

Just Got a New Horse... Now What?

By Barbra Ann King

The process of acquiring a new horse can be a long, tedious one or it can be a spur-of-the-moment, inspired one. Either way, when you finally get your new horse and bring him home, what's the next step?



Do you start riding him right away after letting him settle for a day or so?

When do you start his training?

Can you take him to a local competition, just a small one to see how he does?

Will he be okay on a trail ride?

Or maybe you can take him to that clinic you booked three months ago?

In order to answer any of these questions, we need to consider the horse's point of view.

New Home

Being a horse means your environment can change quickly and often. Sometimes you get to live outside with all of your friends, which makes you feel safe and happy. Other times you are confined in a small space inside with no fresh air and no other horses to interact with. You can spend your whole day in confinement and hardly get to move at all. There are days when you go back outside and all your herd mates are different and other days when you can see your herd mates running around but you can't join them unless you are willing to jump the fence that separates you. So, when you bring your new horse home, there is a lot of adjusting that takes place before the horse can say "Ah, I'm safe and happy in this environment." It takes a full year for a horse to let out a big sigh and feel at home, as long as his living environment doesn't change constantly during that time. The horse needs to go through all four seasons in order to know that he will have food, water, shelter, safety and the company of other horses all year round. That makes him feel safe and happy. I am not suggesting that you don't do anything with your horse for a full year, but I am saying to keep that in the back of your mind. Also, when you are near the one-year mark, see if you notice a difference in your horse. Does he seem calmer, more adjusted and confident?

Time to Ride

Before getting on any horse, I make sure they see me as a potential True Equine Leader. I say "potential" because leadership is a herd position that is earned. No matter how much we decide that we are leaders and have that position, the horse is the only one to decide if you are a true equine leader or not.

No matter how anxious and excited I am about riding my new horse (yes, I also get giddy when I get a new horse!), I will not get on that horse's back until there is some level of trust and understanding between us. There are six exercises that I use to show my horses that I have the qualities to be a True Equine Leader, just like their own herd leader. These groundwork exercises are:

- Round Pen Conversation
- Take My Space
- Food Trials
- Grooming
- Cleaning Feet
- Leading Around

I do not need to do these in any particular order, nor do I have to do them all at once, but each one will give me a good indication of how my horse sees me.

When I succeed in doing all the above exercises and my horse trusts me as a leader, I can take it a step further and start riding if the horse is already started and has no issues with riding. In many cases, I restart them slowly to allow any issues they may have to emerge. I do need to establish myself as a True Equine Leader in the saddle also, which I will explain how to do in future articles.

In next month's article, I will explain how to do the Round Pen Conversation the Relationship Riding way.

Barbra Ann King is an internationally known horse behaviour specialist, founder of the Relationship Riding® method and a published author living in Alberta. She specializes in rehabilitating horses and optimizing performance. She travels year-round sharing her passion with like-minded horse owners and offers video consultations for troubleshooting through her website www.relationshipriding.com.

(See her listing in the Business Services Section under Trainers.)

