

by Lisa Rivas Avila

# Off To A Good Start

**Doing things right in the formative years can set horses on road to success.**

**A**s a business that specializes in training young horses from the ages of 4 and under, I see consistencies come to the forefront that I would like to share with owner and breeders that your trainer and your horse would appreciate. Much can be done in the formative years to set a horse's career up for success and create a positive experience!

## Soundness

Often horses come to be barefoot and usually the owner wants to keep them that way, but usually the horse tells us shortly that the workload will require shoes. How does the horse tell us? Lameness can arise, soreness or general imbalance of the footfall. What the farrier sees versus what the x-rays show can be completely different. Time and time again has taught me that getting x-rays (of feet and joints) before the horse starts its first day of training can be priceless. Know what you are working with, good or bad! Is there an issue going on that might drastically affect the kind of investment you will potentially put into training a young horse?

## Has Your Young Horse Already Learned to Learn?

I am fortunate enough now to get horses as young as 6 or 7 months come into my training program and stay to be started under saddle. The formative years are so important because there is so much handling that can be done with a yearling that is virtually no impact or low impact. Young ones should certainly start with the farrier as soon as possible so preparation with picking up their feet is key and your farrier will be very grateful (and sometimes shocked).

It is imperative to apply pressure to yearlings! People here the word "pressure" and they think, "panic." In turn, they treat this age bracket like a Faberge Egg and these



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horses turn into monsters. Handling them even just once a week and teaching them that when small amounts of pressure are introduced they can think it through and accept it makes a huge difference. If you take just one week to teach a yearling to take a step towards you from the contact of the lead rope (first to accept a little pressure on its face, then follow the feel with a step towards the pressure, the next day maybe two steps, then maybe three steps, then let them throw a tantrum until they learn that you are still there applying light pressure waiting for that one step), you have already done way more than some people do in the first three years of a horse's life and you are teaching them to learn. In turn, making my job easier on the horse.

### Person Timetables

A little older and a little wiser now I don't worry when I get a horse in that is taking longer than "usual" to back. Squirly horses or ones that can be a little more feral than most don't consider time when they are going through training, they only consider the flight instinct in their brain that tells them to protect themselves above all. If you rush these horses you will spend more time going backwards than going forwards, literally and figuratively.

The same can be said for horses that are growing and developing at an alarmingly slow rate, Warmbloods especially. I truly believe their brain development is directly related to the body development and they need to move along patiently so they can gain confidence instead of lose it. Weak in the hind end can mean weak in the brain. It's an easy concept for us to understand when it comes to humans because babies and children look like babies and children. When it comes to horses there could be a 3-year -old that is already close to 17 hands but we have to remember how much development and growth is still required for maturity.

### Who's in the Saddle

When it comes to that magical moments when an owner gets to sit on their newly backed youngster for the first time...let me tell ya...it's seems that every person has this Black Stallion vision in their head of riding into the sunset bareback! Usually it's more like a pony ride on the lunge line because you have bred a huge-strided beast. Right from the get go I like to tell owners that the process of bringing along young horses can takes years before they are able to have success steering, going forward and let alone trail riding or jumping. I tell owners not to be discouraged when they see me or my assistants walk/trot/canter in the arena and they can't get their horse to walk.

Having reasonable expectations can be a key factor in this journey. Perhaps the horse was home bred or purchased as a youngster. I make sure people understand that the price tag at the end of the day will be similar to what you would have paid for a more finished, trained horse in the discipline you choose. There is a reason seasoned competition horses start in the mid-five figures. Time has a high price tag.

### In the End

Spend the money upfront to thoroughly vet a horse that is going to be started under saddle. Have reasonable goals for you and your horse so that you set yourself up for success every inch of the way. Be involved, I encourage all of my owners to come and watch their horse go. See their progress or get a clear understanding of where they might struggle and where they excel. Handle yearlings often, not just treats and kisses but teach them to halter and yield to pressure, handling their feet and even grooming teaches them to stand and be patient.

*Author Lisa Rivas Avila specializes in starting young horses at Burgeon Training in the San Jose area's San Martin. For more information, visit [www.burgeontraining.com](http://www.burgeontraining.com).*