



WHY ADOPT A THOROUGHBRED?

Have you ever wondered why so many Thoroughbred horses with wonderful potential are lost to slaughter before they ever have a chance for second career, and why people who love Thoroughbreds are constantly on the emotional rollercoaster of abandonment and rescue? How can something as magnificent as a Thoroughbred end up as an “unwanted horse”?

The answer is quite simple. The economics of racing dictate that an injured horse must be removed from the training bill as quickly as possible. Regardless of the ethics of this practice, it is an economic reality that must be dealt with. Enter the retirement non-profits, so often the only hope for horses who suddenly find themselves homeless.

But there is a hidden aspect of the slaughter problem, one in which everyone who is concerned for the fate of these horses can play a role. Close examination of the “unwanted horse” issue reveals far too many breeders of Thoroughbreds, and far too few trainers who have experience in transitioning them into a second career. They are often misunderstood by people who are accustomed to working with show or pleasure horses, and out- of- hand are dismissed as too difficult for the average rider. *When you adopt a Thoroughbred and embark upon retraining you are providing an alternative to slaughter for one horse. When you share your training experience and mentor others you become part of the greater solution.*

To help and encourage new Thoroughbred owners this training guide is offered to any and all who will take one of these wonderful horses into their hearts and give them a second chance. If you are adopting your first Thoroughbred we welcome you to an exciting partnership with the elite of the equine world. Now that you have chosen your partner we hope that reading our Training Guide will help you to build trust and friendship with your new horse. Seeing things from his point of view, and keeping an open mind, will allow you to safely embark upon the rewarding adventure of making his transition from race to pleasure horse.

In the world of Thoroughbred racing, one of the greatest compliments given a successful trainer is “He or she gets along with his horses.” This simple phrase, taken to heart, will engage you in dialogue with a lively creature that can test your very soul but also give it wings.

Your New Thoroughbred.

If you are adopting your Thoroughbred from Tranquility Farm the job of getting your horse sound and healthy after racing will already have been done before he is offered for adoption. But because many people can and do adopt horses right off the racetrack, we should perhaps discuss letting the ex-racehorse down and related health topics before we begin our discussion on retraining.

What is the best way to “let a horse down” after racing?

First of all, get a vet check: If your horse has just come from the racetrack it is wise to have him examined by your veterinarian to determine what soundness issues have forced his retirement. Horses that are represented as “too slow” often have a physical reason that they could not run, and this will need to be addressed before beginning their second career. Your horse needs a fresh start, and your veterinarian should be consulted to diagnose any injuries and make recommendations for recovery. If your horse is found to be reasonably sound and does not need extensive rehabilitation it is nonetheless wise to allow him 45 to 60 days of vacation time in order to adjust to his new surroundings and to relax mentally and physically before beginning his retraining.

Diet: The “high” horse. Many horses come off the track in peak condition after suddenly sustaining a career-ending injury. This means they still have abundant energy and can become very frustrated by the sudden lack of strenuous exercise. For these horses a diet of high quality mixed forages such as grass and alfalfa hay without a grain ration will help to calm them down. A probiotic product to help them digest roughage is very beneficial. If you want to add joint supplements or anti-inflammatory products to the ration, mix them with a high soluble fiber product that is low in carbohydrates. Most major feed companies now produce a low-starch or senior ration which is ideal. If you have access to fresh grass, turning him out in a small area or hand- grazing the horse for a few minutes each day will provide welcome relief from boredom and add variety to his limited diet. It will also make your time together something he looks forward to.

The thin horse. The other end of the spectrum is the thin, used- up horse who has run to exhaustion or who may be having a “crash” due to digestive problems or withdrawal from anabolic steroids. For this horse the forage diet will not be sufficient, and the addition of a high-fat, high -protein ration such as an Equine Senior product will work very well. It is essential to supplement this horse with probiotics, and in addition to add to a good quality multivitamin/mineral. Complete ration products like Senior feeds that are milled and pelleted are much more digestible for your horse than course grain, which should be avoided. Fat supplements such as corn oil, soy oil or rice bran are palatable and provided needed energy.

A word of caution about rehabbing a thin horse; too much, too soon can lead to digestive disorders and colic. If you do not have experience with rehabbing a thin horse it is best to consult your veterinarian about the type and amount of feed he should receive.

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A word about ulcers: For a variety of reasons, including stress, soreness, and medications, many racehorses leave the track with ulcers or chronic poor digestion. The symptoms of ulcers are many and can be somewhat illusive. Common observations of horses with ulcers include diminished appetite, teeth grinding, irritability, being withdrawn or apprehensive, as well as the symptoms of colic or frequent diarrhea. Any or all of these symptoms may be observed. It is estimated that nearly 100% of racehorses experience ulcers at some point in their careers.

How are ulcers treated? If you can afford to put your horse on Gastroguard for a short period it is most beneficial, or the related product Ulcerguard, which is less expensive and designed for long term use. Many people have also reported success in administering the Panacur Power Pack. Treating your horse with an ulcer medication, even on a temporary basis, will enormously benefit his health and recovery. A good time to make this determination is while doing your initial examination with your veterinarian.

If you want to avoid using expensive drugs to treat your horse with natural supplements there is a new product on the market called Succeed that is less expensive and works through diet to promote healthy mucosa of the stomach and intestinal lining. A combination of Succeed and a probiotic supplement has worked very well for horses rehabbing at Tranquility Farm, and we keep all of our rehab horses on “U-Guard” which is a digestive aid and antacid. We have also seen a real benefit to our rehab horses when they are allowed fresh grass and carrots.

Housing: Remember, if your Thoroughbred has recently been in race training he has been kept in a stall 23 hours a day at the racetrack, and he has almost no hair or body fat to protect him from the elements. If it is cold or raining he is best kept in a stall. If stall care is not available, blanket him and provide some shelter from the elements. These horses are very delicate when they are fresh from the track and a “meltdown” will occur if they are exposed to harsh weather.

Exercise: The amount of exercise you give your horse will depend upon the results of the soundness exam by your veterinarian. If he has an injury he may have to be confined in a stall and/or a small paddock at the beginning, and his exercise increased very gradually as he heals. Exercise tolerance for various types of injuries are specific, and your veterinarian should make these recommendations.

If your horse is able to exercise without restriction he is best turned out initially in a small individual paddock approximately 50' x 75' so that he can't get up too much speed. His first exhilarating days of freedom can be quite spectacular, and when he has adjusted to being turned out and behaves calmly it is time to give him some more space, or begin an exercise program with him.

Socialization in the pasture.

For the horse that is sound enough to be turned out with others take care to introduce him to his new friends across a fence for at least a few days, until he has accepted them and they have welcomed him into the group. Be aware that horses fresh off the track may have been given hormones which cause them to exhibit stallion like- behavior.

Benefits of Socialization:

For horses that can be safely socialized with others we find a period of turn-out in a social group is particularly beneficial for horses that are nervous and apprehensive. Integrating these into a group often gives them some welcome relief from having to make all of their own decisions about what is and is not threatening to them, and they often gain self- confidence from participation in a natural herd environment.

Hoof Care and Shoeing:

Racehorses are shod frequently when in training, but unfortunately too many still leave the track with the low heel/ long toe syndrome that makes balancing their feet a challenge. Another common ailment of the foot is deep bruising from the concussion of running on a hard surface. For this reason it is best to keep the horse shod at least with front shoes to protect the fragile wall at the quarters, grow some heel, and protect the sole from pressure. Ask your farrier to consider what the foot should ultimately look like when properly aligned with the pastern angle, and gradually bring back the toe and develop proper growth and expansion at the heels. This usually takes several shoeings, and the addition to the diet of a good quality hoof supplement is always beneficial.



Before and after: with proper shoeing the angle is corrected to better match the pastern; the toe is shortened, and the heel is supported to ease strain on the tendon.

FAQ's and Training Tips for Transitioning your Thoroughbred.

If your horse is now healthy and adjusted to his new environment it is time to begin his retraining. Over the years at Tranquility Farm we have rehabbed, retrained and adopted several hundred Thoroughbreds, and some common problems and workable solutions have emerged from our experience.

These FAQs and Training Tips will not apply equally to all horses; the timid little green filly is going to be a different horse to train than the retired champ. But whatever their character, Thoroughbreds all share a similar background in training and experience, and they will have predictable gaps in their education that must be filled before they are safe and secure mounts.

A systematic approach, working patiently to build a solid foundation of trust and good manners before beginning to ride the off-track Thoroughbred has worked the best of us and for our adopters. Our most successful adopters are those who have undertaken this project as a labor of love, and who always consider their safety and their horse's safety as their primary concern. So, let's start with some basics, and very frequently asked questions!

Does my horse know how to tie? The answer is yes, but it is important to understand that the method and place for tying a young Thoroughbred horse is different than a pleasure horse. The first, and usually the only place, these colts and fillies are tied is in the back of their stall, usually with a flexible rubber tie bar, where they will learn to stand while being groomed and tacked up. They are always held by a groom when standing outside of their stall for shoeing, bathing, etc.

Why are Thoroughbred racehorses only tied in their stall? The primary reason is safety. Young Thoroughbreds are valuable and their owners have paid many thousands of dollars for them as racing prospects. Keeping them confined inside their stall while tied is the surest way of preventing them from breaking loose and having an accident. The second reason is that they must learn the routine of the racetrack. Keeping the young horse quiet and unexcited when tied is essential for both his and his handler's safety.

Training tips for tying your Thoroughbred:

Since your horse has probably NEVER been asked to stand tied outside of his stall in the midst of other activity, begin by doing what your horse is comfortable with. Tie him first in his stall where you can become familiar with each other in a safe environment. Never tie him outside and leave him when you have not trained him to stand quietly.

When your horse knows and trusts you it is time to make him familiar with standing tied outside of his stall for grooming, tacking, and bathing. Work with him to stand quietly with you for increasing amounts of time. Loop the lead rope looped through the tie ring or rail, and hold the rope in your hand to give and release. Gradually increase his comfort level so that he has less fear of confinement, and becomes accustomed to standing quietly outside.

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Cross Ties: If you want to cross- tie your horse accustom him gradually by not tying him fast but allowing him to accept the sensation of flexible ropes on both sides of his head. This is a visual adjustment for him as well and horses unfamiliar with cross-ties can be easily startled by the motion of ropes on both sides of their head. Whatever his favorite treat or reward is, going to the cross tie area to receive it sets up a good association.

Wash Racks: Again, this is an experience your horse probably has not had because his groom always held him for bathing. The safest training method is to open the rack on both front and back if possible, and walk him through a few times before asking him to stand without closing him in. Don't make it a trap. A wash rack may also remind your horse of a starting gate and produce an adrenalin rush, so getting him to relax and accept grooming there may take some time. Treats and pets are the best way to make this a happy area.

How can I make my Thoroughbred enjoy being groomed?

Being sensitive to the comfort level of your horse while grooming him is the key. Here you have the golden opportunity to become his best friend by making him feel happy and relaxed in your company. Thoroughbreds are expressive and affectionate by nature, so don't be surprised if he reciprocates by scratching your back too!

Tips for Grooming:

Equipment: First of all, you need to start with the proper equipment. Take a look in your brush box and then take the hard stiff brushes and hard rubber or metal curry combs right down to the local tack sale. Your Grandpa's brushes are not going to "curry favor" with your new horse! Your new grooming box should have a variety of soft brushes, with the softest and most flexible currying mitts and combs, and a soft finishing cloth.

To Begin: With your hands first go over your horse and see how he reacts to being touched on various parts of his body. Notice how very fine and sensitive his skin is, and use your grooming implements accordingly. If he is timid or resistant about being touched in any particular area the way "in" is through making the grooming experience as pleasant and non-invasive as possible. Work on the parts of his coat that he finds enjoyable, always brushing with the grain of the hair, and then ever so gradually, using very soft brushes, include his hard-to- touch areas. Give him pats of reassurance and if he becomes overly nervous simply return to the "safe" areas until he relaxes. The majority of Thoroughbreds enjoy grooming immensely.

What should I do if my horse tries to nip, kick out, or crowd me while I am grooming him?

Establish your space! It is true that a few former racehorses may be resistant to being groomed. This is probably due to having territorial conflicts with a former groom, or perhaps having been treated roughly at some time in their past.

Even though the object of the grooming session is to make friends with your new horse, it is important to remind him of his responsibilities. If your new horse is reactive and either kicks out or nips you it is important to give him a prompt smack with the flat of your hand and firmly say "NO". Let him know you mean business.

What should I do if the bad stall behavior is habitual?

It may be necessary to “untrack” your horse. This technique can be a great benefit in almost any training situation where you feel you are “hitting a wall” with your horse. Learning this technique at the very beginning of your relationship can relieve lots of stress for you and your horse along the way.

As an example, let’s consider the horse that is mouthy, or fidgets, or crowds you while being groomed or tacked-up. The horse is expressing his frustration with his situation, and because he is not receptive and calm your time together is not starting off on a good note.

“Untracking” your horse is the equine version of a “time- out”. What it means is that you create a way to change his behavior by refocusing his attention upon you. You accomplish this not by punishment, but by asking him to do something entirely different before his unacceptable behavior escalates into a real conflict.

There are probably a million applications for this technique both in groundwork and riding; the scenarios are limited only by the trainer’s imagination. Think of what you are doing as basically allowing your horse to regain his composure without a lot of negative reinforcement.

So, let’s return to our horse who is misbehaving while we attempt to groom him. We will now untie him, and being careful to keep control of his head, quietly ask him to walk around us in a small circle in the stall. Then we ask him to halt, walk again, stand, move his head to the right or left, change directions, and cooperate in whatever simple tasks we create for him.

We keep the horse moving, thinking, responding, and under control. When he walks forward as we ask he is praised; when he stops and stands as we ask, he is praised. If the response is slow we patiently persist and give praise and a pet whenever something goes right.

When your horse is attentively watching and listening to you, when his eyes are wide open, his ears moving, his mouth relaxed, his breathing quiet (best of all he sighs!) he is “untracked”. The tension and resentment he felt has left him, and he is accepting your direction. Now resume your grooming session.

What you have done is to gently and safely modify your horse’s behavior by using his basic herd instinct to follow the direction of the dominant horse. By moving him away from you and controlling his footsteps you have achieved a position of dominance without resorting to punishment. You have gained not only respect, but trust. When you have a break in communication with your horse try using this technique until the two of you are once again able to work in concert.

Why do I have trouble leading my Thoroughbred?

If you have ever been to the races and seen the horses dancing around with chains in their mouths and their heads in the air you might possibly believe that you will never be able to teach one of these beauties to lead like a properly schooled horse! Here is perhaps the first real gap in the education of a Thoroughbred that can present a serious stumbling block for the novice owner. Just remember, these horses are very fit BABIES when they are racing, and the people who handle them are professionals who take it in stride. It is very possible that your horse has simply been restrained while being led and has never learned to truly respect the space of his handler. There is a real difference.



This horse exhibits the typical attitude of the TB before retraining. He is prancing along looking off into the distance, not actually paying attention to his handler.

Starting with proper equipment. The lead Chain.

Before you bring your first Thoroughbred home purchase a light-weight 24” to 30” stud chain depending on your horse’s head size, and learn how to properly adjust it on the halter for control:

Step 1: Insert the chain into the ring between the noseband and the cheekpiece on the left (near) side of the noseband.

Step 2. Bring the chain up over the top of the noseband and wrap it one time to keep it from slipping down.

Step 3. Pull the chain out the ring on the opposite side (off side) of the noseband, and then insert it through the ring at the bottom of the halter.

Step. 4. Clip the snap at the end of the chain back to itself at the triangular fitting at the opposite end. Attach your lead rope to this triangular fitting as well.

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The photo above shows the halter and lead- chain properly fitted. The chain is a circle that is wrapped through the halter around the horse's nose and attached back to itself so that it cannot tighten up, slip down, or slide near the eye. It is extremely important to practice the proper application of the stud chain because without it you not only loose control but create safety hazards for your horse. Remember, the chain is to correct and redirect his attention, just a little jingle should suffice; use it carefully or he will learn to ignore it. **Never apply the chain when you are tying the horse.**

Light Whip or Wand for Cueing the Horse.

It is most helpful to use a light flexible whip simply to cue the horse, to perhaps tap and suggest to him which foot needs to be moved, or help position his body. Make the horse see the cueing whip as a "friendly reminder" by gently running it over his body until he is not apprehensive. It then can be used as an extension of your arm to support and guide your horse without being a threat. It is best to slowly and carefully accustom your horse to the use of a cueing whip in the stall in case he is fearful.

Tips for Common Leading Problems:

Problem: Rushing out of the stall door. Take the lead rope in your left hand and hold your right hand about a foot away from the halter on the horse's left side. You have better control of the head with a shorter lead, and if you do need to use the chain to correct your horse you are in a leveraged position. Make sure the horse does not bolt out of the stall, but steps forward in an orderly fashion when permitted. If he rushes out, give him a jingle of the chain to get his attention, make him stand a moment, then turn right around, go back, and try again.

Begin your exit strategy in the back of the stall by asking him to step forward, stop, step forward, stop, a couple of times before you go out the door. It may take a bit of practice but rushing out of the stall is something he can usually learn to overcome quite easily.

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Problem: Leaning on you, crowding into your space, trying to drag you off in his direction.

This problem is best solved by some creative groundwork inside an enclosed area where you can create an environment where the horse is required to notice where his feet are. Learning to focus in a small space is something your Thoroughbred has seldom been asked to do, he has spent his life looking down a mile track of perfectly harrowed ground and going in a straight line. Now he must adapt to smaller spaces and the precise motions of a riding horse. Learning to think his way through obstacles is the best way to teach him

To create a course for him use ground poles, bales of straw, cones, barrels or whatever is at hand to make a challenging course like you might use for trail training. Your training goal is to create a path where the horse has to look down at his feet and learn to turn, halt and back on command in order to successfully negotiate the course.



The fact that the world is a tricky place to walk around in and that his person is there to provide guidance as to how this should be done is **BIG NEWS** to your horse! What he is learning is to focus his vision down into a small and complex area and to become aware that he has four feet that must be moved individually, according to your plan, not his, in order to negotiate the course. This is new ground for your friend who has been on a smoothly harrowed racetrack looking at the horizon.

This is time well spent because what you are also learning is how he will react to challenges that you present in his training. You will soon know his “learning curve”, if he is quick and responsive or becomes nervous and hesitant. This gives you a good reading of how he will progress in his training, and it is remarkable how learning to negotiate a ground course as a team will open your horse’s mind to whole new possibilities of partnership with humans! It will make him a much more settled horse on the lead., and only when he has a good foundation of walking straight and is reliably controllable on the lead is he ready to graduate to the next level of basic training, the lunge line.

Does my Thoroughbred know how to lunge?

Your horse may have had some experience on the lunge but most likely it was for a small period as he was being trained to saddle and not repeated after he learned to accept a rider on his back. Ground work of any type is not the norm for any extended period in the breaking of a yearling, and he very likely has not seen a lunge line since that time.

Training on the lunge:

Begin with the proper equipment: a bridle with a loose ring snaffle bit, side reins, surcingle, lunge line, lunge whip, polo wraps or splint boots.



Tacking up:

Your work with your horse up to this point has concentrated on going forward on the lead, under control, at the walk. Beginning your work on the lunge is the first time you will allow your horse to go forward at a greater speed, and for this reason it is wise to use polo wraps or other leg protection.

Adjust your surcingle to fit snugly , and use a fleece-lined or smooth leather surcingle with a fleece pad to feel comfortable to your horse's back. Now you are going to find out if your horse is "cinchy", and the trust you have gained with him while grooming should pay off and allow him to accept your equipment if it is comfortable and gently applied. If the girth of your surcingle is canvass strapping you may want to use a fleece liner to make this more acceptable to him. A bridle with a basic loose ring snaffle bit of your choice fitted with side reins completes his equipment. The reins should be adjusted for a loose contact that will allow your horse to stretch downward during his transitions but still feel that he has a bit in his mouth.

Attach your lunge line by running the snap through the ring of the snaffle on the side of the handler, running it over the top of the poll, and attaching it to the ring on the opposite side of the snaffle. This gives you the ability to rein in the horse if he tries to run off.

Going forward:

If your horse is unfamiliar with the round pen or enclosed area where you will lunge him begin by leading him quietly a few circles in both directions and let him have a look at his surroundings. With the racehorse you need to do this in a quiet area where other horses are not being worked at the same time. Why? Because he has been trained to key on other horses and get ahead of them. This needs to be dealt with at a later time but the distraction factor will make quiet lunging nearly impossible for the green horse.

When you are ready to begin, start by stepping back into lunging position on his left side where he is most accustomed to seeing you, and keeping your whip low and quiet, give him some line and point the whip approximately at the level of his hocks or simply tap the ground toward his rear and give him a verbal cue. If he quietly steps forward praise him and try to keep him walking in a circle around you, being careful to stay at all times out of range of his rear incase he bucks or jumps forward. Horses often kick out if they are nervous or excited with no ill intent; nevertheless accidents can happen. If he jumps forward or sideways simply stop and repeat your cues until he is capable of walking forward.

If you are inexperienced with beginning lunging or have difficulty achieving a circle with your horse it can be helpful to have a handler walk the horse around you to give him the idea of what is required. Never be afraid to ask for help as sometimes a team can quickly accomplish a lesson with a green horse that is extremely difficult for one person alone!

Your position while lunging :

Keep your body positioned so that your leading hand (the line) is aligned with his head, and your driving hand (whip) is aligned with his croup. It is useful to imagine you and your horse as a bicycle wheel: you are the hub, your left and right hand are the spokes, and the horse's path is the tire as he circles around you.

Walk an inner circle with your horse to maintain the correct position and he will soon learn to do his part. Be judicious with cues from the whip, keeping it low and quiet. If you feel inclined to snap or wave it try tapping the ground behind him and you will see that your horse reacts by responding without feeling threatened.

“Burning Rubber”: A common misconception:

NEVER let your horse “burn rubber” on the lunge line! One of the worst mistakes made in handling off-track horses is thinking that by allowing them to rocket around on the lunge line they will miraculously calm down when they have burned off some energy. Rein them in immediately and ask again that they proceed outward in a controlled manner.

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If you allow your horse to race around he isn't going to be capable of learning anything. Remember he is on the lunge line to learn first, and exercise second. If you do not gain his respect and achieve control at this stage of training he has no reason to believe that it is not acceptable to "burn rubber" with you in the saddle!

If your horse repeatedly wants to run off on the lunge give him the benefit of the doubt by scheduling his training session after he has been turned out in a paddock to run and play. That way you won't be tempted to make excuses for his lack of attention to the work at hand!

It can take a few weeks of consistent work to teach your horse to go forward quietly in both directions at the walk and trot, and the best way to achieve control and create a calm and responsive horse is to concentrate on making smooth transitions: walk to trot; trot to walk; walk to halt; and so on. Your careful and thoughtful work on the lunge is the key to laying a safe foundation for work in the arena under saddle.



Bending and suppleness:

A wonderful benefit of work on the lunge or long lines is that you can do a great deal to cure the common "one-sided" development of the ex racehorse. Concentrate his work equally in both directions so that he gains the ability to balance, bend and stretch equally in both directions.

Overcoming the hollow back and stretching.

An essential gain in your horse's comfort can also be made on the lunge by teaching him to stretch downward and relax his topline between working sessions. This is seldom done by riders on the track and it is typical to have horses with rigid muscles in the back and neck because they have been galloped under a tight hold and then put on a hotwalking machine without ever having a stretch. This is a sure way to ruin a horse's back and your work on the lunge can greatly rehabilitate his upper body and prepare him for once again carrying weight.

Beginning Work Under Saddle:

Now is the moment when you will be rewarded for your patient schooling. If you have never felt the smooth elastic power of the Thoroughbred's gaits you are in for a great treat. If your horse has accepted your direction and leads quietly around your facility, and if he is attentive and obedient on the lunge, you are ready to begin your saddle work.

The Saddle:

Whatever type of saddle you own, whether it is a forward seat, dressage, or western saddle, it will feel very different to your horse than the small racing saddle he has been accustomed to. After you have made the determination that your saddle fits your horse's back, tack him up with a good thick pad and let him get used to his new saddle on the lunge line a few times before you ride him in it. This is usually not a big adjustment for your horse, but it is safer to let him get used to it on his own without your weight.

The Girth:

You have learned by grooming your horse how fine and sensitive his skin is in the girth area, so be careful to use smooth leather or fleece lined girths. Ideally your girth should have elastic on both sides so that one side does not apply more pressure than the other and cause discomfort. The devil is in the details. If you do not have a girth with elastic on both sides you might consider using a foam or fleece girth liner to equalize the pressure.

Mounting:

For your safety is most important that you understand exactly how horses are mounted during race training and make your style of mounting not a big surprise to him at the beginning of your saddle work. Here is your departure point:

At the racetrack the rider is always lifted into the saddle with a "leg up" as the groom holds the horse's head. Most often the horse is led forward while the rider mounts or immediately afterwards, as the rider adjusts his stirrups and checks his girth. Regrettably some former racehorses expect to take right off at the trot so be prepared to do some work to make mounting safe and predictable. At the racetrack the feeling is "a busy hoof is a happy hoof" and the horse is not encouraged to stand around and think for himself!

Knowing his expectations when your mount will help you plan to make your first mounts more of less familiar to your horse. It is essential to have a handler help you at the horse's head, and to use a mounting block or get a "leg up" so that you do not put a lot of weight in the stirrup. Never try to make your first mounts from the ground without assistance!

To Mount: Get up on your block, turn the horse's head toward you, and swing up as lightly as possible into the saddle. As you sit down in the saddle have the handler walk the horse forward and stay with him as you put your feet into the stirrups and take up your reins. If you want to use an extra safety precaution you can also have your handler clip a lunge line on the horse and stay with you as you quietly walk forward.

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As you get to know your horse's comfort level with your style of mounting you can work to teach him to stand for a minute after your sit, or stop immediately after you mount and stand for a moment. You and your handler will have to work this out until you have made the horse familiar with standing to be mounted. Most learn very quickly, and if you have an especially nervous horse you can incorporate a little treat into the procedure which distracts them temporarily from the urge to immediately go forward.

Your position in the saddle.

If you have been to the races you know it gives a whole new meaning to the "short stirrup" horse! Fortunately, in the morning training sessions many exercise riders use a somewhat longer stirrup, but your horse does not expect your legs to be firmly applied along his sides or your heel to nudge him behind the girth. And if you are a fan of riding with spurs please take them off today.

To relax your horse, keep a very light contact with your legs, seat and hands, and walk quietly in a secure area. If your horse becomes nervous some turns, serpentines around cones, or other small "untracking" tasks will help diffuse any tension. Repeating what you have done in your lead line training will give the horse confidence in this situation. You may both appreciate the handler on the ground to help smooth out any rough spots for a few rides before you are both confident and happy together.



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Riding Forward:

For the first few rides concentrate on getting the horse straight between your legs with bends and halts for you to get the feel of his mouth. Keeping him secure in the knowledge he has learned in the obstacle course and on the lunge will make your saddle work an extension of what he has already mastered. This will build his confidence greatly.



Rewards: The more things he can do right, and the more he is rewarded with pats and stretches on the rein, the happier he will be in his new job. Thoroughbreds are proud and sensitive by nature, and most will do anything they can for a simple “good boy”. This young horse is learning to stretch downward to relax the tension in his neck and back during his first few rides after rehabilitation. This is a reward in itself.

Where should I ride?

Just as you have learned to avoid distractions or over-stimulation from other horses while you do your ground work, it is important to set the stage for successful first rides. Try to use a quiet and familiar area, and as you graduate to riding forward along the rail use your knowledge of transitions to settle the horse to work through problems. Stay inside the arena until you are confident that you have control and a good communication with your horse.

What about riding in the company of other horses?

Many people are surprised to learn that for many ex racehorses this presents no problem. The reason is that they are often accompanied by the lead pony on the track, and are taught to gallop in company from an early age. The problem with some that have raced extensively comes later when they learn to chase and overtake their competitors in racing. That’s the game plan, and these are smart horses.

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Whether or not your horse is “racy” and loses his cool with others is unpredictable, and you will have to experiment to see what his reaction is. A good indicator is to put him in a paddock where he can watch other horses being schooled and see if he is calm or gets really excited. When he is not stressed by the other horse’s activities then you can try introducing a calm horse with him when you are working in the arena and see if he is comfortable going along with the other horse. For most this is not a problem but again, it depends upon the individual. If your horse is very reactive it can take some time for him to adjust, and a frequent buddy that he likes and works out a relationship with will be the best tonic.

Graduating out of the arena.

There is not set pattern of development in training the off track horse, and when he will be ready for an experimental trail ride, schooling show or clinic in a new environment will be up to you. If you have gone through the steps outlined above and you and your horse are progressing comfortably then whatever discipline you choose is an open road before you. Happy Trails!