

Helping Young Horses Become Great Performers

by Nanette Levin

A Solution for Every Horse

In many circles, “breaking” is now a taboo term because the implications behind the word connote a process of domination to “break the spirit” of the young horse, rendering it submissive and cooperative. Others ridicule the more current “horse whisperers” who capitalize on the herd instincts of horses and have devised an approach that “speaks” to the animal’s instincts. The problem with both methods is that they prescribe to a rigid approach to every horse, presumably concluding that these are dumb and static creatures that seldom deviate from the norm. Anyone who has really spent the time to get to know horses recognizes that each one has a distinctive personality and responds to different approaches with varying attitudes and retorts.

So, how can you devise a plan for your young horse that bodes well for a successful

future of enjoyable rides and a cooperative approach to every challenge you face? Try and learn how your horse communicates and what he needs from you to gain confidence and/or learn to respect you.

Of course, the breed of the horse is a factor, but all horses learn to communicate with you in a manner that you establish early in life. If you’re dealing with Thoroughbreds or other high-strung breeds, courage is important as you tackle the task of climbing up on their backs and beginning the learning process. Fear will undermine your efforts to teach the horse, as they will sense it and respond in kind. Your chances of getting injured as you start riding the horse are higher if you’re more concerned with what they will do to you rather than how you will guide them. Get help if you are afraid. Know, though, that even with the kinder breeds, bad habits and attitudes are ingrained very early in the process.

Customize Your Approach

While all horses are different, most young horses can fall into two general categories: either they need confidence building and a kind, secure, bold and responsive hand; or they long for an alpha—one who will finally serve as a leader in their life so that they can be a more comfortable follower. The latter requires a handler who is strong enough to earn the respect of the horse while encouraging the animal to adopt a willingness to behave according to the trainer’s cues. Being able to read the horse and customize an approach to appeal to their learning needs is critical in building a successful foundation for future riding performance. Of course, some will find a third temperament—one that is completely comfortable and willing in everything that you ask of them—but this is generally instilled through excellent early handling. For all types of horses, this ultimate responsiveness is an

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ideal aim as you progress through the training and riding process.

Colts or fillies that are timid, afraid, submissive and weary often seek a human counterpart that slowly and surely helps them gain comfort in their ability to handle and master tasks. These types of horses require trainers who are willing to let the steed set the pace in their learning curve.

Working with such a young foal requires keen observation skills and a willingness to change course suddenly and frequently. Adopting new and different approaches quickly when something isn't working is generally the best course of action for such a character. It's okay with this type of horse to quit what's not working and aim for another approach that gives them—and you—an opportunity to achieve a win that is comfortable. Be warned, though, adopting such an approach with an alpha is a recipe for failure and will likely lead to huge battles in the future, so be sure you're clear on the type of horse you are dealing with.

Short lessons that always allow easy progressive achievements work well. Interestingly, these horses tend to shine, tackling new challenges with eager anticipation, once they learn the rider won't put them in dangerous situations and will help them as they attack new and scary situations. Activities such as traversing steep hills and crossing or pass-

ing unfamiliar obstacles become anticipated great triumphs for these animals. With a little bit of watching, these youngsters become very predictable and easy to read (watch the eyes). Generally, they want to please, but are afraid alone, relishing the opportunity to have a guide that is confident and responsive to their concerns. A word to the wise on these critters—help them learn to depend on you, rather than always using another horse for comfort, or they are likely to become herd bound and difficult to handle alone.

The hellions often become the best performance horses, provided proper early training occurs. These are the toughest horses to break, but rarely demonstrate any bad behavior after the preliminary battles, if the initial training is appropriate and successful. Be prepared for long fights and stand-offs that leave both the mount and the transport tired and frustrated. These battles, when done right, will be tremendous relative to the results. The worst thing you can do with a horse that is an alpha—but secretly seeking an alpha to be their guide—is back down. Staying power, endurance and determination is a must. These animals will try every maneuver in their arsenal to unload you, dominate you, intimidate you or just plain win the fight. Let them win and you'll face a major setback that leaves you many miles behind where you started at the beginning of the session. If you're able to

prevail, however, these horses will develop a respect for you and a willingness to please that is an awesome experience, leaving both you and your mount happier from the results.

Getting into the mind of the horse you are working with and adapting your approach to communicate on their terms is an exciting and rewarding experience. Spend a little bit of time watching your project, figuring out what works for them, and altering your style to customize an approach that's just right; you'll be glowing when the results become a resounding success.

Send Your Questions

Do you have a particular challenge with your young horse or are you facing a bad habit with an older horse that is driving you crazy? Send your questions to NLevin@HalcyonAcres.com with a phone number for confirmation, and we may publish your query and a possible solution.

Nanette Levin is co-owner of Halcyon Acres, a breaking, training and breeding facility that specializes in working with Irish Draft/Sport Horses and Thoroughbred race-horses. She has spent 36 years enjoying horses, with activities including riding, breaking, training, competing, galloping, managing stables, teaching lessons and learning the individual personality of each horse she's touched with a kind and respectful response to their communicated needs. Visit www.halcyonacres.com/babies for more tips on starting your young horse.



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