



BARRETT'S SALES/CECILIA GUSTAVSSON

Teaching yearlings to walk is an important component of preparing them for the sales venues

# READYING YOUNGSTERS

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PRIOR PROPER PREPARATION

BY EMILY SHIELDS

**S**ome sights are iconic in the Thoroughbred industry: brand new foals scrambling alongside their dams; racehorses thundering down the track to the wire. But in between those bright moments comes that long stretch of the yearling year.

How do yearlings spend their time on the farm before entering training? When is the best time to begin their early lessons? What about if they need to be prepped for

the sales ring? Local horsemen and horsewomen recently discussed this educational time for future racehorses.

Yearlings are typically divided into two main groups: those going to auction and those waiting to be put into training to race. Nearly all farms consistently turn horses out from the time they are weaned until they are ready to begin either the sales prep or training process. But the time they start either can differ.

"Usually, 75 is enough days to get ready for a sale," said Mike Allen, general manager of Tommy Town Thoroughbreds, which produces about 50 horses for sales purposes and 50 to race as homebreds each year. "We do all the normal groundwork when we sales prep them, and then we'll get them to where they are going around the Equicizer for eight minutes each direction at an



RON MESAROS

Mike Allen, general manager of Tommy Town Thoroughbreds



extended trot. That seems to really tuck them up and get their shoulders and hips looking good.”

Sue Greene, owner of Woodbridge Farm, prefers a full 90 days.

“It gives us a little more time to expose them to things,” she said. “Yearlings go through a big growth spurt in the middle of that year, so from March to May you can see them really growing. Then we bring them up for 90 days to keep the sun off their coats, and we are hand-walking them daily. We want to show them as much as possible so that when they go to the sale they’ve been exposed to anything that can cause them angst once there.”

But getting the horses ready for their future careers can start even before weaning.

“From the time they are born, they are handled,” said Renee Beckwith of Blue Diamond Horseshoe. “We wean them, depending on how they are doing, at four to five months. They go with their friends in a pen of four, and they get led, walked, brushed, and get their feet done. They are totally tame. After their first round of shots, they go across the street into an acre pasture with boys in one and girls in another. They’re still handled every day.”

Both Beckwith and Kate Barton of Barton Thoroughbreds do examinations on their horses to make sure the yearlings are progressing well.

“In January of their yearling year, we do evaluations based on pedigree and conformation,” said Barton. “Between January to about May is when we continually evaluate, getting at least three evaluations of each horse.”

“That helps us put them in different categories. We might race them, and we know that from the get-go—that’s one option. Second is that they are a sales horse, and from there we decide if they are a select sale horse or not. Some might switch later in the program if one looks good enough to sell or one is not as mature and we end up racing it. Evaluations are really helpful for us to determine the best path for each horse.”

Beckwith added, “Before they are allowed to train, the yearlings are all radiographed to check their knees for growth-plate closure. No one is started under saddle until they have an A rating.”

Before training, why are the horses left

generally to their own devices?

“We want them to grow up and just be horses,” Barton said. “The select-sale ones will be brought in every night and are handled daily, with their feet picked and they get a bath. But they are still kicked out every day.”

Miguel Jimenez, manager at Ballena Vista Farms, agrees, saying, “With our program, they are pretty much just out to pasture. Once we get a list of horses that our

from the rest of the herd. It’s not about a lot of exercise, but it’s about handling and refreshing their memories.”

Sales consignor and trainer Mary Knight uses slightly different tactics when it comes to preparing for a sale.

“I can do it in six weeks,” she said. “The very first thing I do is give them a Panacur PowerPac.”

The dewormer, which typically runs about \$80 for a five-day treatment, is worth



Above, Letting horses be horses is key to raising a good horse, for sale or racing; below, Kate Barton of Barton Thoroughbreds



clients are nominating for the select sale, we will pull them out and work with them a bit. We handle them as suckling foals and weanlings, but for the most part they are out to pasture. We let them grow up to be horses because once their careers start they won’t get that.”

The Ballena Vista program is to prepare sales horses for 60 days, but Jimenez and his team “pull them from the pasture about two weeks before that to get them away

its cost, according to Knight.

“It’s a sensible thing to do,” she said. “If you’re getting in horses from here and there and that farm over there, it just makes sense. It helps to flesh them out, especially if you have a yearling that might look a little poorly.”

Feed is important in all facets of yearling preparation, whether for sale or the race-

track. Horsemen strive for a good balance of grain and roughage to allow the youngsters to grow up strong and healthy.

Knight places a big emphasis on feed and hoof care.

“I don’t give any artificial body-builder stuff,” she said. “I feed a lot of alfalfa and molasses, which is high in protein and is really palatable. It gives them something to eat that they can’t get too heavy off of if you are watching their ration.”



Proper nutrition is important whether the horse is going to be sold or trained to race.

"Ours get their daily grain, which is four to six pounds of feed, and then alfalfa," Jimenez said.

"They do get some grain with their alfalfa," Barton said, "and it's a different mix than what the broodmares get."

"Sometimes I'll feed them some Equine Junior," Allen said. "It's something you can feed more of without making them too hot."

Greene said, "The diet is the one part of this that when I hear people say they can feed a horse on \$4 a day, I just think, 'No, you can't!' It's a hard push because the babies are doing so much growth, and we are trying to put a finished body on a young horse that is still growing. You don't want to cause developmental issues by putting too many calories in them. The diet and nutrition put into them builds their skeleton and keeps them growing for the rest of their careers. We are asking them to grow as fast as possible, so you have to feed that skeleton."

Getting a yearling "finished" for the sales ring is a combination of having the horse look healthy, be somewhat exposed to the world via training, and appear physically fit.

"People these days like to have yearlings a little physically fitter than they used to," said bloodstock agent Andrew Havens. "Some form of exercise for 60 days or more leading up to the sale is usually very important, whether that's some kind of longeing or jogging or a treadmill that causes them to sweat a lot, gets the coat to shed out, allows you to feed them up a little bit with a higher nutrition, and gets the right kind of weight."

Horsemen can use simple training methods to help a yearling's fitness without ever getting on their backs.

"A lot of people longe in a round pen with a headstall that puts the head down and builds up muscle over their backend and hip," Havens said. "Horses that are in the later sales often have been under tack for 40 days. It's not something you would necessarily do that time of year if you weren't going to sell."

Havens noted that improvements in sales ring steroid restrictions have limited how bulky a horse can look.



CECILIA GUSTAVSSON

Fresh air, sunshine, and exercise lay a good foundation for proper sales prep

"They used to like them carrying more weight and not be as racehorse looking as they do now," he said. "In the old days they used steroids, but there are serious restrictions about what you can do. So now horses look fitter and a little more mature."

Once the sales horses have successfully gone off to their new homes, racehorse training can begin in earnest.

**“We want to show (yearlings) as much as possible so that when they go to the sale, they’ve been exposed to anything that can cause them angst once there.”**

— Sue Greene

"We will begin breaking horses in August," said Allen, "starting with the colts first. I try to bring up a whole field at a time because they're already grouped by age and sex. We'll break the January colts first, etc."

Per Antonsen, trainer at Harris Farms, said, "For the ones that will be going out to the racetrack as early as January or February, we will start breaking them the first of September. That's considered an early bunch, though."

September or October is a common time for young racehorses to get their start.

"We start mid-September, with everything off being broke by December,"

Greene said. "Barring any injuries, our horses are out running around from the time they are weaned until either 90 days before the sales or until the fall, when they are broken. They've been out in the fields growing up while playing."

"I want to get them started by September or October," Barton said. "We don't need to rush the breaking process, but if they are mature and ready to go, I want to be on top of it. But if they need more time, they can have it."

"We start Oct. 1 with foals born in January or February," Jimenez said. "The foals born in April and May won't be broken until late November or December. And we like to give them another 60 days off over the winter before bringing them back for that final 30 days of training. Of course, a lot depends on if a client has plans to move forward and run them early at 2."

Blue Diamond Horseshoe will be taking a more conservative approach.

"We won't start training until 2," said Beckwith, "and they won't go to the track until they turn 3. We used to race at 2, but we aren't going to do it anymore. That means that the yearlings who are 18 months old and turned out right now won't even be brought back over for training until January."

With early handling, careful evaluation, and proper nutrition, the yearling year becomes an essential step that will set the tone for the horse's racing career and beyond. **CTB**