

DRESSAGE TODAY

VOL. 9

# EXTRA

A Formula for  
Starting Youngsters

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# RECIPE *for a* RIDING HORSE

A top young-horse trainer shares his formula for starting youngsters under saddle.

*By Bob Orton with Louisa Zai  
Photos by Fran Shiver Photography*

**Bob Orton leads Whiz, a Hanoverian gelding by Waltzertraum.**

**M**y program for starting young horses under saddle sounds ambitious, but it suits the majority of the youngsters I start. I take each young horse through three phases of training over a period of about three months. The introduction phase of longeing takes about four weeks. I would not recommend shortening that time frame, but you may have to lengthen it for some individuals. During the second phase, I teach the horse to walk, trot and canter comfortably under saddle. For the third stage, I introduce the young horse to adventures off-property and prepare him for his first horse show.

I am always astonished when people tell me that they are beginning to canter their horse after six, nine or even 12 months of starting under saddle. Set your expectations higher and your horse will rise to meet them. Our goal

is to train each young horse to be able to perform a respectable Training Level test within two to three months. I want to emphasize that I am talking about Training Level; serious dressage comes much later. When people think of dressage, they think of horses working in a Second Level frame or higher. Young horses do not have the muscling to carry riders who sit “into” their backs. We do not have any sore backs on our farm because we ride our youngsters with a light seat until they develop the proper muscling. When the young horse is able to counter canter with good balance, then he is ready for his rider to adopt a deeper seat.

Most of the youngsters we start are 3-year-olds. Sometimes we wait until the fourth year for a horse who lacks the mental maturity needed for training. We don’t accept 2-year-olds for training because they just aren’t mentally ready. If you are planning

to do the FEI Young Horse tests, you need to start your youngster at 3. The 4-year-olds can catch up. We have one showing Fourth Level at age 7, who was not started until the fall of his 4-year-old year.

I prefer that the young horses come to us after having lived a real childhood in the pasture with other youngsters their age. Horses can teach each other a lot about boundaries and good manners. If you have a large number, then you may want to divide them into similarly natured groups.

We generally start two batches of young horses: one group in the spring and one in the fall. I don’t like to start under-saddle training in the heat of summer because I want the horses to find their work to be enjoyable from the beginning.

If you are going to train horses, always remember to keep things simple and to be black and white. That means

## Week 2, Biting and Longeing



**I introduce Fanfare, an Oldenburg gelding by Fred Astaire, to wearing a bit and then to longeing.**

be generous with your praise and quick and strict with your corrections. There are a few behaviors that I will not tolerate from a young horse. They include kicking, biting, rearing and crowding. If a young horse commits any of these misbehaviors, I discipline him immediately. I then ask him to move away from me with a light press of my hand. As soon as the horse yields, I praise him warmly. If you find you must discipline your horse, always follow up with a request that you can praise so the horse learns his lesson without losing confidence.

If you observe a dominant horse in the pasture, you will notice that the other horses will always make way for her, and that she only has to flick an ear at them. She probably had to lay down the law once or twice, but that's all it takes. You want your young horse to be respectful in a similar way. Do not nag or be vague. The bully in the pasture who picks at the other horses is rarely the leader. Never discipline out of anger. Strive to be the leader, not the bully. Here is how my wife, Sherra, and I take a young horse through his first six weeks of training:

### **Week 1, Introduction to Stable Life**

The 3- or 4-year-olds come up from the pasture and learn to live in stalls. They

are turned out for just a few hours a day. We find that they adapt quite well to this schedule and learn to look forward to their training sessions.

Our goal in this phase is to get them relaxed and to develop confidence in us. We get them used to being petted and groomed all over. We halter them and introduce them to having their galloping boots put on and taken off. We teach them to cross-tie and to stand quietly in the wash rack for bathing. We also teach them to yield their space to us. We simply press lightly on the horse's body until he yields away from the pressure. As soon as he yields, we stop and praise him.

We also get their teeth floated. If you adopt only one piece of advice from this article, I hope you float your youngster's teeth before introducing him to a bridle. You want your horse to have a positive experience with the bit from the very beginning. Three-year-olds can have soft teeth so it can be a conservative float. Just ask your dentist to remove wolf teeth and any sharp edges or points.

### **Week 2, Biting & Longeing**

During the second week, I introduce the young horse to wearing a bit. I prefer to start with a simple single-jointed, loose-ring, hollow-mouth snaffle. I have found

that the double-jointed and French-mouth bits can initially make them too busy with their tongues. We attach the bit to a leather or quick-release halter, which each youngster wears during the day from Monday to Friday of the second week. They learn to eat, drink, nap and graze while wearing their bits.

I also begin teaching the young horse to longe during the second week. I attach a longe line to the inside ring of a second halter (which is placed over the halter with the bit attached) and work them in a 75-foot round pen. I longe for 20 minutes and I stick to a specific schedule as follows: two minutes walk, two minutes trot and one minute of trot-canter transitions.

While I follow this five-minute program twice in each direction (20 minutes total), I devote my full attention to the horse. I do not converse with other people during this time and I have a concise vocabulary, using the words "whoa," "walk," "trot" and "canter" and the sounds cluck (to speed up) and trill (to slow down). The cluck means "go," and it is reinforced with a flick of the longe whip. If the horse "mules up" (refuses to go forward), he gets a smack with the whip. This teaches him that the cluck means "go now" and that it is

## Week 3, The Saddle & The Longeing Reins



**1. Introduce a young horse to his bridle and the Vienna reins. 2. He should be able to stretch and not feel confined by them. 3. Without nagging, I ask him to maintain steady gaits.**

not negotiable. The trill (a brrrrrrrr, or rolling R) is a unique sound that horses can easily recognize. Trill and then gradually reel your horse into a smaller circle until he has to slow down. Eventually, he will learn to slow down from a trill and a light tension on the line. I do not move around while longeing the horse. I stay in one spot and teach the horse to move around me.

Teach your horse to respond promptly to your verbal aids. Later, they will be your bridge to show him how to respond to your cues as a rider. Remember, a newly backed horse will have no comprehension of what it means if you thump him in the ribs or pull on the reins.

People are surprised that I spend 40

percent of the longeing time at the walk during the first week, but I feel strongly that this step is key to teaching patience to a young horse. If you have a young horse that keeps trying to jig or trot, keep him on a smaller circle until you can control the walk. If you teach your youngster to wait for your aids now, your job will be easier later.

On the third or fourth day of the second week, I add an elasticized surcingle to the horse's longeing gear. I continue with my 20-minute program as usual. If the youngster bucks with the surcingle, I immediately ask for a down transition to stop the bucking. Never allow a young horse to buck. I am not a proponent of "bucking a horse out." In my experience, driving a bucking horse

forward only makes him buck harder and higher.

### **Week 3, Saddle & Longeing Reins**

I begin week 3 by introducing the young horse to his bridle and the longeing reins. Side reins are the traditional choice, but I like the Vienna reins particularly because they show the horse how to work over his back. I attach the Vienna reins loosely enough that the youngster can lower his head almost close enough to the ground to eat grass. The young horse should not feel confined by the reins. The Vienna reins also allow the horse to experiment with different head positions while discouraging leaning on the bit or ducking behind. The longeing reins will reveal the first glimmer of how your future dressage horse will appear. Resist

the urge to push your horse to "trot for a 9" at this stage. Without nagging, teach him to trot at the tempo you request and make transitions within each gait.

After a few days, if the horse is longeing in a relaxed manner, I replace the surcingle with a saddle. I do not change to the saddle until the horse is relaxed and accepting his surcingle and Vienna reins. Usually, this only takes a few days. I continue to longe for 20 minutes each day with the schedule as follows: one minute walk, three minutes trot with changes of tempo on request and one minute trot-canter transitions.

### **Week 4, First Rides**

The horse begins his fourth week fully equipped, wearing his saddle, bridle,

## Week 4, First Rides



**1. Eye Candy, an Oldenburg mare by Escapade, is now fully equipped with saddle, bridle and Vienna reins. I attach the longe line to the inside ring of the bit.**

**2. After the longe work, Sherra Kosch lies over the horse's back while I hold the mare. We rub Eye Candy and give her sugar as she adjusts to the rider's weight.**

**3. When the horse stays relaxed, the rider puts her right leg over and sits up in the saddle. Once the horse is leading quietly, I remove the longe line.**

**4. When the young horse walks and halts in a relaxed manner, we teach her to turn by opening the inside rein and "allowing," or giving, with the outside rein.**

Vienna reins and a longe line that I now attach to the inside ring of the bit. This enables me to introduce the horse to the feeling of an opening (steering) inside rein. When I ask him to turn his head to the inside, the Viennas allow him to stretch on the outside, while keeping a light contact. This step is important because it teaches the horse how it feels and how to respond when a rider steers him using rein aids. The 20-minute longeing program is continued each day.

On the second or third day, after the longe work, the rider lies over the horse's back while a helper holds him. We rub him and give him sugar cubes as he adjusts to the weight of a rider. When the horse shows he is comfortable and accepting of having a rider aboard (which may take a day or two), the helper leads him forward at the walk. When the horse stays relaxed, the rider puts her right leg over and sits up in the saddle normally.

Once the horse is leading quietly, the helper can remove the longe line and move to the middle of the round pen to stand positioned as if longeing. The rider asks the horse to walk forward, cuing him verbally and with a light leg aid. Ideally, the horse will respond to the rider's voice and, if needed, a touch with a whip or crop.

A stick is used only as a cue; never hit your youngster with it. If the horse does not go, make sure you are not holding your breath. Exhale and think of blowing gently into your horse's ears. We give the horse three chances to respond to his rider before defaulting to the helper in the middle. The helper then clucks and signals with a small motion of the longe whip. The helper stays in the middle as if longeing and must never chase the horse. We do not want tension to escalate.

The rider allows the horse to walk for five or six steps and then asks for

a halt. The rider uses his voice, his core, a squeeze with the knees and a light pressure on the rein simultaneously to cue the horse to stop. The reins should be used very gently so the young horse does not feel defensive. We repeat this process several times until the horse is walking and halting comfortably.

When the young horse walks and halts in a relaxed manner, we introduce small figures of eight. We turn the horse by opening the inside rein and “allowing,” or giving, with the outside rein. The young horse understands this aid because of the way we prepared him on the longe. He will probably turn great in one direction and fall in on the other. When he falls in, simply turn back to the other direction. Do not cross your inside rein over the horse’s withers in an attempt to get him to move out. Now try again. This time when you open your inside rein, apply your inside leg. Remember how you taught your horse to move away from pressure? You applied the pressure and when he moved away, you released and praised him. Now that your horse is under saddle, the rules are

no different. Open your inside (leading) rein and allow with your outside rein. Make sure your weight is to the inside, and then press lightly two to three times with your inside calf until he yields his rib cage away from your leg. Also check that your outside leg and hip are relaxed such that you are not blocking him on the outside of his body.

By Friday of week 4 the rider is usually able to ride the young horse around the pen at a walk. The ground person quietly watches the young horse’s eyes and body language for signs of tension or worry. If a horse shows any signs of anxiety, we slow down. We sometimes just stand and pet the horse until he relaxes. To push a worried horse forward makes him more nervous. Never pressure a youngster to move if he is tense or worried. You want to set him up to have a good experience.

I like my young horses to be accustomed to common distractions, such as lawn mowers and delivery trucks. I do make one exception: I will not ride a freshly started youngster where he can see horses that are free to buck and play in the pasture.

## Week 5, Trotting & Venturing Out



**I work on steering and introduce trotting. Then I head out for a hack through woods and fields.**



## RIDEABILITY & TRAINABILITY



**F**rom a training perspective, I have found that there are three basic kinds of horses: 10 percent are volunteers, 70 percent are draftees and 20 percent are draft dodgers.

The volunteers are the eager beavers and are a joy to train. This group will progress quickly, but don’t be tempted to skip ahead, shortchanging them of their full education.

Most horses are draftees. They’d rather be in the pasture, but they come along fine with fair and consistent training.

The draft dodgers are the tough ones. They want to go left when you say “right.” They are the ones that will need a ton of special circumstances. In my experience, these horses will always be challenging so you have to decide if you really want a horse like that for the long haul.

Breeders also have a big responsibility to produce horses with good rideability and trainability. Good horses are not just for amateurs. Professionals do not want to invest years in a horse that is mentally against them or cannot perform well under pressure. If you are not familiar with bloodlines, take the time to talk to other riders and find out the parentage of their favorite riding horses.

## Week 6, Adjustability



**Now I introduce the young horse to short sessions in the full-sized arena, including canter.**

### Week 5, Trotting & Venturing Out

On Monday and Tuesday of week 5, we start our training session with 20 minutes of longeing in the Vienna reins on the same schedule as in weeks 3 and 4. For the riding phase, we continue to work on steering and we introduce trotting. Just as with the walk, the rider gives the cues. The helper only waits in the center as a backup in case the horse fails to respond to his rider after three clear requests. We trot in short stints of four or five strides. Alternating frequently between walk and trot keeps the young horse calm and mentally engaged. As a result, he learns quickly to be responsive to the whoa-and-go aids, which will become more and more refined over his lifetime.

On Wednesday, I longe first, get on, and, if all is well, I leave the round pen and head out for a hack through woods and fields. I take the young horse out alone. I expect him to feel a bit insecure and want him to look to me for guidance. I carry a whip, which I may use to touch him to encourage him to go forward while I cluck to him. I do not wear spurs because they don't

mean anything to him at this point, and I do not want to inadvertently bump him. If he is fearful of something we encounter, I do not force him to approach it. I never battle with a young horse. If he balks going past a scary round bale in the field, I circle him away and ride a bit closer each time until he simply forgets about it. This is setting him up for success.

If your horse acts up, you can quickly regain control by taking his head to the side and turning in small circle. Open your inside hand out and down, placing it at the back of your knee. Move your outside hand forward like turning a bicycle so you are not blocking

or pulling. Once your horse's neck is bent to the inside, do not draw back farther. Push him out with your inside leg and circle twice in a volte. It's critical to use your inside leg to keep the horse out around the circle. He must move forward as he is turning. If you allow that negative energy to bottle up, it could escalate to rearing.

After two revolutions, circle immediately in the opposite direction. Then allow him to walk straight forward. If he still wants to misbehave, repeat the circles or dismount and put him to work on the longe. Don't ever be too proud to do this. It's unlikely that he will make a connection between his bad behavior and your dismount, especially if he has to go to work immediately. A succession of transitions between gaits will get his attention and direct his energy.

### Week 6, Adjustability

During week 6, I introduce the young horse to short training sessions in the full-sized arena. The 20-minute daily longeing program is followed by 10 minutes of arena riding. I use this time to

work on simple figures, like circles and serpentines, and transitions between the gaits. I also introduce canter. I ask for the canter with my voice, just as I would when longeing. I ride the canter in a light half-seat, and I canter for only a few strides before transitioning back to trot. After 10 minutes of arena work, I take the young horse out for a walk in the field.

After week six, I continue under-saddle training, dividing the time between the arena and the trails. I also introduce the young horse to excursions off-property—for example, to ride at neighboring horse farms.

Your own level of horsemanship will also have a great impact on your horse's progress. Youngsters should be started only by experienced horsemen. If you are an experienced rider but new to training, keep in mind these golden rules: Be black and white about the behavior you expect. Never correct or discipline your horse with anger. Keep things as simple as possible, and always set your horse up for success. 🐾



**Bob Orton** spent a year in Germany learning the German system of training

and riding sport horses in the early 1980s. He has imported more than 200 German Warmbloods to the United States, including some of the country's first warmblood breeding stallions. He began to fill a growing need in the marketplace—that of starting young warmbloods and preparing them for their sport careers. He teaches and trains with his wife, Sherra Kosch, at Buck Branch Farm in Gladys, Virginia.



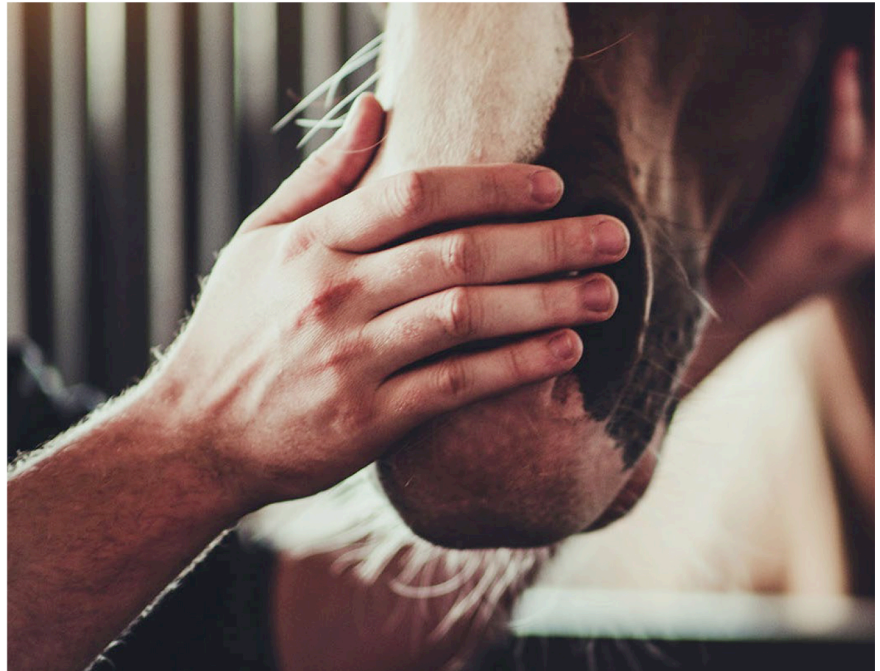
# The Horse Microbiome's Role in Healing

The skin is the largest organ in the body. It separates and protects our internal structures from the outside world. So it may come as a surprise that microorganisms – bacteria, fungi and viruses – decide to make a home there and have an important job to do. Scientists refer to this harmonic coexistence as the skin's "microbiome."

Skin in nature is not sterile. It's supposed to have microorganisms co-mingling day in and day out. And while the effects of the skin's microbiome are still being researched, human studies show its balance is critical to the overall health of the person. In fact, dysfunction in the microbiome is associated with autoimmune diseases and infection in humans.

Research conducted in equine healing shows that equine skin microbiota or microbiome creates a rich and stable environment that is disturbed by wounding. However, it springs back to its previous balanced state of microorganisms upon full healing of the wound.

Studies continue to explore the impact of the skin's microbiome in terms of wound repair.

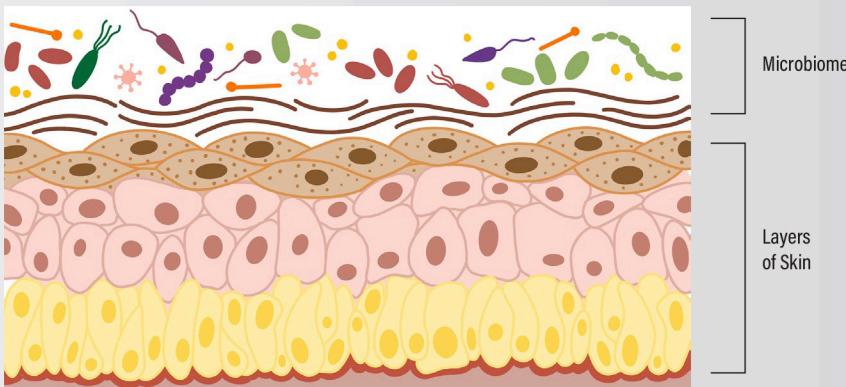


**In the presence of tissue injury, loss of microbial diversity (or a disrupted skin microbiome) often results in prolonged inflammation, which can delay wound healing. Both equine and human research has shown that a balanced microbiome shortens the time it takes for wounds to heal.**

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Find out how Silver Honey can help speed your animal's healing by fighting harmful bacteria while protecting the skin's natural microbiome.



FROM THE DRESSAGE TODAY ARCHIVES

# Building Your First-Aid Kit

By Barb Crabbe, DVM

The following is a guide to assembling a first-aid kit that will leave you well prepared to handle any injuries or illnesses you may encounter with your horse when you're on the road. Your first-aid supplies should be clean, well organized and easy to locate. I suggest that my clients organize their supplies in a watertight plastic container with labeled sections for easy access. To organize the kit, I like to put antimicrobial scrubs and solutions together in a separate container that can be used to hold water if it's needed to clean a wound and will prevent bottles from leaking on other items when not being used. I also like to organize bandaging materials into

**Create a first-aid kit for travel so you're prepared.**



Amy K. Drago

**Barb Crabbe, DVM**, received her doctorate in veterinary medicine from the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine. She is an active dressage rider and competitor who has claimed numerous Regional Championships and Horse of the Year awards over the years. A graduate with distinction from the USDF "L" judges program, she is a former board member of the Northwest Equine Practitioners Association and the Oregon Dressage Society. Based in Oregon City, Oregon, she operates Pacific Crest Sporthorse.

"bandage kits." A 1-quart Ziploc bag will hold the supplies needed to apply a single bandage. This allows you to simply grab a bandage kit without thinking about the individual components when it's time to wrap a wound.

Your kit will include both over-the-counter supplies and prescription medications. Keep a detailed list, including dosing recommendations and expiration dates, with your prescription medications and update it regularly. Store your first-aid kit in an easily accessible location in your horse trailer so you can grab it in a hurry.

## Over-the-Counter Supplies

- Stethoscope to check your horse's heart rate and listen for gut sounds.
- Thermometer to take your horse's rectal temperature.
- Antibiotic wound ointment: Silver sulfadiazine or triple antibiotic ointment are both good options that can be used to dress abrasions or wounds.
- Bandage material: enough to apply a pressure wrap on a wound and a set of standing bandages for swollen legs. This would include sterile, non-adhesive pads, stretch gauze, sheet cottons, 6-inch brown gauze, Vetrap and a roll of self-adhesive tape.
- Antimicrobial scrub (betadine or chlorhexadine) to clean wounds.
- Antimicrobial solution (betadine or chlorhexadine) to flush puncture wounds; should be diluted approximately 1 to 10 with saline or water.
- Saline solution to clean wounds or flush out swollen, weepy eyes.
- Large syringe (30 to 60 cc) for flushing wounds or eyes.
- Safety razor to shave hair away from wounds for cleaning.
- Shoe-pulling tools to remove a shoe that's become loose or sprung.

- Duct tape: Most commonly you need duct tape to protect a foot that's lost a shoe or to secure a bandage.

### Prescription Medications

Ask your vet to help you assemble prescription medications that might be needed when you're far from home. He or she will give you recommendations for their use based on your specific horse. The following are some examples of prescription drugs that can come in handy if you know how to use them:

- Tranquilizers: A dose of a fairly potent tranquilizer (usually containing some combination of xylazine, butorphanol

and/or detomidine) for each horse in your trailer can be a lifesaver if you break down on the road and have to calm your horse. These medications can also come in handy as a safe first line of defense if colic symptoms strike. Your vet may also recommend that you have a bottle of Acepromazine if you need a milder sedative. If you're not comfortable with injections, ask about Dormosedan Gel, a very effective oral sedative that's available.

- Antibiotic ophthalmic ointment: One that contains only antibiotics is safe to use for most eye conditions, including a scratched or abraded cornea.
- Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory: Phenyl-

butazone ("bute"), flunixin meglumine (Banamine) or firocoxib (Equioxx) would be advised in many different situations, including a tendon or ligament strain, inflamed eye or any other injury. Ask your vet about proper dosing and when to use these medications.

- Antibiotics: Several doses of antibiotics to begin treatment for a wound will ward off an infection until you can seek veterinary attention. Again, ask your vet about proper dosage for your horse.
- Corticosteroids: A dose of a steroid such as dexamethasone can be helpful for allergic reactions such as a case of hives or an attack of stinging insects. 🐝



**A large syringe can be helpful for flushing wounds or eyes.**



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<sup>†</sup>Townsend L. Horse flies and deer flies. University of Kentucky ENTFACT-511.  
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