

TIMELINE FOR TRAINING

Educating a horse is like a long, exciting voyage filled with many learning experiences. To get from one point to another there must be a road to follow, and so it is for each and every horse. The goal of the voyage—the education of the horse—is to make the most of his innate ability and talent. You can't get any further than that. Keep in mind that everything we want from the horse is already there in him from the start, at the very earliest age. It can be said that the purpose of the education is to teach the horse to do those things he already knows at birth, but to do them on the rider's signals. A little foal, not many hours old, already knows how to do flying changes, pirouettes, half passes and many other movements. If the ability is not there, no rider in the world can get the horse to do it.

HOW FAST CAN WE MOVE FORWARD?

This is a question often asked of trainers. If it is the trainer's own student asking the question or it is about a horse the trainer knows, the question is not so difficult to answer. However, if the question is about the training in general, then it is another matter completely. In the latter case we have to say it depends on:

- The horse's age
- The horse's conformation
- The horse's temperament
- The horse's innate ability
- The amount of time that can be dedicated to the education
- The rider's knowledge and experience

One of the highest priorities in the education of the horse is to maintain everything the young horse already has in him before the education starts. He should not lose his movement, elasticity, presence and joy for life. Also, the education may not in any way lead to overload, neither physical nor mental. It takes much more knowledge to keep a horse sound and happy than to teach him all the movements.

The education must proceed at the horse's own speed, not according to days or hours.

If the goal is to ride Grand Prix and the horse and rider both have the ability it takes, and if we

assume there is no significant setback from an illness or injury, then we can say it takes about 5 – 6 years, or about 1800 hours under saddle. A horse that is at the peak of his career is normally between eleven and fifteen years old.

There are a few horses that are extremely talented—real athletes—that are ridden by talented and experienced riders and learn everything very quickly, but for most horses and riders we have to figure on taking more time. We cannot and should not educate a horse based on the number of days or hours we think it should take, but rather let the horse tell us when he is ready to move on and when we can increase the demands. Don't forget the horse needs to rest and to have some time off now and then. He needs to develop both mentally and physically, and the best time for this to take place is after a period of hard work and training. At this point he should have a vacation during which time all the new things he has learned can sink in.

Basic work and time to grow up is enormously important.

The best and most ambitious riders that want to go far, let's say the whole way to Grand Prix, often prefer to start with a young horse that can be influenced and trained according to their own ideas. If the rider is less experienced, of course he should preferably not start with a young horse. If the horse is to go far in dressage, he must get a good basic education. It is much more difficult to correct a badly educated horse than it is to work him correctly from the start.

There is no question that horses are born with different abilities and temperaments, but how they are handled from the time they are foals has a big influence on their future education. This means the education starts at the breeder's. The first years are of great importance. You will want to know the answer to the following questions:

- Has the horse been correctly fed?
- Has he had an opportunity for proper exercise and to be together with other horses?
- Has he seen a farrier consistently?
- Has he developed a good relationship with people?

THE FIRST STEP

When does the education begin? The answer is, the first time the foal learns to lead. It is very important that the young horse learns and becomes confident in the idea that people make the decisions and give the signals, and that he, the young horse, should pay attention and respond to their signals. Success in this early stage of training definitely makes the future education of the horse much easier. Of course, the horse's young age must be taken into account during the early stages of training. A youngster should definitely not go to school every day and should be given

as much time to play and be free as is possible. But when you have to lead the horse from one place to the other anyway, you might as well make use of the opportunity to train him a little at the same time.

- Lead him in such a way that his shoulder stays even with your shoulder.
- Teach him to go in a straight line when you are going straight, to turn when you turn and to stand still—all this on a loose lead.

Teaching this at an early stage also makes everything much safer, both for you and the horse.

It is important for the young horse to get plenty of exercise, preferably in the company of other horses in a pasture. When he is a year old it is a good idea to teach him how to show in hand, partially to exercise him, but also to get him used to being under command. We can say this is the beginning of learning how to be on the aids.

If it is possible, once the horse is two years old it is a good idea to longrein him, working only very lightly once or twice a week. With this kind of work it is absolutely essential that it is done by someone who has a lot of experience longreining young horses – it is definitely not something for a novice to try!

I don't want to recommend work on the longe line with a young horse, as too much wear and tear can result in injuries.

BUILDING AN EDUCATIONAL PLAN

The following is a description, in general terms, of how a plan for educating a horse would look for a horse that has all the talent and potential necessary to go all the way, with a rider who is fully experienced and with the assumption that extended periods of illness or injury can be avoided. This plan, of course, is not set in concrete, and can vary somewhat in terms of both the sequence and the age at which the horse reaches each stage of the training. It takes as much time as it takes, and it can vary hugely from horse to horse. So don't focus too much on the age that is mentioned for each step.

However, it is important for the education to move forward all the time, primarily because the horse is a creature of habit. Once a horse has learned a certain way to do something, he doesn't want it to change. This doesn't mean that the horse should constantly be pressured to continually do better and better and that we are never satisfied. Each little step forward must be richly rewarded. Experience has taught us that the horse develops step by step and the time each step takes can vary enormously. For example, developing self-carriage and suppleness doesn't only take a long time, it can take years. At the same time if the horse is to learn how to dance ballet he

shouldn't begin the training too late.

THE SECOND STEP

When the horse is three years old, in most cases it is time to carefully begin the work under saddle. Once the horse has been started under saddle, which can take from 2 weeks to sometimes as much as 3 months depending on the horse's ability and temperament, he should be able to:

- Lead correctly, and be shown in hand
- Willingly pick up all four feet
- Confidently accept the bridle, saddle and leg wraps
- Be longed on a cavesson in walk and trot as well as make transitions between these gaits in both directions
- Be ridden on straight lines in walk, trot and canter
- Be able to turn by following the rider's weight and if necessary, a leading rein
- Be able to stand still with a rider on his back (however, this is not something that should be practiced a lot with a young horse, as it is stressful both physically and mentally)
- Be able to go on short trail rides, preferably in the company of an older, steady horse

Exactly how old the horse should be before he is started under saddle depends on how well developed he is. Some horses are so slow to mature that we must wait until they are three and a half or maybe four. Many horses grow until they are six, and during this time you must pay a lot of attention to the signals they give you. The horse does not have to be completely finished growing before he is ridden, but he does need to rest during the times when he has growth spurts. It is normal for the horse to feel less balanced during these growth periods and he may get sore more easily as a result, which can legitimately result in the horse becoming less willing to work. If you get one or several of these signals from your horse, you should immediately stop work and give him some time off—at least two weeks and sometimes up to six weeks. The exact length of time he will need to rest depends on the horse. When this situation arises, you must re-evaluate your horse thoroughly and use your common sense.

Once you feel your horse is finished with this step of his education it is a good idea to give him a month's vacation. The horse needs time for all the new things he has learned to sink in and for his muscles to develop.

In the old days the young horses were called "First Year Remounts" and "Second Year Remounts," and I would like to continue this tradition here. We will now assume that the horse is

started under saddle, has had a good month's rest and is ready to start his education as a First Year Remount.

THE THIRD STEP: FIRST YEAR REMOUNT

GOALS AFTER THE FIRST YEAR OF TRAINING

- The horse has learned to organize his body to keep his center of gravity consistently under the rider's center of gravity. He is in equilibrium and works with good balance. He works in the correct frame. This does not mean that he is very collected. We help the young horse to stay in balance by riding him more forward, not by demanding a lot of collection.
- The horse has learned his ABC's - that is to say, the aids (the language).
- The horse understands how to reach forward to the outside rein on circles in both directions.
- The horse can be made straight and stays in balance while going on straight lines as well as on a variety of figures.
- Towards the end of this training stage the horse has learned to bend a little around the rider's inside leg.
- The horse has learned to reach to the bit in response to the driving aids.
- The horse can make transitions between walk and trot, and understands the aids for the canter depart.
- The horse can be ridden over cavalettis.
- At every stage, a lot of importance is placed on the horse learning to always keep a steady tempo.
- As part of other movements, the horse has learned to stand still with a rider on his back, or in other words, make a halt. He has also learned to move away from the rider's leg to a degree that one day will lead to leg yielding.

During this stage of the training a lot of weight is placed on the horse becoming receptive to the idea of learning new things. This means the horse develops the right attitude towards work, which requires a combination of trust, respect and a willingness to work. As a result, he understands the difference between work time and time off, and he becomes interested and learns to solve problems.

At the end of the first year under saddle you should begin to see that the muscles over the topline have begun to develop. The horse can work in a round frame which, as time passes, will become a strong spring that simultaneously pushes the body forward and lifts the forehead.

If you feel you have landed on a plateau or something is not working correctly, remember (and this applies to all of us), back to the basics!

THE FOURTH STEP: THE SECOND YEAR REMOUNT

GOALS AFTER THE SECOND YEAR OF TRAINING

- Transitions are now practiced with somewhat higher expectations of collection.
- The horse should bend around the rider's inside leg while on bent tracks.
- The horse can execute a 10m circle in balance.
- The horse can do a leg yield.
- The horse can do a turn on the haunches.
- The horse can do counter canter.
- The horse can lengthen and shorten the strides at the trot while maintaining a steady tempo.
- Work on lateral movements has begun.
- The horse can stay straight on straight lines as well as on bent tracks.
- The horse can maintain a slight degree of collection for brief periods.
- Harmony between horse and rider is established.
- An experienced rider may now begin to teach the horse flying changes.
- The horse is now considered to be at 2nd Level.

After two years of training we should see the horse has further developed his muscles. His balance has improved so much he can now show his natural gaits even when he is carrying a rider on his back. The frame has become more consistent. The horse works between the aids and on the bit.

The time between ages five and six is a time when the horse is especially prone to injury. I am not completely sure why this is so. Maybe it is because the horse is still growing. Maybe it is because we are increasing our demands on him. But if the horse, especially during this period, feels different than normal—perhaps less willing to work and doesn't want to go forward, or develops irregularities in his gaits—the only thing to do is to have a vet look at him, treat him if necessary and then give him some time off. If an injury is not identified, another idea is to take the horse out on trails, let the horse have some time away from dressage work in the arena to have some fun.

THE FIFTH STEP

The horse is now about five and a half years old and we will assume his education is going according to plan. Between five and a half and seven years is the stage when we increase collecting and muscle developing work. The goal for this time period is basically to bring the horse to Fourth Level.

By now the horse should:

- Be able to do half pass in trot and canter
- Make flying changes on a straight line
- Have developed more self-carriage
- Stay in collection over a longer distance
- Maintain straightness—that is, stay equally balanced in both directions, and equally strong and supple on both sides
- Be able to go through corners correctly
- Maintain a steady tempo in all three gaits
- Be able to do extended trot and canter
- Be able to do collected trot and canter
- Have started work on the canter pirouette

By this time the self-carriage is more developed. The horse is working with more push from behind and a lighter forehand. The frame is stable, the horse is between the aids and on the bit. As a result of the increased self-carriage, the horse now looks freer in all three gaits. He responds to small, fine aids.

THE SIXTH STEP

The sixth step is the road to Prix St. Georges and Intermediare I. The horse is now between six and a half and seven and a half years old.

In this period:

- The self-carriage is more developed, which shows up in the lateral work and in the extended gaits.
- The horse maintains his balance, tempo and carriage during transitions.

- Turn on the haunches now becomes walk pirouette.
- Canter pirouettes become established.
- The horse learns to make tempi changes in every fourth, third and second stride.
- The horse learns to do changes of hands in half pass in trot and canter (zig-zags).
- Work in piaffe and passage is started.

At this point in the education we should see a horse that is stable, focused on his work, carries himself correctly and with expression—he now has that “*Here I come, look at me!*” presence about him.

THE SEVENTH STEP

The horse is now between eight and ten years old. The goal for those horses that have the talent to go on is now Intermediare II and Grand Prix. It is at this point where many drop out. Only a few horses have the ability to make it to this level; they have to be something between a super athlete and a prima ballerina, and have the temperament, energy and willingness to do the work that is required at this level.

In this period:

- The half passes are ridden with a higher degree of collection and angle.
- Piaffe and passage and the transitions between them are established.
- The horse learns to change in every stride.
- The training focuses a lot on being able to vary the frame, stride length, and tempo.

When the horse has reached Grand Prix he is a horse that has developed the strength to execute all the movements with ease. The engagement of the hind legs results in an obvious lightness of the forehand. Horse and rider basically dance together in full harmony. The horse responds to small, almost invisible aids.

A rider who is really successful at educating his horse will produce a horse that is proud to show what he can do.

A horse that can do Grand Prix at ten years old should be thought of as a young horse who still needs a lot of training and experience before he reaches his full potential.

The education of the horse never ends. There is always more to develop and polish to get as closed to perfect as possible.

But if you want to get as far as possible in your own and your horse's education, you must learn the theory in depth. You have to set goals for both of you in terms of training and competitions. You must be organized and willing to put the time into it that it takes. If you can do this you will have an exciting voyage.

I want to end this chapter by wishing you and your horse the best of luck and success on your voyage.