

Part 2 David Stuart

MANNERS MAKETH THE HORSE

Story Anna Sharpley



Last month David Stuart talked about the handling of the foal up until and including weaning. This month we continue their education up to the process of getting on and riding.

Our foal has been handled well, weaned and has been living a wonderful life in the paddock with its chums and uncle babysitter; what now? "Depending on where you are from, i.e. In the US, Australia and some other countries you will generally see horses started earlier at between the ages 2 and 3 years of age. In Europe horses are often started at around 3 to 4 years of age. This is also partly influenced through competition and tradition. Where competition or disciplines are geared towards young horses for Futurities and along with racehorses, they will be started earlier. In Europe as competition revolves around older events or disciplines, traditionally it is more common to see horses started at three or even four years of age.

"Ground schooling is quite a popular topic these days and "halter breaking" while sounding a crude term is pretty much ground schooling. The easiest way to start talking about how to teach a young horse to lead is to say how you wouldn't start, and that is to get out in front of them and just pull. If you have already handled them well with a rope, it is often not a big transition when you put the halter on. I again would start where I could step our friend's hindquarters over. Sometimes you may have to do this from a little further away and then as they gain understanding and confidence you are able to do the same in



"halter breaking is pretty much ground schooling"

close. When you step the hindquarters across, bend the head/neck a little and encourage the inside hind leg to step up underneath which means they are going to step forward. You may want to stand behind the balance point (withers) when you do this to encourage the horse to move forward. I also want to be able to move the forequarters as well. Essentially you are teaching the horse to yield in many ways like another horse would, while also getting the horse moving their feet freely.

"Remember that the horse is a horse and it is okay for them to act like one... they spook, they shy, they buck"

To again help the horse move their feet forward I try to help them by getting behind the balance point and drive them forward. Once I can drive the horse forward and be able to step the hindquarters over without bracing and the horse is understanding of this, you will have some harmony working with your horse. I will also get our friend to back up off the halter as well. At this stage the horse will often start to work off a feel and this makes leading a fairly natural transition. With all this work you are getting them to respond to the feel of the halter and learn how to yield to it. Sometimes the way we offer and present the question may cause the horse to not understand. The quality in what we do is more important than the quantity of what we do. Often people get too heavy handed before the horse has learnt to follow a feel of the halter and then the horse is more inclined to oppose it. You don't want to get in to a confrontation situation. It is okay to set it up and wait for the horse to come through. Ray Hunt would say, *horses do things out of self preservation, or they don't know how to do what you ask, or that's how they have lived their lives doing it.* If you can get it right from the start that has a big bearing, and you will have something to fall back on if things do go in the wrong direction.

"You want to always want to remember that the horse is a horse and that it is okay for them to act like one. They spook, they shy, they buck etc., that's all just part of being a horse and some horses will not allow you to knock the self preservation instinct out of them. When you are ground schooling always try to develop their confidence and or better yet develop the



horse's self confidence. You want the horse to be confident not only with a particular trainer or handler, but self confident when there is a change of rider or handler or environment. Have the horse believe in themselves while still being respectful.

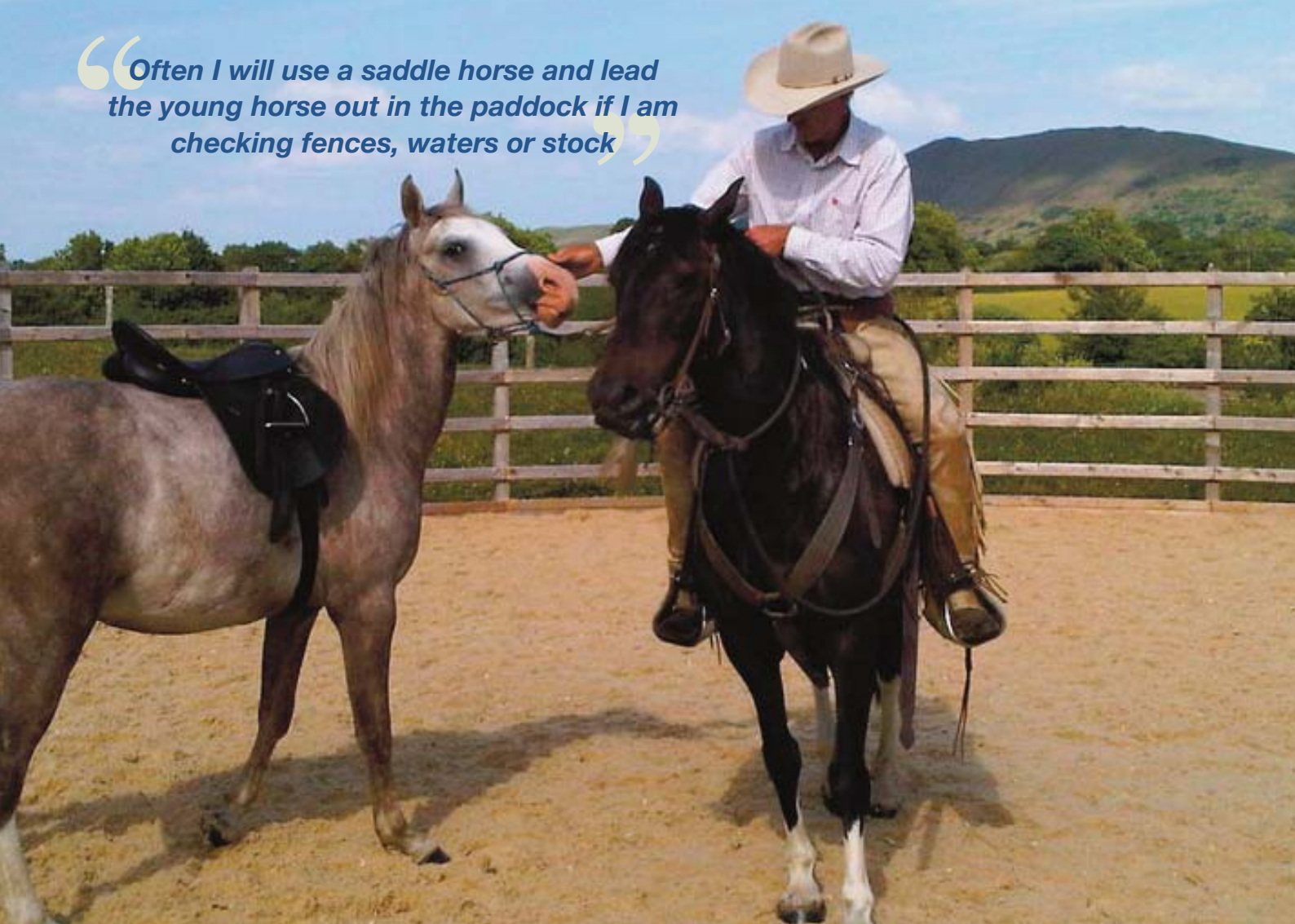
On the ground you can expose the horse to a lot of things; how to load on a trailer, how to lead across little jumps, across creeks, over blue plastic tarps etc. Expose them to a variety of situations to help them develop self confidence. The opportunity for horses allowed to be horses is difficult in some situations because of space and other factors. In Europe many horses know only how to drink out of a trough; they don't know how to cross a stream or how to drink out of one. A young horse growing up in a natural environment, with hills, large pastures and streams will develop better physically and mentally and they learn where to put their feet etc. If they have learnt to socialise with other horses they at least know what it is about being a horse and how to act around other horses. That is all beneficial when you start riding them, as they know what to look out for. Life is not perfect and you have to adjust to fit the situation you are in. By the way you go about ground schooling; you can expose a horse to that sort of thing. Instead of a creek, lead them across blue plastic. Use trotting poles, small jumps etc so at least they have some idea of what negotiating life is all about. The more we wrap our friends in cotton wool and protect them the more likely they will get into trouble when left to their own devices.

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“You would never take anything for granted, but certainly where preparation has been of quality, saddling and later riding is likely to be easier for all. When the preparation has been good your chances of success are greater. The whole process of “breaking / backing or starting” a horse has changed over the last 20-30 years. There have always been people who have gone about educating a horse calmly and had the horse’s best interests at heart, and nowadays the buck ‘em out approach is not acceptable. In preparation for saddling I might check the girth area out with a lead rope using it like a cinch or a girth if I thought the horse was going to be girthy, I would do more preparation. Once you have got the horse to where they are saddled, I let them wear the saddle until they are accepting of it. I often turn a horse loose in a round pen or a suitable yard with the saddle to let them experience the saddle. Some horses may want to buck and others may want to run and some are just fine. The horse is not scared of his mane and tail and if they could see the saddle in the same way. Often I will use a saddle horse and lead the young horse out in the paddock if I am checking fences, waters or stock. That way they are getting used to the saddle on the back and seeing me above them, they also get confidence from the other horse, so a lot of things are accomplished at the one time. Where I may not have a saddle horse to use I will use a fence and have the horse side up to the fence from both sides. This allows the horse to experience you being above them and you can lean over and move the stirrup etc around.

“I don’t advocate long reining or driving and the first few rides I generally give a horse is in a halter. If I have a good connection to his feet and I can untrack his hind quarters and get him to where he is following a feel pretty good, I don’t find I need to drive him. After

three or four rides I’ll ride the horse in a snaffle and if I have done a good job in the halter, I find it’s an easy transition to the snaffle. If I thought I had a horse that was going to have an issue with the bit in its mouth, I would allow them to wear an old headstall that would come off easily or break. If the horse can eat and drink with a snaffle then as a result they also learn how to carry it. Starting a horse starts as soon as you handle them. People don’t realise the influence they can have over a horse just by leading in and out of the stable. If they are dragging you all over the place and pushing on you, that is often how they can ride. If you have got to where your horse has good ground manners right from the start and is self-confident, you are setting up the future.

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The thing about dealing with horses is consistency, staying calm, and looking at the issue from the horse’s point of view. A message on a mug at a livery yard in England read, “Keep Calm and Carry On.” I believe this was a saying from the war years. The horse is a herd animal that has survived for thousands of years and they pick up on movement and emotional activity around them. Whether the horse is two years old, four years old or ten years old. I treat them all the same, a horse is a horse. Where horses don’t have good ground manners they can become extremely dangerous. There is a lot to handling and riding young horses well and with quality. It is important to work with where the horse is at and adjust to fit the situation.