

Back for good

Every horse deserves a good start in life, but whether your horse is young or needs a bit of retraining, Michael Peace explains how to do it kindly

If you want to start riding your young horse this summer, prepare for it now. Many owners send their horses to a professional trainer to be backed or reschooled, which can be traumatic. You've cared for him up until now and it's not easy to hand over the reins to someone else. But whether you send your horse away or back him yourself, have a go at some groundwork beforehand.

Handle with care

Introduce your horse to leading, tying up, grooming and having his feet picked out, but stop if you feel out of your depth, and leave it to the professional.

Most horses in this country will have been handled since they were foaled, but they can still be sceptical if they've had no human contact for a while. Be safe when handling a horse, and don't forget they can scratch an ear with a hind leg!

Areas on a horse's body he'll be most sceptical of you handling are feet, head, chest, belly and flanks in front of the stifle, so start at the lower neck in front of the shoulder.

Rub gently until your horse relaxes, then slowly extend the work until you can touch his whole body. Be sensitive and keep an eye on your horse's head to see how he is responding. Take your time.



About Michael

For the past 25 years, Michael Peace has dedicated his career to training young and problem horses all over the world. Now based in Oxfordshire, he uses his unique 'Think Equus' philosophy to help horses and riders of all levels to achieve their ultimate goals.

To book your horse in for training or to book a home visit with Michael, call the Think Equus office on 01865 842806 or visit www.michaelpeace.co.uk





Head

The horse's head is another area that needs to be handled in preparation for backing. It houses many of the horse's vital senses, so be tactful as all young horses will be initially sceptical of humans approaching this area.

The key is not to be too direct. I like to approach this lesson by first getting contact on a horse's shoulder and then subtly working up his neck, scratching and rubbing as I go. You can make it appear like mutual grooming, then eventually getting your hand on the side of his head, onto his face and around his ears and muzzle. If you do it correctly, your horse will enjoy it, lower his head and neck, and become soft in his eyes. So be careful and take your time so as not to cause him any trouble.

Top tip
If your horse wants to pull his head away from you, let him. Never use force to try and hold his head down, as he will soon lose trust in you altogether.

“If you have done the head handling correctly, introducing the bit should follow on smoothly”

Mouthing

If you feel up to it, you can 'mouth' your horse. This is simply the process of getting a horse used to having the bit in his mouth. For this, you first need to make sure the horse will allow you to handle his mouth and if you've done the head-handling stuff above correctly, this should follow on smoothly. Cue the mouth to open by putting your thumb or forefinger in the side of his mouth, where the bars are, and where there are no teeth. Take care not to get bitten, though, because it can easily happen!

Once you can cue the mouth to open and you're sure your horse is happy with you handling his ears, get your bridle and take the reins and the noseband off it. Adjust it so that it is bigger than it needs to be and then stand on the horse's near-side. Now, cue the mouth to open and place the bit in the horse's mouth without

banging his teeth. Slide the headpiece over his ears and adjust the bridle to fit. Take your time.

Now I like to leave a horse loose in a stable to mouth, but always be careful that there's nothing in the stable or over the stable door that the bit or bridle can get caught on. Leave the horse to do his own thing in there and give him a bit of hay to browse around, as this encourages him to mouth and hold the bit up in his mouth.

If your horse gets his tongue over the bit, don't worry. People may tell you to adjust the bridle so that the bit is higher in the horse's mouth, to stop him getting his tongue over it. However, I like to have the bit lower in the mouth, so that the horse can get it back on top of his tongue when he needs to. In my experience, this is something they will do, especially if they are mouthing and eating hay at the same time.

Top tip
You can make your horse's first experience of the bit more pleasant, and encourage him to mouth, by putting some molasses onto the mouthpiece.



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Feet

A horse who lets you handle his feet shows a good level of acceptance of people and is a good gauge of where he is in his relationship with people. As a flight animal, a horse's feet are very important to him, and to allow you to hold him and work on him shows considerable trust.

When you first handle a horse's feet, remember all you are looking for is to be able to cue the foot off the ground. So start with your hand up high (left hand if working on the near-side, pictured below, and right hand for the off-side) on the horse's body and slide it down the outside of leg (not the inside like so

many people are taught) until the foot comes off the ground. When it does, don't try and hold on to it, simply allow the horse to put it down again, and repeat on the next leg and so on. Repeat this a few times on each leg until the horse is happy for you to go to each foot and cue it off the ground.

At first, a young horse may snatch the foot away and that's fine. Resist the urge to grab it, and instead repeat the process. After a few exposures, the horse should be relaxed and hold his foot in the air for you. Once he realises you mean him no harm, he'll let you hold on to it and eventually position it to work on it. Take your time with this and make it easy on him.

Top tip
Make sure that you are calm yourself before you start. Horses are very good at picking up on tension, so if you're not relaxed, wait until you are, or leave it to the experts.



Choosing a trainer

If you're sending your horse away to be backed, it's essential that you find a trainer you can trust and who will do a good job with your horse. Remember, anyone can set themselves up as a horse trainer and even if they don't have the relevant experience, they can advertise their services, take your money and leave you with more problems than you started with. A good trainer's reputation usually precedes him, but so does a bad one, so listen carefully! Usually, good trainers don't over-sell themselves because they don't have to.

Tell the trainer a bit about your horse – his age, type, previous training, etc. If you like what you hear, the next step is to ask if you can visit.

Assessing the yard

Good trainers will understand the enormity of the decision you're about to make, and may let you watch them work if they have time. Bear in mind, though, that they might have lots to do, so make an appointment in advance, arrive on time and don't outstay your welcome!

Look at the facilities and the yard. Do they offer a safe environment for your horse? Do the horses have clean beds, plenty of hay, fresh water and look tidy? Do they look happy and alert? A good trainer will tell you a bit about each horse he has in, so listen and show interest in the one that sounds most similar to your horse.

Staff on a yard can be a good indication of the overall attitude of the establishment, so talk to as many people as you can. It's fine to ask lots of questions, but be polite and don't be too probing or intrusive.

Remember, you're a guest, so don't be an inquisitor. You'll soon get a feel for the place and if you like it, there is a good chance your horse will, too.

Happy trainers = happy staff = happy horses = happy owners

More questions

When you've found a place you're happy with, ask the trainer how long he'll need to get your horse started and what stage he'll reach in the time. You should allow about four weeks to get your horse comfortable wearing tack and carrying a rider happily in walk, trot and canter. This can vary according to how effective the trainer is, what temperament your horse has and the preparation you've done.

Ask what the training charges include – ie, is all livery and training included? What extras are there? And give the trainer as much information as you can about your horse. Be honest about any bad experiences you've had. This all helps the trainer predict how long your horse will need.

Have a budget, but be a bit flexible. This is a very important time in your horse's life, so don't cut corners or be too cheap. If you're happy with your horse's progress when you visit, but the trainer thinks he needs another week, then do the right thing.

Visiting hours

Ask if you can watch your horse being worked now and then, but be sure to call in advance to make an appointment, and don't hang around for too long.

“Ensure your horse is at a stage where you are happy to continue his training”



Collecting your horse

Watch the trainer ride your horse before you take him home, so that you know where he is in his training. If possible, ride your horse yourself, too, and ask the trainer for advice on your horse's future education and an outline training programme for the coming weeks when you get home.

Be sure he's at a stage where you are happy to continue before taking him home. Ideally, you want him to be easy to tack up and mount and steady to ride, with good steering and brakes.

Getting home

Remember, your horse is only at the very start of his career so take it slowly. Don't over-face him with situations that he's not ready for.

I've got a friend who has a record company, and one day I

In a nutshell

- Get your horse accustomed to being handled, if you feel confident enough
- Find the right trainer
- Visit the yard and ask questions
- Keep an eye on how your horse's training is going
- Make sure your horse is at a level you're happy with before he comes home
- Progress things slowly but surely.

was talking to one of his producers who was mixing a song. His skill at manipulating sound and mixing tracks together to produce a song is incredible, and he was explaining how he was sculpting the sound. So I asked him: "How do you know when you've finished a song, and how do you know you've got the perfect mix?" He paused for a second and replied: "You never, ever finish a song, you just stop working on it".

And horses are the same, because their education is an ongoing process that you can continue adding to until you decide to stop.

For more information

If you've got a young horse and want to give it the best start in life or if you've got a problem horse (or trainer!) who needs help call the Think Equus office on ☎ 01865 842806 or alternatively visit our website at www.michaelpeace.co.uk For a limited time only, buy Michael Peace's new Semi-Flex saddle and have it professionally fitted by expert saddler Barry Swain, while Michael Peace rides and assesses your horse. To book call ☎ 01865 842806.