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From Racehorse To Riding Horse: How to coach the OTT horse

When re-training, it is the consolidation of the new responses that is most important. That is, repeating them over and over, so that the new way of responding becomes an ingrained habit.

Some basic responses may only take days to install, however, the consolidation period could be months of work when dealing with a re-trainer. Remember that re-training is about replacing old habits with new, so the consolidation process is all about reminding them of the new way that we want them to respond and suppressing the old habits.



THOROUGHBRED

Health and Welfare Considerations

Remember that poor health and soundness issues create tense and reactive horses as they respond to pain and discomfort particularly under saddle. This can be difficult to pinpoint as the horse may not be lame.

- Equine Gastric Ulcers
- Poor saddle fit
- Teeth
- Poor hoof conformation:

Poor HPA (Hoof Pastern Angles) and NPA (Negative Palmar/Plantar Angles) in the hoof, thin soles create pain and therefore, poor behaviour, tension/anxiety/spookiness by elevating flight response. X-rays will identify any issues.

I would strongly recommend at least front shoes on TB OTT. Standardbred feet are generally of better conformation than the TB.

Shoeing considerations such as pads, thick shoes such as wide web. Realise that corrective shoeing is expensive.

Which Pony Club riders are suited to OTT?

Experienced, patient riders who have support from knowledgeable coaches. Established independent seat. Knowledge and application of the aids (pressure release).

Issues created by racing environment

- Not standing still whilst mounting
- Heavy in the bridle in groundwork and leading (they want to run)
- Not going into a horse float (used to being trucked). Large horses can feel trapped in smaller float bays. Angle load can be beneficial to OTT as similar to context of truck. Train groundwork so that the horse is manoeuvrable front end (forequarters) and back end (hind quarters) before floating.
- Being really scared of new environments.
- Become adrenalized when they hear loudspeaker (and for some – the metronome and loud voice from rider!).
- Don't clearly understand that when riders have longer stirrups what the basic leg aids are (used to being ridden in short stirrups)

- Stopping, rein back, turning – rein aids are heavy, non-existent
- Horse won't be able to travel in self-carriage in a straight line. Racehorses have had plenty of practice of inappropriate line.
- Whip shy (whip associated with flight response).
- Hyper-active off the leg because flight response is so readily available due to the nature of racing but not trained. Insensitive to the rein
- Spooky/frighty is a symptom of all of the above.
- Ability to work in a group (horse behind/in front).
- Horse shy (facing up across diagonal line).
- Separation anxiety.

Using Equitation Science to target issues of self-carriage (line and tempo), that is, horse responds to light aids (OBEDIENCE LEVEL).

Knowing how to shape something eg being able to apply the unknown cue before the known. Sequence of cues must be in correct order.

Train where you have a better chance of gaining self- carriage. Self-carriage is the holy grail. You train it at halt (standing for the vet, farrier etc, leading and under saddle). Self-carriage means there is no resistance and no flight response.

Train for longer neck posture and longer strides (particularly at walk) to encourage relaxation. Both under saddle, in-hand (also include head down) and lunging.

Important - Don't let the horse practice the flight response. Train all aids to be light.

0631: Jonna McLean 15 - "Case Study - Ten Steps to Train/ Retrain Benny, The Retired Racehorse"



Listen to podcast by Jonna McLean – *Horse Chats* with Glenys Cox.



STANDARD BRED

One of the biggest challenges for any rider/trainer when dealing with an off-the-track Standardbred is likely to be the pacing gait having spent many hours practicing and perfecting a lateral or ambling gait.

In a racing environment, the whip is used in single strikes to elicit a flight response and may align more with a punishment-based approach rather than a reward-based approach to training. When you train and use the whip in the correct way, the whip can become a light signal in the same way as all your other pressure signals (reins, legs, lead-rope).

Standardbreds, and indeed all race horses, are likely to be whip-shy as a result of the incorrect use of the whip, and will require a very thorough habituation to the sight and feel of the whip coming into contact with their bodies. They have to re-learn that when the whip comes towards them it will just make a light contact and they can avoid any aversive pressure from the whip by responding correctly to the light tap.

Training STOP and GO - trot rather than pace

Relaxed in hand transitions walk to trot to develop trot gait. Then shape under saddle – leg aid and handler shaping with lead rein pressure to elicit trot response. Tension elicits pacing (the default). So if the horse paces do a transition back to walk and reward (wither scratch) before asking for trot again.

When consolidating a horse's responses, we can often spend a lot of time telling our horse what not to do instead of telling them what they did right. Rewarding them for what they did right makes it more likely for them to do it again, which is key when consolidating the trot aid.

Using trot poles to develop the trot approx. 1.4m distance.

Training Turn

Exercise 1: 20m circle spiral in using direct turn and then spiral out using indirect turn (flexion remains true to the outside).

Exercise 2: wiggly lines done in both direct and indirect turn + ride an octagon (8 sided circle). Remember, a circle is just a series of turns 😊. Perform in walk and trot.

Exercise 3: Direct turns from A to C. Timing of rein aid. Apply rein aid when inside foreleg is in the swing phase.

Achieving softness in neck and poll working towards a frame

The best way I find to shape roundness is through indirect turns. This is because it is impossible for the horse to soften to the bit without also responding to the aid. That is the key; being able to achieve softness in the neck and poll, whilst still achieving a proportional response in the horse's legs from our rein aid. We have moved from just turning the front legs in an indirect turn to now adding softness of neck before pressure is released (reward) and hands move forwards and follow the bit.

Exercise 4: Use indirect rein on a 20m circle (counter flex the horse) to the outside. Reward softness of the neck and poll by straightening the horse back into true flexion and bend on the circle and following with hands.

Training Canter

The issue with canter when training a pacer is that canter is, biomechanically, fairly similar to pace, so it's difficult for the horse to choose canter over the well-consolidated pace response. Depending on how naturally it comes to your horse, will determine how long it takes to establish. It could take months.

Pace is an extremely fast gait with a top speed close to that of the gallop, so it wasn't just a matter of increasing the trot speed into canter which you can do with a regular horse. The SB will continue pacing as his speed accelerates. Therefore, keep the trot slow and relaxed and it relies on the obedience of the leg aid (GO response).

A good way to teach a pacer to canter is by going up hills. Hill work works well because it requires more power from the hindquarters. Pace and trot would be a lot harder up a hill because only one leg at a time does the pushing up a hill, in comparison to canter where both hindlegs push – making it physically easier. It also stops them from falling on the forehand, which subsequently stops them breaking into pace.

Another method is using a jump. Like with the hill work, jumping over a jump is physically easier if the horse pushes with both hindlegs, than it is with one. Jumping also involves landing with both legs and, thus, sets them up for cantering after the jump. They may still flatten out after a few strides, but it is a great way to get them cantering if you are struggling in those initial stages.

Using indirect rein into the canter will help straighten the shoulders and keep the horse off the forehand. For the indirect rein to be effective to help shape the canter transition, it must be at OBEDIENCE level (off a light aid) at walk and trot first. Horses break out of the canter when they lose straightness so a good exercise is to canter down the long side and indirect rein a few strides towards the centre of the arena. Do turns gradually around the arena using a hexagon shape.

You will find that the responses will go back to BASIC ATTEMPT level as you go up the gaits. In many cases, to teach the horse to respond correctly in the new gait, you have to take a step or two back within the Shaping Scale.

Remember, training canter will make muscles sore as they have never had a chance to practice this gait and strengthen these new muscles! He will be unbalanced. When you are ready to train canter only do two sessions a week. Do only as many strides as the horse can manage eg 5 or 6 and always make sure the downward transition is on an aid and not the horse breaking back to trot/pace. This rule should be applied to all horses when moving between the paces.

Remember, **TRAINING TAKES AS LONG AS IT TAKES**

I would like to acknowledge Alistair McLean (Diploma Equitation Science) who documented the training of the retired standardbred Andy in "The Standardbred's Track To Hack Journey" that appeared in *Horses and People* magazine in 2014.

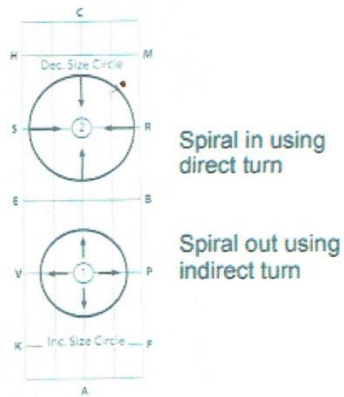
<https://horsesandpeople.com.au/the-standardbreds-track-to-hack-journey-part-1-settling-in-rq/>



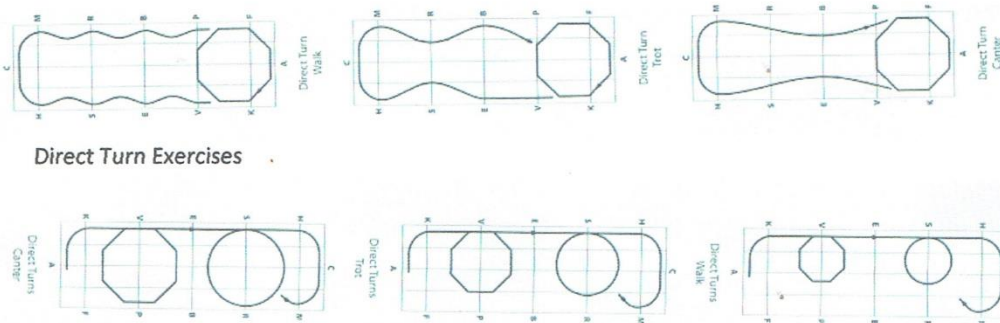
Alistair and Andy

Pony Club WA SCS 2023

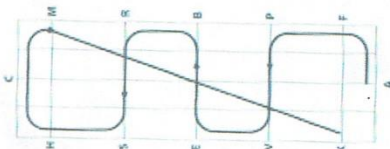
Exercise 1



Exercise 2



Exercise 3



Exercise 4

