

March 2010 Beyond the Basics

Colt to Horsemanship Series – Part I

Are You Ready to Start Your Own Horse?

Over the past five years, I have had the good fortune to be a regular contributor to *Northwest Horse Source* magazine. I fondly remember sitting with the editor and publisher to talk about what people were asking for in my clinics, and how we could bring a glimpse of that information to the publication. In five years we have covered topics from purchasing a horse to understanding the training pyramid to use of the cavalletti in developing the positive balance in horse and rider. It has been a great journey, the results of which have produced an aspiring horseman's workbook that is valuable to all equestrians, no matter their discipline.

Where to go from here? The answer has been brewing for the past five years. We know that one of our favorite clinics is the colt starting focus, or what we call 'Colt to Horsemanship'. In providing these clinics at the ranch in Oregon for the past ten years, we have learned some very important points that contribute to the success of these seven to nine day experiences. Most important is the reality that the human participant simply must have a good basic foundation in their horsemanship and be willing to go ever deeper in their understand. The type of foundation that has been presented in these *Northwest Horse Source* articles over the past five years! Armed with this background, I believe we are ready to embark on our original goal of presenting a clinic in a magazine, and present a series of articles about starting a young horse. Hang on...we are in for a great ride!

Getting Started – Is the Human Ready?

There are many wonderful outcomes, both physically and emotionally, to starting your own horse. There is a satisfaction from knowing that for good or not so good, you have developed all the buttons on your horse. A lifetime connection comes from creating experiences together from the very beginning with a colt. Moreover, maybe the most awe-inspiring attribute is the true spirituality found in developing a partnership. Starting a horse is an amazing experience!

All that said, there are many people who are simply *NOT* positioned to start their own horse. In fact, I will bluntly say...Most people should not be starting a colt! Compare the experience to the sequence of learning to fly a plane, becoming a pilot, and then teaching someone else to fly. There is a lot of time, study, and variety of flying experiences in the pilot's seat, before you would feel comfortable being an instructor. Using an airplane metaphor, I find that many people think they can start a colt simply because they have sat in the pilot's seat, without the investment of time and study!

Here are some questions that I feel you need to answer before you consider starting your own young horse or re-starting a horse searching for a good leader:

Physical Questions:

- How is your physical health? You need to be in decent physical shape to start a colt. Not only for the activity of the ground work, but certainly your balance, timing, and feel in the saddle. If you can't trot on your own two legs at least once around an 80x100 arena, you need to re-consider! If you can not walk, trot, and canter on-board, with a loose rein, you are not ready to start your own horse.
- What is your physical and 'fiscal' facility and conditions? Are you set-up to care for your young horse in safe facilities, with good footing, clean water, appropriate feed, veterinarian care, hoof care, and giving the horse a job to accomplish? As we all know, caring for horses is expensive, and if you are adding a new colt to your responsibilities, you need to make sure you have thoroughly considered the financial restraints.
- Are you physically prepared to dedicate *time* to this process? If you are looking for the 'ride'em in one-day-clinic' wonders, you can stop reading right now! To truly develop a partnership with your colt or any horse for that matter, you have to be willing to give yourself and them *time*.

Emotional & Mental Questions:

- Have you evaluated 'Why?' you want to start a colt? If it is about ego, winning a prize, or showing how much you know...well, God bless the horse! You may end up winning hundreds of prizes, ribbons, and awards, but your foundation should be based in wanting to develop a good partnership with your horse.
- How is your fear level? A measure of fear is critical to being a good leader by becoming aware of the environment around us, and being prepared and knowledgeable about what might happen, before it does! However, if this awareness manifests in a way that prohibits the human from still providing leadership, then you are not ready to start a colt. You must be able to relax, while maintaining awareness and focus.
- Have you dedicated time to *study* horsemanship? This is where bringing a young horse along is very similar to the pursuit of any other art form. To truly play an instrument beautifully, or paint in an inspiring manner, you need to study the masters, understand the technique, practice your scales, and still find the joy in playing. In remember Ray Hunt saying at the Tom Dorrance benefit in 2001, "It's amazing what you can learn after you think you know it all"!
- Your attitude will create your reality. There may be no better mirror in the life of aspiring horsemen, than that of a young horse! Your humility – the good, bad, and ugly – will show when you start a colt. Are you willing to have your patience, forgiveness, gentleness, discipline, and grace on display? Not every human will see it, but I can guarantee, the horse will recognize where you are coming from, and react accordingly.

Spiritual Questions:

This is always a tough issue to bring up when talking about horsemanship. For many, the idea of getting into the spirituality question is over the top and way too "touchy-feelie" to consider. Nevertheless, I truly think this is just a matter of semantics. Tom and Bill

Dorrance both talked about the importance of developing *feel* in understating horses, and confided that there was something deeper than the word '*feel*' to define what they were trying to describe. Nuno Oliveria talks about his desire to never ask more of his horse than the horse was capable of giving, in order to develop a deeper relationship. For me this is the feeling of finding a balanced spiritual place...In harmony with the environment.

If you can answer the questions above with a firm "Yes", or at least a willingness to set it up, work, study, and observe, then you may be ready to start a young horse. It is a huge commitment in time, finances, emotions, patience, gentleness, and leadership. All that said, there is little other opportunities I have found in life that will bring more rewards! So let's get started! Over the next 10 months we will take a step by step approach, that will be accompanied by referrals to previous articles (www.tnthorsemanship.com/articles), other suggested reading, and the ability to follow the progression via video and the blog. (www.horsemanshipjourney.blogspot.com) I assure you, that if you take on the challenge of bringing along your young horse by following the ten month progression, you will have a partner for life...willing, obedient, and happy!

"Make him a companion, and not a slave, then you will see what a true friend he is."

*Nuno Oliveira from his book...
Reflections on Equestrian Art*

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