

Starting Smart Under Saddle

by Nanette Levin



Photos courtesy of Halcyon Acres

(left) Here, you can see how much easier it is for the colt to accept and handle weight given the opportunity to move forward to regain his balance.

(right) Cowboy is clearly off balance and uncomfortable standing while trying to hold weight he's not accustomed to.

It seems like everyone you talk to has a different answer about how challenging it is to start a young horse who has never been ridden before, with an accompanying array of edicts on how to do it right—or wrong. Of course, one of the reasons for the varying attitudes and approaches is that it depends on a lot of factors relating to both the horse and rider.

The process is less important than the results, but in many cases the former does have a considerable impact on the latter, so you should be clear on why you're doing certain things and maintain a vision of the end-game. For example, it's unproductive to punish a horse for being afraid when you're trying to develop a confident and capable trail horse. Conversely, it's generally not a good idea to coddle a colt who's decided that rearing and striking at you is preferable to paying attention.

This article is designed to provide some basic ideas for staying safe while you build a rapport and a language with your intended riding companion.

Last month, we discussed lunging as an ideal tool in establishing attentiveness and responsiveness (www.halcyonacres.com/

lunging). It is advantageous that you consider the benefit of ground work prior to leaping onto your anticipated buddy.

We'll continue with Cowboy, our illustrated 20-month-old colt, as he's an interesting project with some quirky issues.

While there's rarely a good reason to keep a Thoroughbred a colt in upstate New York, in Cowboy's case, there are extenuating circumstances. He was a septic foal with very little chance for survival. His first contact with humans involved two-hour daily rituals that included digging out, cleaning, saline washing and bandaging gaping wounds in his hocks, elbows, hips and stifles, as well as needles carrying penicillin morning and night. There's really no totally sterile environment at a farm to treat such infections, and this, coupled with the severity of his condition, did

not bode well for his future.

This colt has heart though, and fought to live harder than the infections worked to kill him. Interestingly, soundness has never been an issue with this foal. Even with holes in his joints and bandages encasing them, he hit the ground with exuberance, and has continued to thrive. With his history, we didn't feel it was a wise decision to introduce a wound unnecessarily to this colt at this time. Instead, have decided to give him another year to fully recover from his harrowing start in life.

Why Start Him Now?

It's time. He's close to 15.2 hands, exceedingly strong, sturdy and is beginning to get unruly as his hormones start clouding his better judgment. Cowboy is a good kid and he wants to do the right thing, but the basic handling associated with daily care is insufficient to override his more obnoxious urges.

Sometimes you need to be a little flexible and creative in dealing with unusual circumstances. For example, Cowboy was getting exceedingly aggressive with his pasture mates. The behavior ceased within minutes of being introduced to Midge—our 14.3 hand pregnant alpha mare who is pretty clear about introducing any horse who may have other ideas to the pecking order.

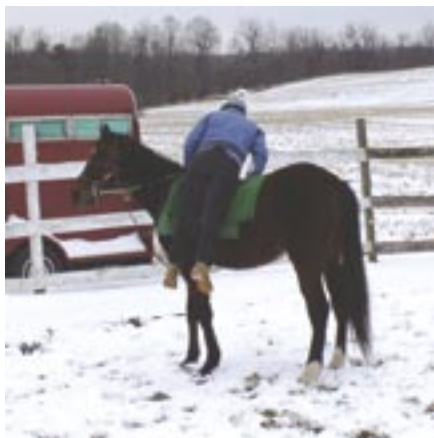
She didn't take kindly to the youngster's stud impersonation. Cowboy sported a couple of hoof shaped wounds on his chest for a few days, but he learned very quickly that behavior had consequences, and has dulled it down quite a bit. Point being, working on starting a horse—and heading them in the right direction—doesn't always involve human lessons. This single event helped mitigate some of the issues we were already facing in groundwork

activities and made the communication process with him more effective. He's still having a tough time learning to curb his biting, but he wouldn't dream of mounting another horse anymore, and the rearing and striking has stopped.

The Groundwork

Groundwork prior to putting a rider on his back included learning to tie, weeks of complete grooming, including currying and body brushes on all parts of his body, picking his hoofs, combing the mane and tail and working extensively around his head, more formalized leading lessons, and increased structure to all handling and behavior issues.

Grooming was a tough lesson for Cowboy as he was exceedingly phobic about his elbows (we had a difficult time clearing up wounds here and they remained very painful for a long time), so any contact with his belly near his front legs had him dropping to the ground instantly. With gentle but persistent repetition (he was required to accept a brush under his belly prior to completing any grooming lesson—which sometimes took



Cowboy is clearly much more comfortable now with the new concept of weight on his back and can do so easily standing still. It's time to see how he responds to height over the top of him. Here, the rider pushes up on the saddle to let the horse see a person, in this case, higher than his head.

the better part of an hour for him to stand and deal with it), he learned that this contact would not hurt him and began to accept it. Once he realized the pain was history, he was able to handle a heavy curry under his belly

and between his legs.

Tack was the next step, and he surprisingly handled this without incident.

Voice Commands

Next, we put a mouth on him. Riding him in a large broodmare stall, we used voice commands he had already been introduced to on the lunge line, such as "ho" and "walk on", to acclimate him to the hand/bit and leg. In addition, we worked on steering, using an extreme leading rein with a reinforcing leg to help encourage him to turn on request by keeping light pressure on—sometimes in a take and give fashion until he responded—and releasing the moment he took a step in the right direction. Of course, this step was met with lavish verbal praise as well.

Belly Over

It's generally wise to "belly over" a horse when you put weight on them for the first time. This provides you with an opportunity to get off quickly and easily if things go wrong. It also gives your young horse a chance to feel

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While this colt isn't quite balanced with full weight on his back, he calmly accepts the height above him and the feeling of two legs hanging on either side of him.

what it's like to carry a load without the added concern of height over their head and your leg hanging on their off side. Don't be afraid to let the horse walk off while you're laying over them, as many young horses are challenged balancing themselves at first, and forcing them to stand may be too much for them to handle. It's usually best to help the horse accept these new lessons in a manner that is comfortable.

Once your mount is able to handle your weight over his back, it's a good idea to make sure they are comfortable with height behind their head. Prior to throwing your leg over the saddle and plopping on their backs with your legs wrapped around them, introduce them to the sight of someone towering over their backs. It's wise to do this initial work without stirrups. If you've ever been dragged, chances are you are clear on how easily a foot can get lodged in a stirrup when unexpected movement occurs—no matter how safe your footwear. If you haven't, here's hoping you are smart enough to learn from those that have gained insight the hard way.

Don't be afraid to hop off and on if your mount becomes panicked during this stage. Finish the lesson, but don't feel a need to be a hero if the movement of your body over the top of your horse initially concerns him. Patience and persistence will win out. Let the horse come to accept you by taking time to accomplish this task rather than to insist on immediate results; such an attitude can increase the potential for injury and undermine your horse's confidence in you.

Cowboy was ready as we progressed to each new stage, which could be discerned by watching his eye and only introducing him to new experiences as he gained confidence in the task at hand. Proper ground handling and patient progression made a huge difference in his willingness to accept the full weight of a rider on his back.

Nanette Levin owns Halcyon Acres, a 120-acre facility in upstate New York that helps horses and riders start off on the right foot, teaches older horses with challenges to do the right thing, and connects riders with horses that are ideally suited to their needs. Visit www.halcyonacres.com to learn more.