

# Training the Young Horse: *Get 'Em Tired, First!*

with Bill Bohl, Skyland Arabians, Woodstock, VT, January 2002

**B**ill Bohl has been training horses forever. Well, maybe not forever, but for a really, really long time! As a kid in the Midwest, he worked with Arabians and Saddlebreds. After moving to the northeast in 1965 he began working with Arabians full-time. Now, in 2002, after decades of regional and national wins, Mr. Bohl is happily settled at the beautiful Skyland Arabians, a showplace of a farm located in the historic old town of Woodstock, Vt.

Bill's training methods are solid and effective. His horses, once trained, are soft in the bridle, responsive to the leg, and happy in their minds. This result is achieved by the consistent application of proven basics, combined with the John Lyons inspired trick of "get 'em tired, first." What this means is that, rather than try to work with a horse (particularly a young one) which is frisky and not interested in listening to its trainer, the trainer takes the "edge" off the horse first by having it trot/canter/gallop in an arena, round pen, or on a lunge line until it is tired. Once the horse is tired, it will be interested in listening to its trainer. This way the trainer will have a willing student who will learn more quickly and easily.

That being said, here are the steps that Mr. Bohl takes when training a green horse. It is important to remember that the horse *must* be well versed in each step of training before it is asked to move on to the next step. Be prepared to give your horse 1 year or more to master all the steps. Some horses may move along faster than that, but normally it takes at least 1 year to move a horse from untrained to fully trained.

## **Skyland Arabians** Woodstock, Vermont



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1. Introduce the Bit
  - 1.1. Put a bridle with a snaffle bit on the horse. No noseband should be used at this point. Let the horse wear the bridle in the stall until it is comfortable and does not chomp on the bit or open its mouth a lot. When the horse willingly holds the bit in its mouth you can move to the next step.
  
2. Introduce the Surcingle
  - 2.1. Start by simply tying a polo wrap around the horse's belly. Lunge the horse or let it run free in an arena or round pen wearing just the polo wrap.
  - 2.2. Once the horse is okay with the polo wrap (doesn't jump, buck, or try to run away), replace the polo wrap with a surcingle. Tighten the surcingle only enough to keep it from rolling around the horse's belly.
  - 2.3. After the horse is comfortable wearing the surcingle, if you like, add a crupper. The horse will probably be upset by this piece of equipment so expect it to jump, buck, kick and try to run away. Simply work the horse consistently with this equipment and, usually, it will stop being bothered by the crupper and will settle down. Some horses are so disturbed by the crupper, however, that it is better not to ask them to wear one. If your horse is this way that is okay. Simply continue the training process minus that piece of equipment.
  
3. Work horse with the Bridle and Surcingle
  - 3.1. When the horse is comfortable wearing the bridle and the surcingle (with or without a crupper) separately, have the horse work with them together. Spend a couple of days

lunging the horse or having it run free in an arena or round pen while wearing all this equipment. If you lunge the horse at this stage you should also include a halter in the equipment it wears. The halter should be placed under the bridle and the lunge rope should be hooked to one of the rings on the halter. The lunge rope should *not* be hooked to the bit.

3.2. When the horse seems comfortable with this gear, go ahead to the next step.

#### 4. Teach flexion of the Head with Sidereins

4.1. Using only *one* side rein at a time (never both side reins at a time), loosely hook the side rein from a lower ring on the surcingle to the bit. At first, leave the side rein long enough that it doesn't put any pressure on the horse's mouth when the horse is standing with its head in a natural position.

4.2. Lunge the horse with this equipment in both directions, being sure to always have the hooked side rein on the inside of the circle (so that the horse bends to the inside). Again, be sure that the horse is wearing a halter under its bridle so you can hook the lunge rope to the halter ring and *not to the bit*.

4.3. Once the horse understands that it can get away from the pressure of the bit by dropping its nose and "releasing" to it, the trainer can slowly tighten the side rein a little each week until the horse has to turn its head completely to the side to get away from the pressure. The pressure of the side rein is released when there is a small droop in the side rein. Releasing to the pressure of the bit is one of the very most important things that a horse needs to learn. Training should never progress until the horse has *completely* mastered this step.



4.4. When the horse consistently releases to the pressure of the side reins in both directions it is time to move on to ground driving.

## 5. Teaching Your Horse to Ground Drive

5.1. Because there is no rider involved, ground driving is a simple and quick way to train the horse to stop, go and turn.

5.2. The horse should be tacked up with the bridle, surcingle, and, if it's wearing one, the crupper. A halter should be placed on the horse's head *under* the bridle. This will give the "ground person" (the person who will help lead the horse when it is first learning to drive) a place to attach a lead rope. Again, the only things that should be attached to the bit are items such as side reins, regular reins, etc. Nothing that will pull sideways should be attached to the bit.



5.3. To ground drive the horse simply run the long lines through one of the lower rings on the surcingle then up to the bit. It is important to start off the ground driving process with the long lines through the lower rings on the surcingle as this gives the driver increased control. As the horse becomes better trained, the driver can move the long lines to a ring higher up the surcingle, if desired.

5.4. The horse should begin its ground driving lessons by working in a circle around the trainer, as though it were lunging. It is important to have the helper lead the horse when this is first attempted. After the horse gets used to working at the walk, trot, and halt with the helper at its side, it is time for the helper to move away from the horse. This should be done a little at a time until the helper has moved completely away from the horse. If the horse seems confused at any point, however, the helper should move in and assist the trainer in

teaching the horse what behavior is desired.

- 5.5. Most horses need to be worked in the long lines for at least 30 days. It is important that the horse become well versed in all movements *before* it is asked to carry a rider. This makes training much easier on the horse and much safer for the rider. Especially important is for the horse to know the meaning of the word "whoa." No rider should ever get on a horse that does not understand and respond immediately to this cue.

## 6. Introduce the Saddle

- 6.1. After the horse works well in the long lines, it can be taught to carry a rider. To do this, start by simply replacing the surcingle with a saddle. The stirrups can be removed from the saddle or pulled down then crossed over the top of it. If you are using a western saddle, you can take the stirrups off the fenders so that they don't bang on the horse as it moves.
- 6.2. At this point, the horse should be used to having something on its back so the saddle shouldn't come as much of a surprise. However, work the horse on the lunge line or loose in an arena with this tack on until it is completely happy and at ease.

## 7. Introduce the Rider

- 7.1. When the horse performs happily while wearing a bridle and saddle, the trainer can proceed to mount up. This should be done carefully at first and with the aid of an experienced ground person. Many horses are quite shocked by the thought of a person getting on their backs and they will be inclined to become nervous.
- 7.2. In order to prevent the horse from trying to run off when mounted, it is important that the horse is worked very, very hard right before the trainer attempts to get on. The best thing is to have the horse gallop around a round pen or small arena until it is attempting to stop

and stand.

- 7.3. Once the horse is tired and wanting to stand, the ground person should hold onto the halter (which is on under the bridle) while the rider mounts. The rider should be careful to get on slowly and not to hit the horse in the hindquarters with his foot.
- 7.4. After the rider is on the horse, he needs to decide if the horse is scared or not scared. If the horse is scared then the rider should just sit there for a minute then get off. If the horse is not scared then the rider can squeeze with his legs and ask the horse to walk. Most times the horse will not understand this request, however, so the ground person will need to lead the horse forward when the rider gives the cue to walk. After a little practice, the horse will associate the squeezing of the legs with moving forward and the ground person will not need to be so actively involved (though should still remain at the horse's head at this point).

## 8. Teach the Horse the 3 Gaits

- 8.1. At first, the ground person should stay at the side of the horse while the rider is aboard. After the horse becomes comfortable walking and stopping, and listens well to the riders cues, the ground person can move away from the horse. However, the ground person should always remain close enough to help in an emergency.
- 8.2. When the horse walks and stops quickly and smoothly for the rider, it is okay to ask the horse to trot. This gait should be practiced until the horse picks up the trot swiftly from a walk and proceeds strongly forward, not moving from side-to-side and not breaking into a walk or halt.
- 8.3. After the horse becomes proficient at the trot, the rider can ask for a canter. At first, the horse can be "run" into the canter. This is done by the rider having the horse pick up a trot then asking for the canter (with the outside leg and outside rein). Usually the canter is first

asked for while the horse is on a circle or at the beginning of a corner. Eventually, after many practice sessions, the horse will understand that the cue of an outside leg and outside rein mean to canter. At this point, the horse will pick up the canter immediately upon feeling the cue to canter. When the horse picks up the canter quickly and consistently on the correct lead while on a circle or corner, the rider can ask it to pick up the canter on a straight line.

- 8.4. Once the horse picks up the canter on cue while at the trot the trainer can ask the horse to canter from a walk. The horse may, at first, need to add a few trotting steps between the walk and the canter. Eventually, though, the horse will canter directly from the walk.

## 9. Going Backwards

- 9.1. The rein back is a movement that each horse should be trained to perform perfectly and without hesitation.
- 9.2. To train this movement the rider simply applies pressure to the bit with both the reins at the same time and squeezes gently with his legs. At first, the horse may pull against the pressure of the bit or may simply attempt to move away from its pressure by tucking its head in to its chest. By maintaining the pressure of the bit and legs, however, the rider will stop the horse from obtaining a reward for this incorrect behavior and, eventually, the horse will take a step backwards (or somewhat backwards) in an attempt to get away from the pressure. When the horse takes even *one* step backwards the rider should immediately reward it with a release of the rein and leg pressure and a pat on the neck.
- 9.3. The horse should be asked to practice this movement several times during each training session. After a week or two, it should back immediately upon feeling the cues and

continue backing until the cues have ceased.

## 10. Bring the Horse off the Rail

- 10.1. Up to this point the rider should keep the horse "on the rail" while riding. Once the horse can perform the walk, trot, and canter smoothly, it is time for the trainer to bring the horse "off the rail." All this means is that, instead of the rider keeping the horse on the track next to the arena fence all the time, he asks the horse to move away from the fence and to do "patterns," such as serpentines, circles and diagonal lines.
- 10.2. These patterns should be practiced often as they will help the rider teach the horse to be supple and to listen carefully to the rider's cues.

## 11. Leg Yielding

- 11.1. Leg yielding is simply the act of the horse moving away from the pressure of the rider's legs. Every well-trained horse knows how to leg yield and does so skillfully.
- 11.2. To teach the horse to leg yield the trainer simply asks the horse to move sideways by combining leg pressure (about 6" behind the girth) and rein pressure in order to keep the horse from moving forward.
- 11.3. When leg yielding is first attempted, the horse will usually become confused and will attempt to move forward. To show the horse that forward movement is not what is wanted, the trainer simply applies pressure to the horse's mouth every time it tries to move in a forward direction.
- 11.4. When the horse finally takes even a partially sideways step the trainer should immediately reward him with the release of pressure and a pat on the neck. After a minute or two, the horse should be asked again to step sideways and yield to the pressure of the leg. After many practice sessions of this type the horse will understand that it is to move sideways

when it feels the pressure of just one leg.

- 11.5. When first training the horse to leg yield it can be helpful to have the horse stand facing a wall or fence. This can help it to better understand that it is not to move forward, but sideways.

## 12. Perfect the Moves

- 12.1. Once the horse can do the basics of halt, walk, trot, canter, rein back and leg yielding, the rider needs to school the horse consistently until it can do each move in a smooth and relaxed manner. It is important that the horse, even if it is meant to become an English or Park horse, should be schooled in a relaxed way. Doing otherwise could result in a horse that is frightened and will never become proficient in the basics.

So, that's about it! Be consistent and patient in your training and you, too, can have happy, soft horses, as does Mr. Bohl. Some important points to remember are:

8 If the horse isn't listening to you, get it tired, first! You'll be doing yourself and your horse a big favor if you adhere *strictly* to this rule. This is particularly important if you are working a young horse or a stallion.

8 Do not feed your horse more grain than it needs. Often times young horses are getting too much grain, which only adds to the problem of them being frisky. If your horse is usually a handful to handle, be sure to cut back on his grain. Of course, you can feed plenty of good quality hay. However, stay away from alfalfa. Try timothy hay, which does not provide the horse with as much energy as alfalfa.

8 Give your horse the time it needs to perfect each step before moving on to the next one. Many amateurs make the mistake of moving on to steps for which their horses are not ready.

8 The basic concept that each horse needs to learn is that it must move away from pressure. This pressure can come from the bit, the reins, your seat, or your legs. Your job as a trainer is to teach your horse to move from even the slightest pressure immediately and without question.

8 It is quite normal for a horse to need at least 1 year of schooling before it becomes proficient at all the basic moves. However, every horse is different so some may take less time while others may take more time. It is critical that the trainer “listen” to his horse so he can bring the horse along as quickly as possible without rushing the animal.

8 There are many wonderful training books and tapes on the market right now. Books and tapes by such noted trainers as John Lyons, Jane Savoie, for example, are easy to understand and to implement, and they work very, very well.

8 Most of the time, stallions are especially tough to train! Do not attempt to train a stallion, or stud colt, unless you are an accomplished horseperson. Normally the training of an ungelded male horse is best left to the pros.

8 Every horse has limitations. Know what your horse’s limitations are and do not attempt to ask the horse for more than it can give. As in any sport, there are only a few superstars. Know your horse and know when it’s giving you all it has to give.

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