



### Training Aspects of a Young Horse Transitioning from Breeder to New Owner

#### The elusive horse age

While English-speaking equestrian community calls any horse before age six a young horse, we actually differentiate a horse age more granular. Everybody knows that once a foal reached the end of its first six months of life and is separated from a dam it becomes a weanling. This term relates to the actual date of a foal's birth.

#### Large stud breeding culture

Traditionally, the large breeding operation in a stud or a farm used to be organized in a way that all or most mares would foal in December-February, with rare exceptions of foaling to happen in March or April. It was a synchronized managed production cycle in rather cold climates with grassy summers and cold, snowy winters.

Breeding operation would take into account how critical it is for the foals to get into grass pastures with their dams, since the earlier in its life a foal is exposed to the sun, green grass and play in freedom (May or even April on a good year), and the longer this period is in its first year of live before the

winter, the stronger, sturdier, and more athletic foal you get. This free development on a grass time lasts till end of October, and makes good six or seven month of the foundation for its further correct and not delayed development.

That is why it was practical to count all foals birthday on January 1<sup>st</sup>, since the actual difference in age was minimal. Breeders grouped foals for further development and training based on their age with a date of birth as January 1<sup>st</sup>. Hence the training schedule for the horses used to be based on a calendar year.

End of year a foal was born – ta-da, he is a yearling. Year passes, on a New Year Day – and he is a two years old. The following New Year Day – and he is a three years old. It used to be that preparation for mounting and first mounting work itself was done based on age, gender, and season (for colts end of fall and December, for geldings and mares August and early fall) by a very skilled personnel who used to do that year over year, and had accumulated all kinds of experiences and nuances, and could project the best approach for a developing horse just by looking at it briefly.

## Modern small farm breeding culture

Modern warmblood breeding has less of this pattern. Breeding farms are often many, scattered geographically, and smaller. Due to globalization they are established in a large variety of countries and climate zones. In the Northern Hemisphere breeders continue trying to start a mare as late as June or even July, or in some circumstances even past that. So they have foals who are born in December, January, February, March, April, May, June, July, and sometimes beyond.

This melting pot of foals can be organized into groups for free grass turnout and play after weanling had been done based on their gender, strength, and attitude. They all have foal halters, lead on a line, and learn a tie up post, but that is as much as can be done with them without individual differentiation.

## Young selling age defies opportunity for training experience accumulation at a breeder's place

Breeders are trying to sell foals that qualify as riding horses and not as breeding material (in which case they prefer to keep it longer) as yearlings or even weanlings, without mentioning high anticipation cases like in-utero contracts with live foal on a ground guarantee. And many breeders do sell foals successfully before they are yearlings or very soon after, so they do not practice and do not accumulate the second year or the third year of horse life training acumen.

## First boarding situation with a new owner

Buyers, horse owners and riders, usually come from the training stable cultures, where they mostly work with four or five years old mounted horses, or much older. So, for them a two years old horse, even a three years old horse is still too young to be dealt with in familiar manner, and a horse is either switched between a stall and turnout for almost two years, or is being turned out individually or in a group in a large field with a shed. For breaking the idea is to send that youngster for 30 days to a jockey or a cowboy, and to get back a "safe mount".

This is a big gap in a horse management. Stall and 60x60 feet turnout, or group play and pasture roaming are not enough to prepare a horse for mounting work. This regime returns to your training stable in September of the fourth year (i.e. at 44 months old) a raw horse body that is big, but not developed to carry even itself properly and safely.

## Training impact on bone remodeling

There are studies on natural horses bone remodeling process that happens between 24 and 48 months of age. During this growth phase bones remodel to match their strength, density and shock absorption ability to whatever workload a horse is exposed to. If standing in a stall or roaming in a pasture, a bone will remodel to match just that. Occasional play in freedom also is not a big deal. If your horse has not been progressively trained during these two

years to gradually reach the levels of workload that it would be exposed to soon after sure mounting, you had wasted your time.

Now your horse is a four years old, coming five years old in a few months on New Year’s Day, and you still have a skeleton and soft tissue of a large two-years old. And the fact that growth plates in bones had closed for the most part, will not make much of an advantage.

You still will have to do those gradual workload increases over the next two years (your horse’s fifth and sixth year), to get to a solid point where its bones remodeled to match anticipated work, and soft tissue strengthened, and your horse is ready to carry itself in the basic (Training level) frame<sup>1</sup>.

If you are a skillful rider and ambitious, and horse looks big and round-bodied, you will likely over-push, and chances are high that a horse will break. This scenario sounds uninspiring, right?

<sup>1</sup> Have you ever thought why with so many horses it takes two years to get them accepting contact and balance well on forehand to start, and go in a decent working canter, like what the requirements for the Training level in USDF dressage are? And then it takes another two years to get those horses through horizontal balance to initial stages of uphill balance on hind quarters like in the Second level of USDF dressage? I.e. your horse is six years old when hits first Second level shows if it has not broken down yet.

Table 1. New Training Year begins in September, hence a shift.

Training stage	Young horse 13-32 months		Remount horse 33-56 months		Specialization 57-68 months	
Foal	Yearling	Two years old	Three years old	Four years old	Five years old	Six years old
1 <sup>st</sup> year	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	3 <sup>rd</sup> year	4 <sup>th</sup> year	5 <sup>th</sup> year	6 <sup>th</sup> year	7 <sup>th</sup> year
0 – 12 months	13-24 months	25-36 months	37-48 months	49-60 months	61-72 months	73-84 months

After specialization in a certain discipline is complete<sup>2</sup>, we get what it’s called a mature horse.

Equestrian Insider deploys the following approaches to address the breeding and developing complexity of a modern sport horse:

- We map horse training and management into a timeline of actual age from a date of birth.
- Horses are separated into four training stage groups: foal (goes for 1 year), young horse (1 year and 8

<sup>2</sup> Completing specialization can mean different things for different horses. It is being determined by an experienced coach for each horse. For some it can mean successful practicing of Grand Prix movements in dressage, jumping 160sm clear rounds, or meeting time limits on an advanced cross-country course. For some it means reaching limits of physical ability in a selected discipline, and developing a horizontal career shift into something that a horse enjoys.

months<sup>3</sup>), remount horse (24 months), specialized horse (24 months).

- We design and adopt training and development programs for young horses to assure their readiness for the beginning of consistent mounted work as remount horses.
- We design and adopt training and development programs for remount horses to enable their holistic development and a fair specialization route into a mature horse.

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<sup>3</sup> This stage is shorter, because it starts on a New Year Day, but ends on August 31<sup>st</sup>, right before the Training year begins on September 1<sup>st</sup> for a remount horse.