

Taking the Racehorse Out of Your New Mount

by Nanette Levin



Photo by Elliot Framan

Last month we outlined some tips on identifying good prospects that may still be at the track, but are likely to convert to a decent riding horse for you. Nothing is a sure bet when dealing with racehorses, but you can certainly improve your chances for success with some knowledge and insight prior to tackling a project buy and subsequent retraining program for your mount.

Know that Thoroughbreds are not typically sedate animals, nor are former racehorse conversions for the light of heart. If you are a novice or timid rider, a Thoroughbred may not be a good match. It's always a good idea to engage a seasoned trainer as a guide when you begin to work with your new mount. It generally takes a whole lot longer to fix problems than to create them, and starting right will save a lot of time and frustration in the long run.

Starting Out Right

Once you land your envisioned stellar competitor, there are some things to keep in mind as you proceed in your dream scheme. Many racehorses are never turned out in pas-

tures once they begin their careers. Simply giving the horse the opportunity to run around unfettered and the time to unwind can be a huge boost toward future progress. However, it's wise to initiate turnout in a very small paddock and allow at least a couple of weeks for the horse to graduate to bigger digs, and preferably months to simply chill while he placates his mind and heals his body.

Plan on a considerably higher feed bill than is customary for most other breeds. The "skinny" horses you see at the racetrack are actually "tucked up", an indication of extreme fitness, and often are fed sixteen quarts a day or more to hold their weight and provide the necessary energy for performance. Of course, your regimen likely will be considerably less

As racehorses, Thoroughbreds are taught to pull against the bit.

demanding, but these horses still require good quality hay with a decent amount of grain to mask their ribs. More grain will be necessary if the rigors of training and/or competing at high performance levels are a factor.

Converting the Racehorse

Racehorses can be very different from your typical riding mount. They are bred with the primary aim of winning races, often with little regard toward temperament. They are generally broke merely to carry a rider and don't always get a lot of initial handling prior to having a saddle tossed on their back, nor do they customarily receive much instruction on the nuances of aids. Consequently, it's likely you will need to start over with the training for a new career. Still, finding a sound horse with an amiable attitude is a very surmountable goal.

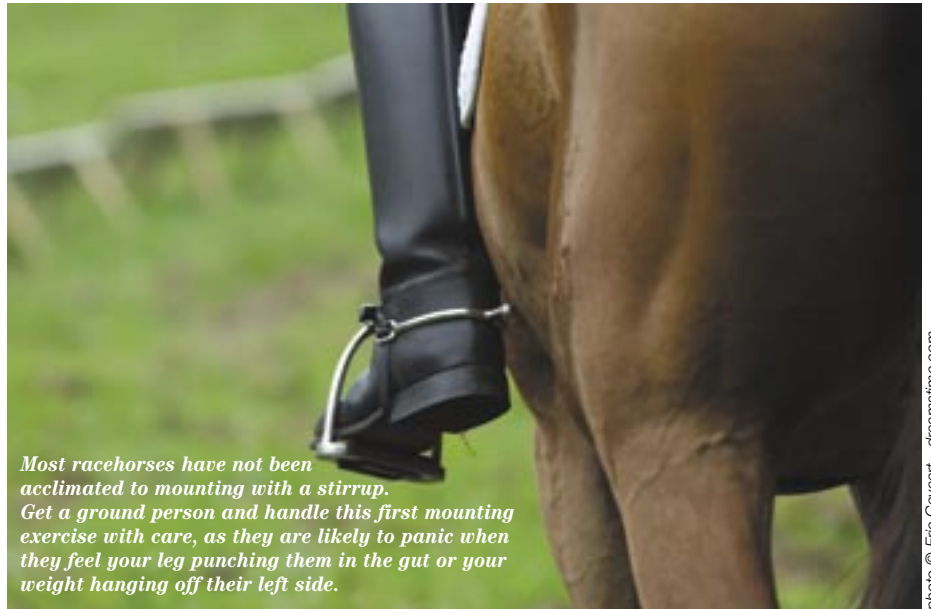
Most racehorses are taught to pull against the bit. It's unlikely that you are strong enough, as a show competitor or pleasure rider, to "hold the horse". Consequently, it's important to realize that pulling harder won't necessarily stop your steed. Resist the temptation to lock onto the horse's jaw in an effort to contain him as you begin your training. Start in a small area and work with a soft hand that takes and gives—and use your seat and voice—to cue the horse to slow down or stop. You will likely be surprised to find the horse slows when you release the pressure on the bit. Initial groundwork on a lunge line might even be an appropriate start here (see *Today's Horse Trader*, May, 2006).

Access to daily turnout will help a lot in the training process. These horses have a lot of energy that they need to release—and it's better if they can do it prior to hoisting yourself into the saddle. If turnout isn't an option, you can work the horse on the lunge line

prior to mounting, but do it with discipline and communication in mind—whipping him around at high speed and letting him do as he pleases with the idea that exhaustion will provide a responsive mount isn't generally a good approach.

Time and patience is important when working with former racehorses. Many are kind animals who will respond to praise, but don't initially understand what you want. They've been trained to win races and conditioned to be aggressive and competitive. Transitioning to a life that involves quiet and subtle responses to your requests and aids is foreign and may be confusing at first. Short lessons with limited demands are best initially, aiming for a quick win for both of you. Pick one surmountable goal each day and quit when it is achieved.

Often, Thoroughbreds will relax and excel when offered the relaxing calm of a walking trail ride, but make sure you have control in a contained space before you venture outside the safety of your training facility. It's best to plan your initial trips with a seasoned, unflappable companion, as it's



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likely that your new mount has never seen such landscapes and the associated wildlife. A steady friend should calm him.

One of your early goals should be to “put a mouth” on your new steed. Interestingly, this is best achieved with your leg, seat and

voice. Light and responsive hands are important. These animals are stronger than you and can always out-pull you. Don't go there. Work on flexibility training reinforced by the leg and seat to soften the mouth. Start with slow
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gaits and don't move on to canter or lope until you have a responsive horse at the walk and jog. Figure-eights and serpentines can be great exercises to bolster flexation and encourage responsiveness. It will also help you keep control of an animal primed to run off given the opportunity. Racehorses are often much stiffer to the right (at least in this country), so be sure to work this side of the horse diligently—but don't overdo it—you don't want to make him sore and sour, resenting the associated exercises.

Try and refrain from "smooching" to your horse—the sound made when you purse your lips and suck in—this is a signal to go very fast. Instead, accustom your horse to voice commands that refer to particular gaits, being consistent with the terms you use and the aids applied to reinforce the request.

Taking the "Race" Out of the Horse

Racehorses are generally well behaved when in the stall, as they are accustomed to having a lot of work done on them and around them in this contained environment and instructed to comply with demands. Certainly,

some can be very nasty and dangerous here, but presumably, you've screened your purchase sufficiently to ensure he's not prone to this behavior. Many, however, are not accustomed to freedom and can be challenging when first introduced to open environments. Take your time and watch your horse to gauge his likely reactions to your presence before you make yourself vulnerable.

Most racehorses have not been acclimated to mounting with a stirrup. Get a ground person and handle this first mounting exercise with care, as they are likely to panic when they feel your leg punching them in the gut or your weight hanging off their left side. Don't force it the first few times, but instead, drop your stirrup so you can easily remove your foot if the horse tries to bolt and continue slowly acclimating him to the process until he is comfortable.

Once you've slowly and patiently acclimated your new mount to the demands of a different career, he can be a loyal companion, predictable mount and willing performer. Hurrying to victory without an understanding

of what he has been taught and trying to apply what you know from seasoned riding horses may prove ineffective—or dangerous.

Former racehorses can be great riding horses with a calm approach, responsive program and an understanding of how the horse has been conditioned to behave in the life that preceded your intended conversion. Watch and hear the horse instead of believing the erroneous stories you've heard about instant adaptation or fated failure, and you'll gain insight that can help you create a great companion. Sometimes you get lucky, but being smart, receptive and observant is a better approach for success.

Nanette Levin owns Halcyon Acres, a Thoroughbred and Irish Sport Horse breeding and training operation. Hundreds of Thoroughbreds have come to the facility over the years to either gain a solid basis for starting under saddle with an eye toward responsive and comprehensive early training that serves them well after their running careers, or to undo problems that have been created through hasty or poor initial breaking. Visit www.HalcyonAcres.com for more tips on working Thoroughbreds and tackling problems—or to see some Irish Sport Horse foals, and to witness how exquisite conformation and bloodlines lends itself to awesome motion.



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