

Educating the Gaited Horse From Start To Finish

The Beginning: Birth to 3 weeks – The “For the Horse” Method



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The coming birth of a new foal is always an exciting event. The questions are always the same: What will their personality, conformation, color be like? The big question is how can we help them be the best they can be given their individuality? As humans, we have an incredible responsibility in our part of this relationship with the newborn and should seek to improve our interactions through experience.

The physical environment should be safe, clean and well prepared for the foaling event. Well prior to the foaling, the mare should be trained to be comfortable around humans and have a good working relationship with humans. Handling the mare on a daily basis will ensure she will accept us around her and the newborn foal during its early training phase. Regardless of our personal goals in raising a foal, be it for future sale, to keep, to show and/or trail ride later, it is important to introduce them into the world they are born into which is one of human environment with human management



KMSH General Jackson foal at Barbara Weatherwax's.

throughout its life in some way. This will help the foal develop to its fullest potential as it matures. Health care, nutrition and handling make a huge difference in the quality of all areas of physical and mental development. It is the goal to help them learn to be a good horse citizen no matter what their future job may be.

The first year is a very critical time in all these areas where foals learn many important lessons and behavior patterns during this time from their dam and from people. These lessons will help them throughout their life and continue to be the building blocks in daily management, handling and future training. I always wait until 6 months before weaning because this is an extremely valuable time for the dam to teach the foal to interact and function within its own species for proper behavior development.

Early human handling is important because it is the foal's natural instinct to flee when confronted with stressful or dangerous situations--a normal behavior pattern that protects the horse from predators. A domesticated horse must learn to accept restraint, trust our judgment, look to us for leadership and resist the instinct to flee. Learning to accept restraint can be an emotional experience at first and our goal is to avoid a physical battle in every way possible. The later these lessons are taught, the more traumatic it can be for the foal and the larger and stronger they get with growth making our job much more physical and higher risk for injury for them and us. Our goal is to create as positive an experience as possible in these early handling and manners lessons, avoiding creating a negative attitude toward future handling and training as much as possible. Unfortunately, too much incorrect handling can also have a poor effect on a foal also and in some cases create a disrespectful foal that is pushy, disrespectful and does not understand interaction with humans is different than what is accepted with other horses. That cute little foal that we think is fun to have all over us and in our space will grow into a very large horse that will not understand the rules when we change them as they develop into a big, pushy horse with no respect for human space boundaries. It is best to set boundaries early and maintain them from start to finish to avoid confusion in its continued training throughout life.

Immediately after birth, I do only the minimum—iodine the navel, check that the foal is healthy, make sure it suckles well and then just let it bond with its dam

and gain some strength. I do let the foal see me working around the mare and foal area so it can observe me. On day 2 I will go in and halter the dam, groom her and spend some time with her while the foal observes. I keep my energy low, but work confidently and softly in how I present myself, talking to the mare and foal in a positive tone. Day 3 is when I will start foal handling and haltering lessons in a stall or safe contained area. I have a 2nd handler halter the mare. We work our way softly and confidently to the foal using the mare if needed to create a block to apply our arms around the chest and hind quarters first to experience that first feeling of restraint, this is called "cradling".

If possible, try not to hold the tail up if the foal is more resistant, but if one must, do so in as soft a manner as possible since the tail is delicate and part of the spine. It is important not to do damage to this or any area that may create stress or pain in restraining the foal. While holding the foal at the chest and hindquarters with our arms, stand keeping your head as close to the center of the foal's back as possible as to not get hit in the head if the foal does resist and raise its head in a struggle which is a normal reaction. As the foal softens some to this front and back restraint, don't release the hands from the foal but soften your fingers just enough that the foal feels it. If the foal starts to struggle again, just tighten the fingers and hands again until the foal settles again and repeat until the foal understands when it stands quietly the hands soften. At this time softly rub the foal's chest while holding with the fingers, opening their mind to the experience that something that feels good can be delivered from the human hand similar to the feel of their mother's tongue. Continue to talk to the foal in a calm, relaxing manner, to create the right emotional energy from ourselves so they learn our intent in working with them is one of patience, confidence and understanding. This is a very important part of teaching the foal to trust in us.

When teaching any horse, use calming words and positive re-enforcement while you are exhaling. Use correction words while inhaling. After rubbing the chest, then quiet the front hand, and slowly move the hand in a small area at the rump in a soft manner allowing them to get used to the feel of hands at the hind quarters. It is normal for a foal to struggle with each new touch sensation. Just tighten the fingers until the foal once again settles and remains so as we move to each new area, gradually working the hand at the hind quarter up the back, under the belly, and down the hind legs. Once this is done and the foal remains settled, then work again with hand at the chest up the front and back of the neck and down the front legs. The most difficult area to work with is the head. Take your time and don't wiggle the finger in doing so, just calm relaxed strokes working under the jaw first then up the cheeks, to the ears and last down the front of the face and around the muzzle, but do not play or work in a playful manner with the muzzle. When teaching a foal, we never want to encourage nipping or biting which is normal foal behavior within the herd but not with humans. It is also a good idea to set specific rules to be followed by other people who interact and



visit the foal to maintain consistency in the horse human relationship.

This session is also when I will halter the foal with a flat leather or nylon halter that fits well, not snug, but not so loose that the foal could get a hoof hung up in it. Hold the foal still with the halter on and continue rubbing it slowly and calmly along all the areas we have already worked and then remove the halter slowly, still holding the foal and then slowly step back and let the foal be released and just stay in place for a minute before making a step backwards first and then moving out of the contained area still talking a word or two to the foal. This first session should last no longer than 15-30 minutes and will depend on the foal. Repeating these sessions twice daily for 3 days in a row going through the exact same procedure helps start a good repetition they become familiar with and comfortable.

During the next three sessions, cradling them with your arms, ask them to take a step forward and then a step backward. Adding something new each three sessions and repeating for 3 sessions is a great procedure and starts a good working relationship and adds to their knowledge base in handling and learning restraint and manners. Next add working from both sides and gently teach them you can pick up each hoof and set it down also for them, never let it drop or let them take it away. Next lesson would be to add using the front arm still at the chest while replacing the hindquarter arm with a 1 inch diameter soft cotton rope as a butt rope to ask them to step forward from and even when working with arms to do so in a soft squeeze release manner so they start learning this as a signal to respond to. This type of signaling follows through in all our training from halter to lead, and later from hand to rein to headgear and also in leg aids to the horse's sides. When adding the butt rope to sessions, is also a good time to use a soft brush all over the body in place of our hand over the body and a soft cloth also is another good addition. Remember each tool we apply looks, sounds and feels different to them so add

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as many different ones as they are comfortable. Slowly in these sessions start to apply some pressure to the halter in a gentle pull, release manner so they become accustomed to that feel and sensation of head restraint.

If all goes well, at the start of the second week we can attach a light snap on lead to the halter. The lead should be about 10 feet in length to run from the off side of the halter down the off side of the foal and around the hindquarter between the bottom of the rump line and halfway to the hock to use a butt rope. This rope can be held in the right hand to give a pull release aid at the hindquarter with the left arm still working as a support aid in front of the chest to guide and support in the beginning to walk and lead the foal forward and add more steps forward as the foal is comfortable. Again depending on the progress of the foal, about three sessions of doing this before transferring the butt rope to the left hand and using a tug release aid at the halter to ask the foal to step up and walk forward. Start to teach the foal to also turn right and left with halter using pull and release aids. When the foal is working well and at ease with this butt rope in the left hand from the halter,

it is time to release the butt rope and work from the lead to halter alone but always have the right hand ready in case the foal does need some added support periodically to the hind quarters. This is a good time to also walk farther with the foal in this manner having the dam also in halter being led by another handler in front of the foal.

The 3rd week is a good time to go out with the mare and foal on halter and lead ropes for longer walks lasting about 10 minutes in larger contained spaces if possible. Never take walks at this age on roads or dangerously exposed areas for the protective mare and inexperienced foal. Do not leave the halter on the foal to walk around unattended as accidents happen quickly. It is also not recommended that the foal wear a lead dragging the ground to learn to give to the pressure of the lead rope. Foals are very fragile in skeletal structure and soft tissue throughout their bodies so it is very important to avoid any trauma or injury that could affect future soundness such as stepping on the lead rope dragging the ground and hurting its neck. At this young age, early self-conditioning to build strength is important. As the weather permits, keep them out for exercise as much as possible. The daily living environment for foals and horses that helps them to feel safe and secure is very important. A volatile environment may cause development of defensive, reactive or insecure behaviors in foals and horses. It's better to have a horse place with people than a people place with horses. Enjoy the journey!!
