

Getting those 2 year olds ready to ride

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This time of year can be an exciting one for horse owners. Many of us enjoy doing the breaking and starting of our 2 year olds and now is great time to get the process going. The goal of ground work is to make the riding part much easier and less worrisome for both horse and rider. If it takes 6 months or a year to complete the process, that's ok.

Utilizing a round pen is ideal, but not completely necessary. In fact, much of it can be done in his stall or turnout pen, where he feels comfortable and is less like to spook or shy away because of unfamiliar areas.

- ✓ ***Is he halter broke?*** First and foremost, he must be halter broke. If he's not, spend as much one on one time as you can with him. In doing so, you are developing a trust and comfort level, without stressing him out or asking too much at once. The horse really doesn't need to be haltered until you can rub and pet all over him (especially around his ears and poll). If you have to rope him or pen him up in a corner, you are only adding stress to the situation. Once you do get the halter on, don't leave it on long the first time. Take it off and put it on several times until it becomes easy. There could be an entire article devoted solely to halter breaking. However, this is the condensed version. When he's ready to lead, start by putting a slight bit of pressure on the lead rope. The second he gives to the pressure (just be giving his head), release! The smallest amount of accomplishment should be rewarded here. Repeat once or twice during this first session, and then call it a day. Over time, gradually increase pressure until he takes a step. Again, the smallest amount of accomplishment should be rewarded. Repeat until you can comfortably lead. If he's already halter broke, you can skip this step.
- ✓ ***Pick up their feet.*** I have found that the younger and smaller the horse is, the easier it is to teach them to pick their feet up and hold them up for you. More than likely at this point he has had his feet trimmed. But if not, this would be a good time to start teaching him those things. You're farrier will thank you for it. Start by running your hand down his legs over and over. If you can't comfortably touch his legs, picking them up will be very difficult. Working with their feet only makes them more comfortable with you and adds a little more "training" to them.
- ✓ ***Sack out.*** I like to sack out all my horses, whether they're young or old. I'll take an empty feed sack and twist one end to make a handle. The point of the sack is that it makes more noise than anything else. I like to hit my own leg with it the first few times

we use it. When I feel like they have passed the noise and motion test, I'll start down low on their legs and tap a few times. Generally, they'll move around a little, which is not a big deal. As he gets more comfortable, I may move up his leg some. The end result is a horse that is comfortable with the noise and movement of the feed sack from head to toe. Keep in mind that you're not slapping the horse with it, just merely brushing and possibly tapping the horse with it and getting him used to noise and pressure coming from different directions from a source they may not recognize.

- ✓ **Utilize a longe line.** This is another great way to teach your horse to move away from pressure. Begin with your lead rope and move his hind end around. Release pressure when he moves his legs. The more forward he moves, the lighter you should be with your hands and pressure to move him. Just like other exercises, start small and reward. The good thing about using a longe line, is that can it be done anywhere at any time. For example, you can longe before you ride at home, at a show or even a trail ride. This will get your horse warmed up mentally and physically.
- ✓ **Saddle pads.** Spend time putting a saddle pad on your horse's back and moving forward and backward up his neck and down his rump. Too often I see someone attempting to saddle an unbroke horse and they can't comfortably put a saddle pad on them. The saddle is really tough to get on their back if you can't get the saddle pad on easily.
- ✓ **Use lead rope to pressure around the girth area.** It's a good idea to get your horse used to pressure around his girth area before tightening the girth on the saddle. A lead rope can be used by going over their back and underneath around the heart girth. It doesn't need to be fastened or tied, just tightened up with your hand. This allows them to get used to pressure in that area without having to commit to tightening the saddle and securing it to them before they're ready.
- ✓ **Saddle.** If you can sack them out and put the saddle pad on them and he stands comfortable with his head down, move to the saddle next. Slowly place it on their back. There's no need to tighten the girth the first few times you put it on them. Let the saddle sit on his back for a few moments, then take off. Repeat a couple more times the first day, and then call it good. As times goes on, leave the saddle on a little longer each time. It's also good practice to saddle and unsaddle from both sides. He needs to stand still and be comfortable with the process. Over time, you should be able to tighten the girth. Make sure that if you do decide to tighten the girth, that it really is tight. If he decides to bolt or buck, you don't want the saddle slipping up their neck or twisting underneath them.

If you haven't mastered all of these different activities, it probably isn't time to get on quite yet. Take your time during the process. There will always be another day. It's much easier to go forward without having to make up damage that was done. It should also be noted, these aren't

listed in any particular order (with the exception of being halter broke and putting the saddle on), just simply a list of possible activities you can do with your horse to get him ready to ride. Over the next several months, I'll go into greater detail of each of the exercises listed above and add more ideas to making that first ride less stressful to horse and rider.