

Training at the Box Hanging Three Ranch

The First Year

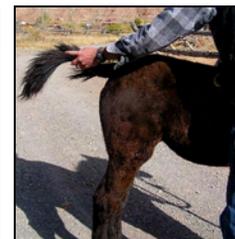
In the early years of the American West when vast herds of cattle were driven from Texas to the grasslands of Wyoming, Montana, and other states, the horses used were un-broke animals rounded up on the plains to work for the herders. These "horsemen-in-a-hurry" broke those horses swiftly and brutally to do their bidding. Rope 'em, ear 'em down, throw a saddle on, and break 'em out! At this ranch we do not "break" horses. Instead we raise and train our horses following the philosophy of the Arab nomads from centuries past who nurtured their horses from birth to adulthood.



Emulating the Arab horsemen at the Box Hanging Three Ranch, we begin training in the first hours of a foal's birth. Most foals are born in May, and as soon as they are on their feet, we are handling them. The method is known as imprinting. We imprint the gentle touch and voice of human beings and accustom the foals to our smell by breathing into their nostrils. We touch them everywhere: head, ears, legs, belly, tail, and even insert a finger into their mouths. The message is "we are not only gentle, but no part of your body is off limits to us!" Body handling, wearing a baby halter, and learning to move forward and backward are the earliest training lessons of foals barely a week old. These handling sessions occur 5 days a week for at least 5 months, continuing as needed after weaning.



The foals are weaned in a corral close to the mares' pasture so that the mothers and babies can see and hear each other, and know that everything is okay, even if it's not a situation of their choice! Within a week's time, the dams have returned to herd animals and the foals are a herd of their own.



It is now winter and the foals have hay available night and day, as well as grain twice a day. They are wormed every 2 months and their hooves are kept trimmed. They continue daily handling by our experienced and dedicated staff. And they grow! By May of the following year, they are big yearlings ready to be turned out for a summer of grazing and independence.

Yearling Training

From May to September, the colts are pastured across the Wind River in full view of the house. They are fed daily, wormed, trimmed, and monitored, but receive minimal handling. It is similar to kids going to off summer camp. They are always glad to see us, mob us for attention, but for four months, they lead a carefree life. In September, we lead the yearlings back to headquarters for 2 weeks of challenging yearling training.



The trainer grooms the colt with brush and curry, and combs the mane and tail, reminding him that all areas of the horse's body are places to be groomed and touched. Then comes "sacking out." A saddle blanket or sack is flipped all over the back, butt, and legs and is drawn over the head. Next, the soft sack is replaced with a crackly tarp. To introduce the tarp, the trainer induces the colt to follow it, allowing him to smell it and hear its crackling sound. This is done for however long it takes for alarm to be replaced by boredom. Finally, the colt knows that the trainer is a benign teacher and trust is enhanced.



The trainer now shows the colt a saddle, lets him smell it and feel okay about it before setting it on his back. Cinching him up happens when colt and trainer feel secure. A bit and bridle are added to the lesson when the colt appears ready. It should be emphasized that the trainer is not in a hurry to accomplish any of these tasks or those that follow. The colt must be ready and the trainer/colt trust strong.



Lounging with a saddle on and stirrups flapping is the next stage in our 2-week course. The trainer stands in the center of a circle and urges the colt to move forward around him or her. At first, the colt is anxiously looking for his buddies. He has not given his attention to the trainer. He wants to return to the horse herd. The trainer intervenes in this herd addiction and requires the young horse to accept the trainer as alpha leader in a different, human-centered "herd." Next, the colt is introduced to ground driving. Long lines are attached to his halter, and with the trainer walking some distance behind, the colt is taught turning left, right, backing, and stopping with back pressure on the reins.



Each daily lesson ends with the colt being led out to the horse trailer. Initially a pan of grain is placed inside the trailer door and the colt is encouraged to eat. On subsequent days, the grain is moved further into the trailer until the young horse is relaxed enough to enter and eat while fully loaded. Over the next 6 months or so, he will take several trailer rides before he leaves for a new home.

Two weeks is usually enough time for most colts to learn these tasks. If not, extra time is allotted to ensure that the colt is ready to move on to the saddle training later in the new year.



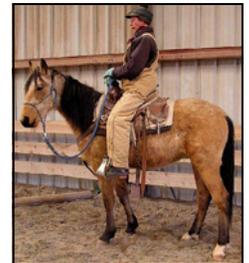
Under Saddle and Out into the World

The colts and fillies are now almost 2 years old and are ready for limited training under saddle. They are brought in and given a refresher course for a few days to remind them of the groundwork they previously learned.

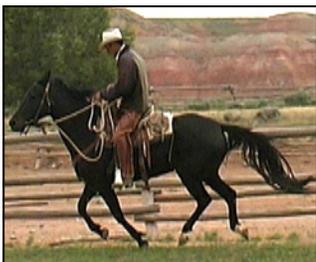
The first step preliminary to mounting is putting a foot in the stirrup and stepping up. If there is resistance, the trainer steps down and repeats the step up until the colt is relaxed and accepting. Next, the trainer leans over the saddle and strokes the colt's neck on the "off side." Again there is no sense of urgency. The trainer may mount fully and simply sit there, or dismount and call it good for that day.



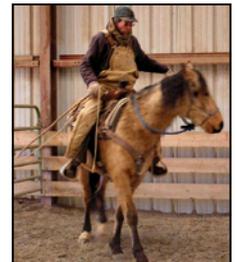
These partial mountings are practiced on both sides of the colt's body because horses' brains are designed such that every lesson must be repeated on both sides in order to be learned on left and right. An adult horse that has not learned mounting and dismounting on both sides could present a hazard on the trail if the need arose to mount or dismount in a situation where there was a drop-off on the near (familiar) side of the horse.



Now the young horse learns to move forward with his trainer on his back. He may wear a bridle with halter on top. The trainer directs him right and left, using reins attached to the halter but not the bridle. In order to keep the colt's mouth "soft," the rider teaches turning and stopping with a halter only, just as was done in ground driving during yearling training.



When all is ready and the weather's favorable, the trainer rides the colt into one of our smaller corrals. Horse and rider walk in a leisurely way around the corral until there is nothing scary about being outside. In the days to come, horse and rider will venture into the big outdoor arena, gradually moving out of the walk into a slow running walk. If the colt slips into a trot or the undesirable pace, the trainer turns him in a small circle and then moves forward again. Over time, the young horse learns that under saddle the only acceptable gaits are walk, running walk, and canter. The canter is perfected when the running walk is solid. Walkers that tend to pace may need to work on the canter to break up their habit of lateral movement.



The trainer knows when the colt is ready to go down the driveway, and cross the bridge over the river and begin to enjoy the trails that crisscross the mountain foothills. Crossing water is part of the trail routine. Knowing that many of our owners live in more populous areas, we also expose the horses to traffic by riding them along the highway that runs a half mile north of our ranch.

From groundwork to corral work to riding the trails usually takes about 4 months. We want the horses leaving here to be as safe and solid as they can be. We have experienced and sensitive trainers who continue to make Box Hanging Three horses sought after by discriminating horse people nationwide. After at least 4 months of training, our young horses are ready for a new home. They handle with ease and enter the new owner's trailer with confidence.

On to the next colt crop!

