

# *“Starting a Horse”*

## *‘The Natural Way’*

### Part 3

**By Brad Weeks – Queensland Natural Horsemanship**

The final part of this series will cover our ultimate goal - to saddle, mount and move the horse under saddle. In Part 1, we discussed our motivation, reasoning and psychological approach to the starting our horse. In Part 2 we discussed how to control our horse and prepare him ‘on the ground’.

I saddle my horses mostly from the off-side. I believe it helps give the horse that all-round training experience, i.e. being handled on both sides. Also, I find it easier to just put the saddle on from the off side, adjust the girth while you’re there, then walk around to the near side to girth.

To introduce the saddle I’ll put it on the ground with the saddle pad on top. I’ll invite the horse to come over and look at it and smell it. Once he has investigated what it is, and has satisfied his curiosity, he has partially accepted it.

Next, with the lead rope over the crook of my right arm, and my right foot beside the horses off side front foot, I’ll pick up the saddle pad. I’ll twist my body to the left to show the horse what I have in my hand. I’ll give him another opportunity to look at and smell the pad. When he has satisfied his curiosity again, I’ll place the pad onto his back. I’ll place it forward of the wither and slide it back. I’ll do this numerous times in a caressing fashion. I’ll also slide the pad down the near side a bit and let it rub the ribs a couple of times before replacing it onto the back of the horse. Once he has accepted this I’ll leave the pad on his back.

To saddle, I’ll put myself in exactly the same position. I’ll pick up the saddle and hold it under my left arm

I’ll again twist my body to the left and invite the horse to look at and smell the saddle. Once he has accepted it again, I’ll turn on the ball of my right foot, lifting the saddle and place it gently onto the horse.

I’ll leave the saddle there for a moment and let the horse become use to it. I’ll then slowly let down my girth whilst rubbing the horses whither. I’ll now walk around to the near side of the horse.

In my experience, most horses do not buck or play up from weight. It’s usually from constriction of the girth. So, besides the actual mounting and first steps of the horse, the next part is very crucial.

I'll position my left foot beside the near side front foot of the horse. With my 'left' hand I'll reach under the horse, rubbing the horse's underside with the back of my left hand and taking hold of the girth. I'll bring it around and do it up very loosely (*Photo 1*).

Whilst caressing the wither of the horse with my left hand, I'll slowly and gently tension the girth. It is very important to remember that everything, which you are now doing, could spell how the horse feels about these things in the future. So, to prevent making the horse girth shy, do not tighten too fast or too hard.

I will girth the horse just so that it is firm. I'll now invite the horse to walk forward. This can be either in a circling fashion or in a straight line. Just be careful at this stage. I've found that most horses, if they are going to buck, will do it when they go into a canter, however some will do it going into a trot, and an even smaller percentage from the first step. So, just stand aside a bit when you ask him to move.

Whilst you are doing this a number of things are happening. Firstly, the horse is becoming use to the saddle on its back. Secondly, because you have not tightened the girth too much, the forward action of the horse's front feet will pull out any skin which might be caught under it. Finally, the horse is breathing and relaxing his ribs, therefore causing the girth to become looser. After a little bit I'll stop the horse and, with my left hand caressing his wither, I will tighten the girth.

I'll usually go through this process at least one more time. So, in the end I have actually girthed the horse three times, but in a nice, gentle and less forceful way.

In the old days what would happen now is that the 'breaker' or a 'volunteer (?)' would get on the horse and ride the buck out of him.

However, I'll now take the halter off the horse and let him go. I'll let him move around the roundyard and let him get use to the saddle without the added problems of me on his back. It is now that we may see some fireworks. It may be in the walk or the trot, but usually it will be going into the canter that you will see a reaction. Just stay in the roundyard with him and wait until he works it out.

I'll get him to come down to a walk, and come to me a couple of times during this process to reinforce that I am a comfortable place to be and I will look after him (*Photo 2*). I'll continue this until I can get a walk, trot and canter, at liberty, without the bucking.

Once this activity is completed I will put the halter back on. I am now going to start putting weight into the saddle. Whilst standing on the near side I will flex the horse's head to the near side.

Whilst maintaining the flex, I will now lift myself, as athletically as possible, so that I will be standing in the stirrup, with my right hip into the side of the saddle. If the horse moves off a bit, let him. Remember, he is not use to this weight hanging off his side so he might overbalance slightly or, because he might also be a bit nervous or scared, he will find it necessary to move his feet.

Once he is standing still I will step down. On the off side I will do exactly the same, but in the mirror reverse (*Photo 3*). I will do this, probably twice on both sides. On the third occasion I will lean over to the opposite side from which I am standing in the stirrup, and rub the horse on his shoulder and ribs. I will also rub the fender of the saddle back and forth a few times, shaking and rattling the fender and stirrup (*Photo 4*). Only when the horse has accepted this, I will move on to the actual mounting task.

For this I will tie the 12 foot leadrope into a single looped rein. Whilst on the near side of the horse I will stand in the stirrup the same as I have done previously. However, on this occasion, whilst maintaining the lateral flexion of the horse's head, I'll sit into the saddle.

I'll sit there, nice and quiet, for a period of time whilst the horse gets use to me being on his back (*Photo 5*).

Now, whilst I have flexion through his jaw and he is standing still, I will ask for his first movement. It has been said that the first ride is everything to horse. I would like to go a bit further, and say that it is actually the first step that he takes with you on his back. Whatever happens now, DO NOT pull back on the reins. Just allow the horse to move and stop as he relaxes. It is at this point that you can 'jam' a horse from his very first step.

Whilst maintaining the lateral flexion, squeeze with your legs. Do not kick the horse, just squeeze. If the horse does not move off with a reasonable amount of pressure, whilst holding the flexion using the rein in your left hand, slap your right thigh with your right hand. If he still does not move off, just increase the slapping on your own thigh and clicking him up.

Once the first, possibly hesitant step is taken, take your legs off and stop the slapping. Let the horse think about what has just happened for a couple of seconds and then go through the same process again .

Once this has been achieved, I'll flex the horse's head to the right and repeat the process. Within a relatively short time you will find that the horse is walking off with just the leg pressure, and you are steering the horse around the roundyard. And before you know, you have made your first ride.

On the first ride I usually do not ask for anything more than a nice walk, some turns, stop and back up.

There you have it. For all intents and purposes, your horse's education, under saddle, has been started. His education now will continue for as long as you want it to.

I break down a horse's education into four stages – a bit like a humans. They are 'Pre-school' (foal handling); 'Primary school' (starting); 'High School' (what I call the Consolidation phase); and finally, if desired, University (Sports specific performance training). However, before University, their basic training needs to be consolidated. This consolidation, or training of a 'green' horse will take, on average, about 100 hours – some less, some significantly more.

In conclusion, I would like to enlighten anyone, who is thinking about getting their horse started, about some of the traps. These include:

1. Check out the trainer - their personality, facilities, equipment, and horses. Ask to see them ride, or even ask if you can watch them start another horse.
2. Ask for references.
3. You should be able to watch the starting process. If the trainer doesn't want anyone present because 'he has some secret techniques that he doesn't want anyone to see', he's got something to hide. The trainer should be open and inviting with his training techniques.
4. Good trainers can be any race, sex, colour, size or age. Horses are not judgemental on these issues – that's one of their real beauties. Advertisements for 'lady breakers', or 'small- framed trainers' and such are garbage.
5. The starting process should normally take no longer than two weeks. The first ride, as I have described in these articles, took approximately 45 minutes. Yes, admittedly, you can get problem horses for starting which may take a little longer. But, I would say 90% are the norm.
6. At the end of the starting process your horse should be able to:
  - Walk, trot and canter on both leads;
  - Stop
  - Back up, using both reins and seat;
  - Side pass
  - Turn on the forequarters
  - Turn on the hindquarters
  - Pick up all four feet
  - Tie up
  - Float, and
  - All of the above should be able to be done in a halter, or a bridle.
7. The trainer shouldn't use hobbles or cross-ties.
8. You should ride your horse at least two to three time at the trainer's place, under his direction, before he comes home.
9. Just because a person is a good trainer for a specific equine discipline does not mean that they will be good at starting a horse.
10. Do not use a relation or a mate because he used to be a ringer once.

I hope that this series of articles has helped to dispel any confusion or myths relating to the starting of a horse. It is not a difficult process, but a lot of people do make it difficult for themselves and, more importantly, for their horses.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the owner of the horse I used for this article. She was a two-year-old Arab mare named 'Akara', owned by Josephine Johnston-Rowers. The starting, and hence the photos, were taken on a particularly cold and windy (hence the cap and not my usual hat) day in August 2004.

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