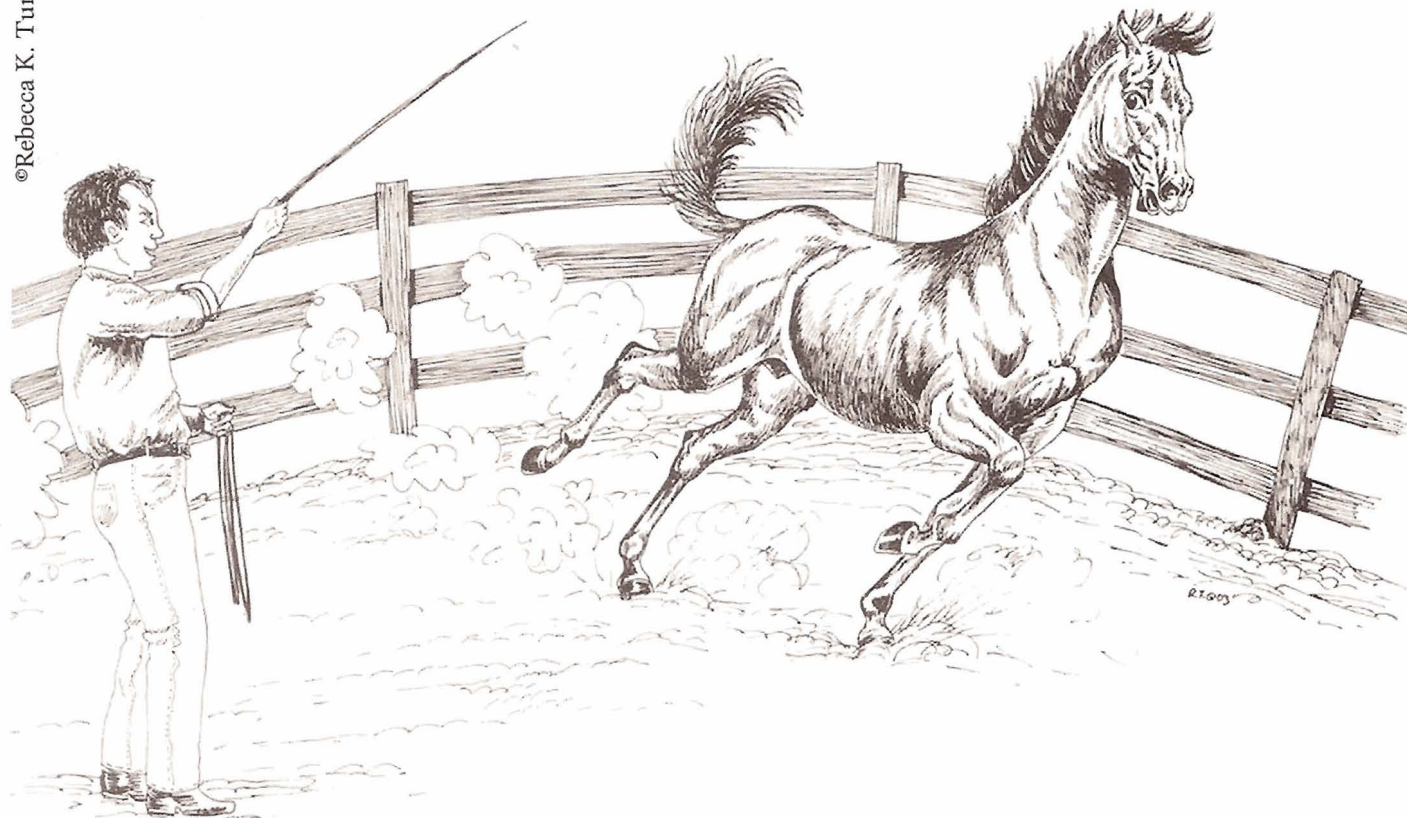


# Age Appropriate Training for Gaited Horses

*When and in what way do we  
start training our young horses?*

By Elizabeth Graves

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**WRONG:** Many an overzealous trainer has rushed a young horse. Instead of instilling confidence and cooperation, this fellow is driving his horse too hard, risking injury and showing the horse he is not to be trusted.

SEEMS EVERYONE HAS A DIFFERENT OPINION on this topic. Every book and video shelf are full of various “how-to methods” for getting the most out of our horses. Something to suit almost anyone, some people will follow a method to the letter, others change them through their own varying interpretations, many will combine several methods, while others will have their own techniques - all hoping to get the desired results.

Will every horse going through the training process become the ideal horse for people to enjoy? I believe we can each answer that ourselves through our own experiences and observations. We're not perfect, being humans, and we make errors, but hopefully they are kept small and recognized early, not allowed to become the permanent kind which an

individual horse may carry throughout its life, or even worse cost a horse its life. Sometimes the best lessons learned are through observations of others and the sharing of their experiences.

**Our horses must rely on us for every part of their care and training, we are responsible for every decision we make for them.** At times this can be a very heavy burden when we are really concerned for the best interest of the horse, while hoping to satisfy our own needs and desires, as well.

## Under Pressure

WE CAN BE GOOD AT PUTTING PRESSURE on ourselves, but many of us are also masters at putting even more on those around us. This can happen either through the need of power, control, or some self-serv-

ing interest. Think as an individual, step back and ask yourself if what you are doing is in your, and your horse's, best interest, or is it serving the needs of someone - or something - else?

In this day and age horse owners can also find themselves putting a horse under early training pressure due to show rules within varying breed organizations offering two-year-old under saddle classes. It takes a lot of preliminary work to have a young horse ready to perform an entire class in all gaits, both ways of an arena, consistently and place in the ribbons. Often it is the preliminary training prior to showing that can be detrimental to the horse, not only in physical pressure, but also mental pressure.

It is not uncommon for many horses now to be started under saddle at age 14 -18 months of age. Horses 12 to 24 months old were at one time termed as yearlings, yet now, when ridden under saddle at this age, this term is no longer used. It can be a common experience to be criticized for not having a two-year olds going well under saddle. The answers too "why start them so early", may very well be in that of who benefits, and changes to be made in those who lose through these practices.

## The Pay Off

RIBBONS, TROPHIES AND titles generate money for trainers, breeders and those in horse sales. There is nothing wrong in the generating of this money, it is simply business and making a living as is everything in our daily lives. But at what price is it worth the well-

being of the horse, and the losses of those new to ownership, who are in the early stages of learning to discern good and poor practices within the industry?

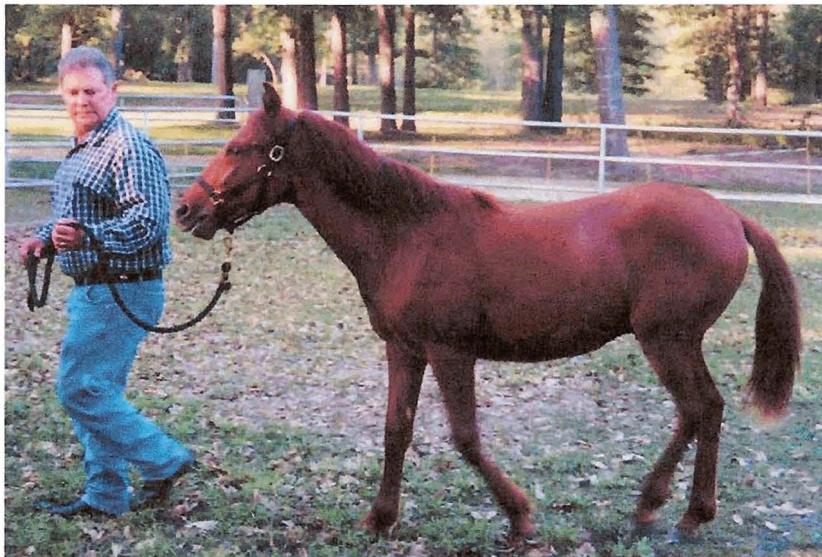
**If training is done correctly and the horse's best interest comes first, everyone benefits,** be it for business or pleasure. It may mean more time and patience on everyone's part and more understanding in the value of this. Even if the raising and training of an individual horse takes more

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time (resulting in a higher cost to purchase the horse) in the long run the end product is better and should stay physically and mentally sound longer - saving money for the consumer.



**RIGHT:** Here Steve XXXX of shows yearling stud colt, XXXX XXXX, that he is a trustworthy companion. The colt is relaxed and follows along on a loose line. Colt owned by Beverly and Wally Frick, Conroe, TX.

## Physical Assessment

IT'S IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND the growth process of any horse and respect it in relation to what sort of stress the body is truly capable of bearing without present

or future complications. We may just need to think with a bit more conscience and use correct judgement in the kind of training we do with the horse from birth to maturity.

Through much excellent research we know that total bone fusion of any horse's body does not occur until the age of five to six years of age, as an average, and some will not be completely fused until the age of eight, regardless of breed. The small-sized horse will mature out earliest and the largest will do so later in this time span. This means it is better to let the larger horse wait longer before beginning under saddle work, rather than to start

earlier. **Just because a horse may look mature does not mean it is.**

The horse's bones fuse from the bottom up. The bones of the lower leg fuse first, with the bones of the spine being the last to fuse.

It is very common for many gaited breeds to have a longer lumbar span than other non-gaited breeds. The lumbar span is the weakest point in the back and one that can easily be sprained or damaged with early riding, overwork or something as simple as teaching a foal to lead incorrectly. Other possible stresses include working in ill fitting saddles, poor equitation, and/or forcing a horse to carry a frame that is not within its structure to do comfortably or naturally.

Other common problems in some gaited horses are cow hocks and /or sickle hocks. When any



**RIGHT:** Steve has XXX's attention. The colt is alert and attentive, yet calm.

deviation from ideal structure, regardless of breed, is present, allowing the horse to mature before adding extra work will incline a horse to maintain soundness longer. In addition to bone fusion, the growth and filling out of soft tissue, which supports the skeletal structure, is also important to consider. Allowing for muscle development provides strength to overall structure, allowing for easier conditioning to maintain performance.

The development of hard and soft tissue is not ready for the added stress of carrying weight (other than their own) until the

age of three in the average-sized horse and should be limited at this age to slow work, for short periods of time. A common indicator of overwork too

young in gaited horses is

stumbling of the forelegs and buckling of the hind legs. In an aged horse this may mean lack of conditioning or that it was not taught to carry itself and weight correctly, and needs more support of aids to do so.

Longeing work benefits many young horses, teaching them to respond to our body signals, voice commands and to move away from easy pressure - willingly, without fear. It should be done in moderation at slow speeds. Done incorrectly and in a driving fast manner can reverse all the handling work that was done as a foal to build trust and comfort with people, as well as cause physical stress or injury to the body.

## Mental Assessment

CONSIDERATION OF A horse's mental capabilities to absorb and process information is often overlooked when the training process begins. Very often a horse that shows resistance is tagged as problematic requiring more assertive to aggressive methods of training. Assertiveness may be necessary, aggression, though, has no positive effect in the end result and can take a horse backwards in the training process.

Horses are often forced to meet our time lines without consideration for each horse being an individual, having its own natural limits in learning or being able to accept the varying increases of pressure in training one may apply. A horse can often react by shutting down, showing resistance, to varying degrees of over reaction, or by becoming unpredictable or even dangerous. It would benefit us and the horse to step back, evaluate

## GUIDELINES for successful training of the young horse:

- ◆ Have the right and safe tools.
  - ◆ Prepare yourself and horse for everything you do.
  - ◆ Be patient
  - ◆ Work slowly.
  - ◆ Make the lessons simple and easy for the horse to understand.
  - ◆ When asking for more do so in small increments.
  - ◆ Learn to read a horse's body language correctly, don't assume resistance is misbehavior, it could be misunderstanding or discomfort.
  - ◆ Reward correct behavior and performance with positive reinforcement.
- Examples:** A rub on the neck and/or positive use of voice.

◆ If you want a horse to stop doing something, reinforce it with negative reinforcement.

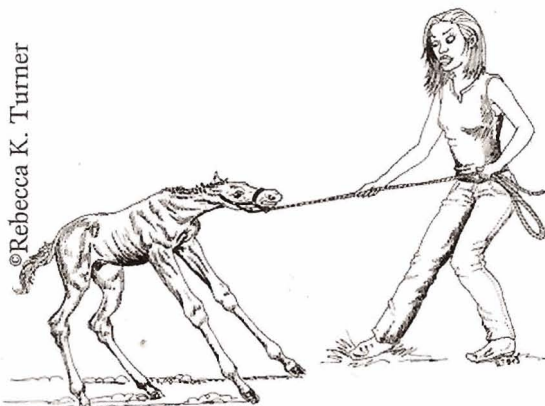
**Examples:** Use of strong, harsh voice and/or tug on the halter.

- ◆ Don't let people or time put pressure on you to hurry.
- ◆ Be sure your young horse is mature enough, in every way, for the task at hand. Waiting a year to start under saddle or taking 60 days longer to complete a portion of training will pay off later.

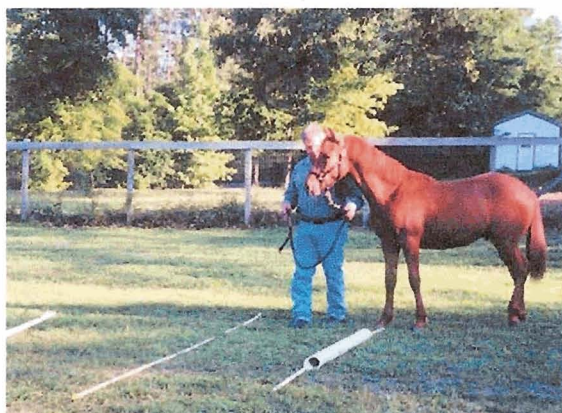
◆ Loss of temper has no place in teaching.

F Set your horse up for success. Ask for things he knows and reward.

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**WRONG:** Permanent injury can result from this kind of "tug o' war" with a foal. At best, this handler is teaching resistance.. At worst, she could be damaging fragile, immature, cervical vertebrae.



**RIGHT:** Calmly looking over the obstacle before proceeding

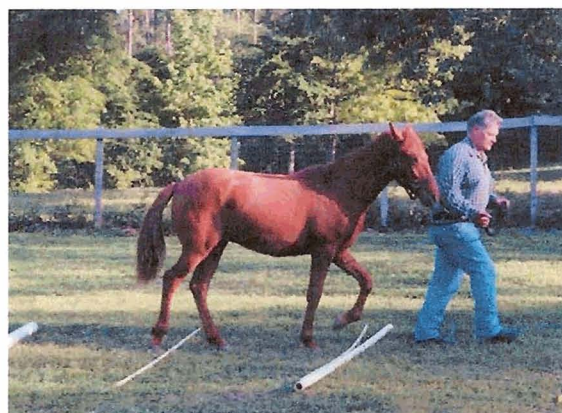


Calmly approaching the obstacle.

**RIGHT:** Here Steve and XXX prepare to tackle a simple obstacle. First Steve allows the colt to look over the various poles on the ground, then to walk past them. Finally, he asked the colt to follow him as he steps over the poles. XXX follows him comfortably all the way. In the last photo he is clearly concentrating on where he places his feet, while still following Steve on a loose lead.



On a loose lead, following along near the obstacle.



Confidently stepping over the obstacles.

and possibly break down lessons in smaller pieces, while taking longer to teach them. It is normal for a young horse to have a limited attention span and working in short sessions actually accomplishes more than pushing them to learn fast.

Some may need a totally different approach than our chosen method of training and being open minded to change in a program can result in that desired success without residual effects to the horse, adding to its quality of life *and* market value.

## Doing It Right

MAKING THE DECISION of who does the training is also one in which the horse should be considered first, not just the person's own needs. Some horse owners are very good at evaluating a situation and choosing a method for a young horse. They are filled with com-

mon sense, apply it correctly, and all goes smoothly. Some owners rely on others to do varying levels of training for them and certainly should if this is more comfortable them. This includes anything from teaching a foal to lead, to groundwork, to starting under saddle work.

Choosing the right person to do this work is the owner's responsibility for the best interest of the horse and for getting home an appropriately trained, healthy horse.

In any training program shortcuts rarely pay off, and can certainly put the horse at risk to some sort of temporary to long-term physical damage.

It pays to think before believing leading is taught to a weanling by tying it to the bumper of a vehicle, or that all horses must be bucked out before mounting. It is more common for a horse to buck

## Too much, too soon?

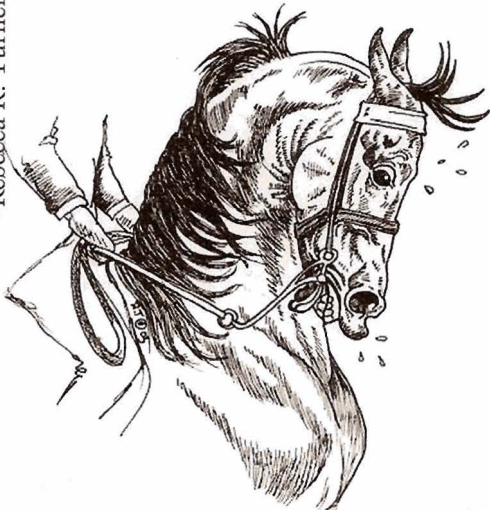
*What are the pitfalls of too early training of gait and how can you tell?*

- ◆ Resistance. Reluctance. Horse shows stiffness through the body. Rushing, lack of self-carriage, irritable.
- ◆ Lack of a foundation under the gait, the least little thing causes the desired gait to disappear.
- ◆ Rushing through the fundamentals leads to weak progress afterwards. Few horses in the Walking Horse breeds, in particular, are ready to do a good running walk until they have mastered a dog walk, regular walk and flat walk- which takes TIME.

## Suggested Age Appropriate Tasks

AGE	TASK	COMMENTS
Day of birth	Desensitize	Work calmly, quietly. Handle all over, but in small increments of time, only a few times during the first day.
After standing and nursing.		
3-7 days	Halter and handle	Pick up hooves, brush over body, wipe and handle private parts, use rectal thermometer. Handle mouth minimally; stop after seven days to avoid teaching baby to be mouthy or to bite.
	Lead	Ask for a few steps in all directions. This can be done with arms wrapped from front to back, or with a butt rope and halter at first, then with halter as the understanding comes of giving to pressure.
8-30 days	Lead and tie	<b>Never drag a foal</b> , long-term damage could result, teach gently. Lead behind dam, then lead away from dam for short distance. Teach "whoa" next to handler. Tie, for short periods of time for grooming and hoof handling. At this age foals should never be left unattended.
	Being caught	Let foal learn to be caught gently, willingly and to come when called.
	Good behavior s	Discourage <i>consistently</i> any bad behavior, such as biting, moving around when tied, kicking...
6 months	Basic longeing	Use a line no more than 14 feet long. Start with small circles and increase size as understanding comes. Work at a walk only. Make change of directions quietly, Teach stopping and standing.
	Give to pressure	Start teaching yielding to pressure, turn on forehand, and hunches. Work for very short sessions - about 10 minutes - in a confined, secure area at first.
6 months to 1 Year	Advanced leading	Practice regular repetition, from birth to 6 months, but don't over do it. Lead at a walk around and over obstacles, such as poles, water. Sack out with blankets, towels, etc. <b>Do not frighten a foal</b> , work slowly, to build confidence.
	Bending	Start some gentle bending work of the neck from side to side, down the poll and upper neck, but never to the cinch area.
	Trailer loading	Teach quietly and with confidence, this should not turn in to a fight, teach through trust. Reward each little bit of progress and don't push for too much.
	Continued longeing	Continue longeing at walk and flat walk.

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**WRONG:** Forcing your horse into an overflexed "headset" from the poll, really can look this ridiculous. Plus, it overstresses your horse and makes it difficult for him to carry himself.

because we added more pressure than he or she was ready for, such as, slapping a saddle on and cinching it down hard and fast the very first time. Training applications such as this are a set up for future rehabilitative training of some kind on many horses and are easily avoided with slower work. It may very well be wise to stop and think what effects it can have on a foal to follow its dam on that 10 mile trail ride that one just can't miss. Training a young horse should more often than not be a positive experience for the horse, one which makes it easy for them to learn and does not have detrimental physical effects.

### The Future is in Our Youth

THE YOUNG HORSES OF TODAY DESERVE EVERY CHANCE at being our prized trail, companion or show horses of tomorrow. We are the ones that hold their future in our hands through the decisions we make, whether in breeding practices, training prac-

AGE	TASK	COMMENTS
1 to 2 Years	Advanced longeing	Longe at dog walk, walk, flat walk, trot, if they have one, or intermediate gait. Avoid the pace (working over ground poles works well in longeing the pacey horse). They should learn to rate their speed and go up and down through speed transitions upon command.
	Ground tying.	Teach standing still for saddling with a surcingle or bareback pad.
	Trailering	Trailer away from home for short, easy rides.
	Ground driving	Using halter and long lines, teach right and left turns, whoa, backing, driving over obstacles, backing through Ls, etc.
	Neck exercises.	Teach to lower or raise neck by giving to gentle pressure.
3 Years	Standing	Teach to stand still while you stand over them on a fence or mounting block.
	Ponying	Leading from another horse can be beneficial at this age.
	Longe work/canter	Calmly add the canter for short distances/times working on the longe line.
	Saddling/mounting	Teach to stand still for saddling, mounting, dismounting.
	Riding	Using a sidepull or bosal (until tooth changes at this age finish) begin with short rides in a contained area at walk and flat walk, then progress to out side area.
4 years	Rate speed, yield	Teach to rate speeds at the walk/flatwalk, lower head, poll and neck, flex, move away from leg pressure, leg yields.
	Advanced work	Teach backing, making circles, serpentine and light hill climbing at the walks. Do obstacles with a rider up. Learn to ride out with other horses at the walks. Lots of walking and some light gait work can start at the end of the third year.
	Driving	This is a good age to start driving work with a cart.
	Bitting	Starting with a snaffle at this age is usually successful as many of the tooth changes having taken place (the teeth should be checked first for maintenance needs)
	Progressive work	Establish consistency at the walks. Much more lateral work can be introduced at the walk, such as shoulders in and haunches in, half passes and side passes
	Gait work	Serious gait work can commence. This is the age that they can start to build much more strength due to physical maturity and can do longer more challenging (within reason) trail rides at the walks, with gait work included.

tices or through proper use. It seems me important to give some thought to how many of our young horses never make it to a full life, or one of being pain free, due to the decisions humans have made for them. How many horses could have been champions in their given field if they had made it through better training choices?

A consumer should be aware when they investigate possible purchase of a two-year-old advertised as completely trained with lots of trail miles. This could mean lots of undue stress to a horse, which in later years could cost the consumer more in medical bills, corrective training or early replacement of the horse. It should not be too much to ask for a horse

that has been started at four, slowly, to insure better results with added years of sound performance.

Breed associations and registries certainly should put forth extra effort and thought in preservation of the horse through better regulations, and older age policies in the showing venues they represent. The right answers to age appropriate training are in the use of simple common sense when teaching the horse.

*Ask only what your horse is mentally and physically ready for.*

**About the Author:**

Elizabeth Graves is an accomplished trainer, clinician and producer of the video tape series, *A Gathering of Gaits*.

