

# *Starting a Horse*

## *“The Natural Way”*

### Part 1

#### **By Brad Weeks – Queensland Natural Horsemanship**

Before you can start a horse you must ask yourself some very important questions. Firstly "Why am I starting this horse?" The obvious answer is "So that I can ride it." Our next question is "How are we going to ride it?" Hopefully the answer will include words like nicely, with lightness, and willingly. If we start our horse hard, treat him hard, and ride him hard - then he will be hard to turn, hard to stop and hard to move off the leg.

In the first part of this two-part article I will explain the mental and emotional concepts behind the starting of a horse. If we can understand these concepts then the physical starting, or training, will be so much easier for both horse and human.

If a person, being a predator, approaches a horse, being a prey animal, with the mind-set of 'breaking' the horse, then you have the wrong approach. You see, predators chase prey animals and prey animals run away from predators. The vast majority of horses do not want to hurt you. However, if they are scared, confused or nervous and they feel jammed up or trapped they can and will cause us injury in their haste to escape.

A horse can have three distinctly different mindsets. They can be *submissive*, *defensive* or *offensive*. Of course we would all like to have our horses submissive. In this mind he is in his left brain. His head would be down, he would be blinking his eyes, probably mouthing and his body soft. It's in this mind that we can train our horse.

If a horse becomes defensive, it's usually because he is worried, concerned, confused, or frightened. In this mindset he will usually put his body straight, i.e. he will put his hips, ribs, shoulders and head straight, his head would be high and his jaw set. It's in this physical shape that he knows that he can bolt, buck, rear, kick or strike. It's also from this frame that he can turn offensive very quickly.

In the offensive mind the horse will bolt, buck, rear, strike or kick. As I said, I like to have a horse submissive. I can work with a defensive horse, just be re-assuring him or taking a step back to allow him room to think. However, I do not want an offensive horse because an offensive horse is going to get me hurt.

The starting of a horse is probably the most changing and challenging experience it will ever undergo in its life. For a horse to have a human being on its back is tantamount, in the horse's mind, to allowing a lion or tiger to be draped over its back.

The horse's senses are stretched physically, mentally and emotionally. How a horse is started can mean the difference between how they see humans and how they approach their training for the rest of their lives. How then, do we start the horse in a way that will ensure that we have a partner for life, rather than 'just a horse' which just appears to go through the paces?

You might have picked up, already, that I refer to the term 'starting' of a horse. I say that because the age-old term of 'breaking' can denote visions of breaking the horse physically, mentally and emotionally – and why would we want to break such a spirit, or suppress the mind so numbingly or turn a thinking, reasoning animal into a zombie. If we approach the horse with the belief that we are going to 'break' the horse we can project to the horse a feeling that we are, indeed predators, and that we are, in fact, 'hunting' the horse.

I use the term 'starting' because that is exactly what we are doing – we are starting their education. It's a bit like sending a child to grade one. It is in grade one that a child learns, amongst other things, the basics of socializing with other children, how to learn, as well as the basics of reading, writing and mathematics which will then allow the child to go on to whatever discipline or career they want - whether it be to high school, university or beyond.

I am often asked, "Can you start a horse for dressage, or racing, or reining, etc?" My answer is simply, "Yes." I can say this because I start all horses the same way. Albert Einstein started his schooling the same way as other kids his own age, as did Banjo Patterson and William Shakespeare. The point is, that all humans, no matter what their final achievements, no matter how great they became in their selected fields, all started their education the same way – with the basics.

It is the same with horses. They are all started the same way. Once their basic movements are consolidated, only then can their training go to the next level – which is usually the introduction of performance movements.

When a horse is started, they are learning the basics of how to behave in the human world, how to learn, as well as how to perform certain basic movements that are the cornerstones of virtually every advanced movement in every equine discipline.

The basic movements which I refer to are, turn on the forequarters, turn on the hindquarters, yielding to the leg, stop, back-up, float-loading, leading, tying-up and paces in the walk, trot and canter (both leads). It should also include grooming and basic veterinary procedures.

So, the next obvious question is, "How do we get the horse to do all these things to prepare him for the future without reinforcing his preconceived ideas about humans?"

Three key words to keep in mind – *Trust, Acceptance, and Training, or Emotional, Mental, and Physical*. If the horse does not trust us, then he will not accept what we're

trying to do with him; if he doesn't accept what we're trying to do to with him, then we can't train him. We obtain trust by the approach and retreat method. The biggest problem with humans is that we are predators, and predators are direct line thinkers. To earn the horses trust we must convince him that we are not your typical predator. In order to do this we must show the horse that we are not attacking him. By approaching or placing pressure, in gradually increasing phases, on the horse, until we get a response, rather than a reaction, and then retreating to allow the horse some room to think or digest what we have done, we allow the horse the opportunity to make a decision as to our intentions.

The response I am talking about is the decision made in the 'left brain' – the thinking side. Conversely a reaction is a decision made in the 'right brain', or is adrenalin induced. In order to train the horse we must keep him in the left side of his brain, rather than the right side- his reaction or 'flight from fright' side.

If we approach the horse with this psychological approach, we will project an aura of body language, which will instil in the horse of sense of trust. This sense of trust will ensure that the horse does not feel as though we are 'hunting' him. If we can achieve this then we achieve the horse's Emotional acceptance.

The obvious question, then, is how to achieve this trust. Usually by the time that I receive a horse for starting, it has had a halter on it and, probably, been held, led or pulled around by the halter. In order to disconnect the horse from his pre-conceived idea that I am 'just another predator', I will try to do the opposite. To do this I will put the horse into a round-yard and take the halter off it.

In Part 2 of this article I will explain the actual physical concepts of starting a horse naturally. In this I will attempt to guide the human through a maze of physical, emotional and mental aspects of helping a horse to accept the human and overcome his innate fear of having a human (predator) draped over his back.

I will do this by explaining how a horse's education commences 'on the ground'. We will start to programme the horse to respond to lightness, moving away from pressure, and creating 'cues' which will later be used in the same fashion whilst in the saddle.

In Part 3 we will conclude this series with the final piece to the puzzle. We put on the saddle, and eventually put our bum in the saddle. We will then go on to get the horse to go forwards, stop, back-up, turn on the forequarters, and move off the leg.

In conclusion for this part, one thing to keep in mind is that, although this article will be produced over a number of months, in real-time terms the process, which I will discuss throughout the series should take approximately one hour.

*Brad Weeks uses and recommends "Winning Edge" saddles (Gatton) and "Natural Equine Horse Products" (Newcastle).*

