

## **A Foundation for the Show Ring** **by Deborah DeHoff**

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I can't say that I am really an expert on the subject of training and showing the weanling and yearling, but I do believe that the basic steps I am about to outline can provide the foundation for the novice or professional to build on.

Training the youngster for showing starts long before show day. In my experience, it actually starts 24 hours after birth. I give momma and baby 24 hours without much handling so they can bond, but after that 24 hours, all is fair. (Some people prefer to imprint their babies immediately after birth. If this is something you want to do, you can find information on this topic in a variety of books and publications.)

The first step is haltering Baby. Start by getting Baby used to the halter on day one. My choice is always a bright purple halter because I want my baby to be the talk of the herd. You know, when Charmin says to Prince, "Isn't Maggie's baby adorable? And the beautiful halter is just precious." Okay, so use your imagination a little.

Give Baby a couple of days to become used to the having the halter put on and taken off, wearing it around the paddock with Mom, and of course nursing with it on. (You'll find Baby always manages to get milk on the noseband.)

### **Tying**

After Baby is used to the halter, his next step is to learn to stand tied. This happens on day three or four. If you teach him early to stand tied, it is a lot safer, less traumatic, and a lot quicker than if you wait to do it when he is older. My preference is to use an old-fashioned hitching post, with a few modifications. My hitching post is made of 4 x 4 steel tubing welded together and buried 4 feet in the ground with steel plates on the bottom. It isn't going anywhere.

First, tie Momma wherever you choose to have your lessons. It is much less frightening for Baby if Momma is right there standing by, calmly. (I always keep Momma close at hand for Baby's lessons, no matter what I'm teaching him. If Momma is in her paddock getting hysterical because Baby is 10 feet away but on the other side of the fence, Baby isn't going to get much out of the lesson.) Next, tie Baby and wait. Make sure you are only about two steps away so you can help calm him at any time. Baby's attention span is short at this age, and he will soon be bored with standing and will try to wander away. He will quickly learn that he can't go any further than the length of the slack in the rope, and then the battle will begin. Let Baby pull unless he becomes frantic. If he does, calmly step up to him and urge him forward to release the pressure. Once the pressure is released, he should settle right down. Scratch him and rub him. Remember to pet Mom too because she has probably gotten a little upset herself by this point.

Once both horses are both calm, step away and let it happen again. If Baby fights excessively again, step up and urge him forward, then scratch him. I have found that it doesn't take most babies long to figure out that the rope is not going to allow them to go anywhere, so they might as well stand there. This is a lesson that must be repeated on a daily basis until it is well learned. Keep the lessons short at about 10 to 15 minutes. A little bit goes a long way with babies.

### **Trailer**

The next step is learning to ride in a trailer, when the baby is about 10 days old. Let's assume that Momma hauls well. The process of loading Baby will be very dependent on Momma. My mare is very protective of her baby, and I've discovered that if I put her in first, she practically tears the trailer apart because Baby isn't in yet. Baby is standing at the door, but that isn't close enough for Momma.

Having another person to help you with the trailer lesson makes it easier. One person can hold Momma at the door, while the other calmly walks Baby to the trailer. At this age, Baby has not developed much fear. Baby will be cautious but not significantly afraid. If he strongly hesitates, get behind him and urge or push him forward. Once again, keep the lessons to about 10 to 15 minutes.

Once Baby is in the trailer, quickly bring Momma in and let them both stand quietly for a short time, and then unload. Repeat the procedure daily until both load quickly and quietly. Once Momma and Baby load and stand quietly, take them on a short ride. The first time, make it just around the block. The second time, take them to a friend's barn. Make each trip a little longer until you, Momma and Baby are all comfortable.

### **Clipping**

Another lesson that must be learned early is clipping. Imprinting is great, but if you haven't continued the clipping lessons since March when the baby hit the ground, don't think he will be willing to be clipped in June. Imprinting just makes the lessons much less traumatic.

Start clipping lessons after Baby has learned to stand tied. Again, keep the lessons short. Continue running the clippers over his entire body, nose, ears and poll. Be aware that babies are exceptionally leery of having those buzzing things on their poll. I have found the poll to be the most difficult part of their body when it comes to having babies accept the clippers. I have also found that just when you think your baby will never let you clip his poll without a struggle, the light bulb goes on one day and he figures out that neither you nor the clippers are going to hurt him, and he barely twitches an ear when you clip. Just keep your cool and stay patient - he will figure it out. (Of course, Appaloosas figure it out a lot quicker than other breeds.)

### **Bathing**

Bathing is another thing you need to go over with Baby before the show. Wait for Mother Nature's cooperation before you give this lesson. Choose a nice warm Saturday or Sunday afternoon. Tie Momma and Baby to the hitching post, grab the hose and

bottle of shampoo, and start by washing Momma. She should stand calmly for her bath because Baby is standing tied right next to her, getting wet in the back spray. After the first few nervous hops to the end of his rope, Baby should be okay with this.

You will have sprayed down one side of Momma, lathered her up and rinsed her off, all with Baby right there. Now, gently turn the hose on Baby, suds him up and rinse him off. Because he's been right there while you did it to Momma, he should behave like a big boy and allow it to be done to him, "just like Momma." Because of his size, you'll be able to wash his entire body at one time instead of half-and-half as you did with Momma.

After giving Baby his bath, let him remain standing tied, and return to Momma to do her other side. Once both have been bathed, let Baby loose to nurse. Then put them both back in the paddock. Remember, this was just a lesson, so it doesn't matter that they both immediately find the sandiest spot to lie down and roll.

At this point your baby is now prepared to go to a show. He loads, stands tied, clips and bathes.

### **Show Day**

One of the nice things about showing babies is that you're done early in the day. The baby class is almost always the first class of the day. However, this scheduling can also be a drawback. It means you have to get to the show *early* so you can let Momma and Baby have a chance to settle in (as much as a Momma with a baby at her side can).

You *must* have a second handler with you at a show. *Do not even attempt showing a baby by yourself.* Momma may not mind Baby being the length of your yard away from her at home, but at a show, Baby must stay by her side. My 16.1 hand mare does not want her baby more than 3 feet from her side when the two are out in public. This is why you need to have a handler who is experienced handling horses, and preferably handling your mare.

Let me illustrate why this is so important. My father used to handle my mare for me at shows. The mare would stand on a loose lead, dancing in place and whinnying while her baby was in the show ring. She would throw a hissy fit, all on a loose lead without pulling because she knew she could not get away with anything more than that with my father. However, a few years later when my father could no longer help at shows due to his health, I had a friend handle this mare. My friend has horses of her own and is not a novice at working with mothers, but she was not familiar with this particular mother. My mare dragged her around, and then took off with her when the mare was finally allowed into the ring. She nearly ran over the judge, who fortunately had a sense of humor. The judge said, "Isn't showing babies great?"

I found that for the most part, babies find shows really interesting. They get to see other horses and hear loud speakers for the first time. They also love all the attention they

get when people stop by to admire and praise them. I like to get my babies to as many shows as possible while they are young to get them accustomed to the hustle and bustle. You want them to think of shows as "just one more thing Human Mom wants me to do." (Baby, of course, has Horse Mom, Human Mom, and if fortunate, Horse Grandmom to give Horse Mom a break once in awhile while they are all out in the pasture.)

Don't expect a lot out of your baby the first couple of shows. Getting him into the ring without Momma may be all you can accomplish at the first show. Getting him into the ring without Momma and having him sort-of stand still may be all you can accomplish at the second show. Start with small shows and consider them lessons. Keep your showing to one or two classes (lessons), and don't forget to praise Baby. In halter classes, you are not supposed to touch your horse, but in baby classes, you can pet him, praise him and scratch his favorite spot. Let him know he is doing good. And if he's not, pet him, praise him and scratch him even more to let him know everything is okay. As he gets older and goes to more shows, you won't do this. but when he is just starting out, Baby needs the attention to know that everything is all right.

Also, remember to always stay quiet and relaxed. Your actions will transmit to Baby how he should act. If you and Momma stay calm, Baby will stay calm too. This leads to a calm adult horse, not only at shows but in any situation.

\* I have a gelding I raised from birth using the above techniques. Once, my trailering partner and I were returning home from an overnight show, hauling a weanling and my yearling. While traveling down a major highway at 65 mph, we had a trailering accident due to a manufacturer's defect in the trailer. Once we were stopped and were able to assess the damage, we had to off-load the yearling to put the trailer back together. I remember commenting to my friend that I had no idea how we were ever going to get him back in the trailer because he *had* to be traumatized from the whole experience. But because of his training, he miraculously walked right back in. Remembering to stay quiet and calm kept the yearling calm too, and turned out to be just one more lesson for him. (That is one lesson I never want to teach a horse again, however. After limping home with the damaged trailer, we humans fell apart!)

Once your baby is comfortable with the show ring, begin to find-tune his performance. Babies can stand still for an entire class if taught to. Don't expect them to stand for long periods at a show if you don't make them do it at home. Don't be afraid to talk to your baby. Teach him verbal cues along with body cues. *Walk, trot* and *stand* are important. When leading, tell him to walk. When you want him to trot, cluck to him and tell him to trot. When you want him to stand, say "Stand." I also use a hand cue very much like a policeman's signal to stop. This helps tremendously when it comes time to teach Baby to lunge. It also gives him a comfort zone if he becomes confused as to what you are asking.

When training your baby, it always comes back to these five points: Remain quiet, remain calm, have patience, keep lessons short and repeat lessons frequently.