

# Educating the Gaited Horse from Start to Finish

*The Beginning: 4 weeks to 6 months*

## The 'For the Horse' "Method"

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As we are entering the last of the summer months and soon to enjoy fall, it has been fun watching folks from around the world share their new foals of the year through the wonderful means of on-line media. In this installment of my series I was going to continue where I had left off and add the next phase of our foal's knowledge base in becoming good horse citizens.

Instead, I have changed my order at this time due to my own observations in this sharing of everyone's foals. Several items of importance should be addressed now before proceeding to the next lessons for the foal.

Many of the spring foals are now coming to the 3-6 months age and a new phase of fun for all to enjoy. They have been learning what it is to live as a horse and with people. Their curiosities are expanding; they are getting stronger, faster during play and very entertaining to us all. Everyone raising a foal has their best interest at heart and hopes they grow up to be good and healthy in body and mind. The goal being a future riding horse and companion for themselves or for a new excited owner in the future.

Most of the time decisions in management and teaching the foal are based on advice we may seek from others, researched through books, articles we may read, and sometimes just trying to make the best guess that felt right at the time. As strong and vibrant as these foals seem, we should keep in mind that they are still, and will be for some time to come, in a very vulnerable state in physical and mental maturity. We all are aware of how easily they can get into trouble and hurt themselves on their own. Sometimes though we unknowingly put them into positions or ask them to do things where they could be hurt in the present and pay a price in later years for what we think is not harmful to them at the time. In this installment I would like to share some of the foal management and teaching applications I have seen which could be better addressed for the foal.

Halters and halters with drag lines. In fitting a foal with a halter, make sure it is not so large that a foal could accidentally get a hind hoof caught in the halter while doing that cute little hind leg to head scratch. Halters also should not be so tight that they create pressure to the foal's cranium. A foal should never be left unattended with a halter on and a thorough check of their environment should be made for possible places a foal could get hung up with a halter. It pays to

have a couple of different sizes in adjustable flat nylon or leather halters. Foals grow fast and can outgrow a newborn size rather quickly.

Again this year I have seen many videos and photos of foals out in pastures or pens wearing halters with lead lines being left on with the owner's hope that the foal will learn how to give to pressure, learn to stop when stepped on or just get used to having a rope dragging around them. This rope drag method always creates some kind of problem for the foal. At the very least they may receive a rope burn at some point in accidentally getting it wrapped around the legs. The most common problem occurs later at the cranium and C-1 joint attachment in practically every case with this method, when these foals arrive for under saddle training. This can also include displacements in the cervical chain, dis[placement of the hyoid apparatus d, jaw misalignments and cranial plate misalignments. These often show up in resistance to vertical flexion and lateral flexion and acceptance of a bit or bit-less head gear.

Working obstacles and tricks. Working through obstacle courses has become a popular and fun way to enjoy our horses but now we are seeing this done at a much earlier age. Small simple obstacles such as ground pole walk overs, a low platform walk over, or shallow water walk throughs are great if a foal is ready. But again, big large ones can cause enough stress physically to have future effects on a horse. A foal of this age should not be asked to jump 50 gallon drums set on their sides, even if the foal trusts what you ask and is



willing. When working simple obstacles, don't overdo it. Once in a while may be fine but not daily. It is very easy to get a foal sour on work when overworked. At this age they do not know if what is asked is in their best interest. But we do if we think about it a little. Teaching a foal to bow or lay down on command also at this age is not in their best interest for future soundness.

**Children and foals.** It has become very common to see folks share media of children playing with foals. This looks innocent enough when all is going well but in reality some very serious hazards and future problems can evolve from what seems like fun play between horse and child. I always advise clients to use helmets on their children when around a horse or foal. A simple fun kick out from a foal in play could have life threatening effects to a child. Children should never be left unattended when with a foal and at all times should be under good parental direction. Children should be educated in good basics first on how to approach a foal, know where foals' blind spots are, and never pick on or act aggressively toward a foal in fun or intentionally. They should be taught how to touch a foal properly and gently. Children should not be encouraged to chase a foal in play or teach a foal that it is alright for them to chase the child.

This year alone I have had three training horses in between the ages of 3 and 5 years that grew up where allowing children to interact improperly with them as foals was allowed. Each now is very agitated or negative around children and one is very aggressive toward children. What may seem well and good at the time, often is not later when a horse has realized it is not fun and games any more.

**Ponying foals or trail ride follow along with foals.** It is not recommended to pony a foal wearing halter and lead with a horse. Possible stress to the neck and head of the foal having to hold or lift its head are often due to tension on the lead and halter. This forced posture in turn creates an inverted shape being unhealthy to the foal's body use at an early age which could be difficult to correct later. When riding the mare allow a foal to follow along free yet always be aware where the foal is while teaching the foal that biting, rearing and kicking at you in play or the mare during this time in not acceptable. Although it has become more popular, it is not advised to take foals of this age on long trail rides. In groups, other horses can feel threatened and act negatively toward a curious mischievous foal moving in and out of their space putting the foal and riders at risk. Another factor to consider is foals are not of an age where they are physically capable of being conditioned to the stresses of an hour or more trail ride.

Most foals do not live in an environment where they are getting a lot of time or ground covering exercise on a daily basis to hold up well on a trail ride

covering much distance or difficult terrain. Just as with a horse, a little tired is good but fatigue is their enemy with the body using itself in a harmful overly stressed manner. The foal will keep up most of the time but at what cost to a foal's present and future soundness.

One of my observations in the gaited foals that have been through a lot of the follow along trail rides, is that they become strong in the pace and thereby it takes a considerable amount of work to bring out the correct easy gait they were meant to execute. It's easier for a foal to stiffen and create a pace to match the horse sized stride of its dam in order to keep up.

Here are some final thoughts to consider. Foals, just as with horses, are not toys. They are cute and fun but we are still the ones responsible for what they experience and what develops from those experiences.

When we make decisions in the teaching and handling of foals, let them not be to prove a point to others of what we can get a foal to do to impress other people. These types of decisions often are not in the best interest of the foal. Sometimes we can get a little greedy without realizing it because we are having fun. It's good to ask what would be the current effects to the foal and the future effects with what we do and ask of a foal. Make wise, common sense choices from those honest questions of ourselves. It's a great feeling to know that we have done everything right for the foal along the way and see the results later as they grow and mature into fine performing horses.