

BACKING THE OLDER HORSE

There may be a time when a trainer is presented with an older horse (over the age of four) who, for one reason or another, has not been backed. Most trainers would strive to find out exactly why the horse has not been backed earlier, perhaps there was a required period of rest due to an injury or illness and in this case it would be absolutely necessary for a trained veterinary surgeon to confirm that the animal is fully sound and fit for work and weight carrying before any attempt is made to introduce a rider.

Perhaps the horse has been a brood mare and again, for reasons due to infertility or such she is no longer required or is unable to produce foals and has been sent for backing.

Perhaps the horse has been running “wild” as a native pony and has been rounded up for sale (such as Exmoor, or Welsh ponies sometimes are).

Sometimes however, the horse has simply been neglected and left to fend for themselves until such times the owner decides to get rid of the horse and finds that they can only get a better price if the animal is backed.

More worrying for Trainers are the horses who have been “backed” in their early years then “turned away” and just need reminding of the business of carrying a rider. I worked with one mare who had been “turned away” for 6 years. However, in this case the owner was completely honest with the problems incurred in backing her (the owner ended up in hospital and the horse in ditch at one point) and the decision had been made to turn her away till she matured a bit then try again. I was very grateful for the forewarning given by the owner and as a result we were able to retrain the mare and iron out her issues she had shown when younger. As a result she has turned into a very nice, willing and showy riding horse that the owner’s daughter rides.

In all cases, when presented with an older horse to back most Trainers are very aware of the difficulties that can be faced with such a task. I know you are now all wondering what the big deal is, surely it is easy to back a horse at any age? Like all things connected with horses, backing the older animal does not always go smoothly and the reason this is the case is due to the very nature of the horse as a species.

As discussed in previous articles, horses are, to all intents and purposes, slaves to our whims and as such we expect total obedience to our requests. By now you will understand that everything we expect the horse to do is contrary to their nature and they have to consciously override their basic instincts every day of their lives. With the best will in the world we cannot ignore the fact that this “control” is very tenuous and can easily and readily be broken. With this in mind we must teach the horse to listen to our requests to such an extent that it becomes second nature to them, almost “programme” them to override their instinctive responses, we call this programming “learning”.

Nature provides the horse the ability to learn. A foal will be constantly learning about his language, his environment, his social etiquette and his world around him. This learning takes years and the horse has the ability to build up a vast store of information that allows them to survive in the wild. But this ability to soak up information like a sponge has a time limit. In truth a horse of any age can learn new things but their personality, their values and their outlook on life are all formed in the early years of their experiences and this window of opportunity starts to close as the years creep by.

In a wild herd the young colts stay with the family till they begin to mature. The older mares and the main stallion will drive them to the fringes of the herd at around the age of three, but in truth they will have already started to form “teenage” gangs on the outskirts of the herd from two onwards, testing their strength and honing their skills with the other colts. These teenage gangs will eventually break away from the main family and form bachelor groups where they form a gang with a very clear hierarchy and leader. The leader of the bachelor group will be next in line should an older stallion begin to fail and be unable to keep his mares and it has sometimes been seen that these groups work as a team to “steal” young mares from another herd.

In domestication we need the horse to see us as the leader of our small herd and the best ages to imprint this leadership on the male horse is between the ages of three to five. Nature makes the horse want to follow an older or wiser horse during these years so they can learn about life fully. A mature stallion in the wild will begin to steal mares for himself at around seven years of age onwards and by this time will be pretty sure about what he wants and how to get things done and he will not take kindly to being told otherwise. For a Trainer to teach a horse to obey and carry a human and accept him as leader then it is much easier to do so between three and five years of age before his personality and mind is set. Of course, like people, not all horses want to be in charge and not all want to be the leader. In these cases it is much easier to back and train beyond the age of five, but all Trainers are aware of the “boss” horse who will take a lot of convincing and this is made harder with age.

Mares on the other hand have a much steeper learning curve. Many mares begin to come into season as two year olds and may well have a foal at foot by the time they are three. Because of this a mare will learn much faster than a colt, they will mature earlier and have different outlooks on life. The urge to wander and explore and leave their family starts at around two (usually coinciding with their first season) and this is when they are most likely to be stolen by another stallion. By the age of three, if they do not already have a foal then they usually will have left the family group and joined another herd or stallion. With a foal will come a huge step in her maturity and the window of opportunity for training will begin to close. There are many mares who are put in foal as three year olds deliberately to make them “grow up” and “settle down” and this generally works but by giving the mare the responsibility of being a mother can throw up a whole series of different challenges for the Trainer.

In the wild very few young mares will be dominant leaders of the group and they usually have to work their way up the ranks as their experience grows. This is one of the main advantages a Trainer has. A mare between three and five will be relatively straight forward to train (even if she does have a dominant streak) but once they reach the age of six onwards then they can be really difficult to back. This is because nature has prepared the mare to be a responsible mother (who will hopefully have already reared at least two successful offspring by age six). They will take charge and make decisions that may mean life or death to her foal, in other words she is automatically programmed to be a leader. Even if she has never had a foal, a mare over the age of six will have a clearly established personality and ideas about what she wants and this may not agree with your ideas at all.

It can be extraordinarily difficult to back an older mare, but, like geldings, not all mares want to be in charge and they can be persuaded to play the game. The real problems arise with an older and dominant mare and to successfully back such a horse takes a lot of skill, a lot of understanding and a lot of compromise.

I was presented with a six year old mare for backing who had been “started” at four, had done a bit of hacking then had been turned away whilst the owner had a baby. Shortly into the training programme it became very clear that this mare had very definite ideas about what you could and couldn’t ask her to do. If she was attached to you via a lead rope or lunge line then she would do as you asked (she had been led and handled a lot), however, if you asked her to move around a school or pen loose (in other words she had a choice of whether or not to accept you as leader) she simply attacked. This mare would bite and strike at you with her front legs then spin and reverse into you showing you both of her heels. She said in no uncertain terms that when loose she was her own boss and this was a major problem when being ridden. It became apparent after the first (and only!) incident where we discovered the problem, that this had also been the case then she was first backed as a four year old. The mare had been fine when being led but if unclipped she was highly unpredictable, happy to go along with what you said as long as it went along with what she wanted. It finally became clear that she had in fact thrown the rider and this was one of the reasons she had been turned away. Unfortunately for the owner this is one instance where turning the horse away made matters worse as she was quite happy with her life and saw absolutely no reason to listen to a human. There are very few options open to a trainer in this situation and due to the aggressiveness and severity of the attack I was not prepared to risk any of my staff in this case as it was clear the horse had no regard for the human and was trying to land every strike made at the person, these were not empty threats. The horse was given back to the owner, I’m afraid I do not know what became of her.

On a lighter note there are many, many older horses (mares included) who have been easily and happily backed, some even in their teenage years! What is important for the Trainer backing the horse

is a clear understanding that with an older horse you must make every request reasonable and negotiate every step of the way. You will not get automatic acceptance for what you ask as the older horse often knows better and understands more clearly what they are being asked to give up. I recently spoke with a lady regarding her newly backed 12 year old dominant mare who, despite one small hiccup, has been a sweetheart and willing to work. The hiccup came after several weeks of being ridden the lady was trotting along the road with friends and heading towards home. The mare got a little excited about the whole experience and forgetting about the rider on board threw an enormous buck and took off for home. Now all of you with youngsters out there understand that this is one of the hazards we all face but with a youngster they usually would stay with the other horses and hopefully with the rider, however, in this case the mare, being the boss legged it home on her own! The lady understands very well how to approach such an incident and will take steps to remind her horse that she should listen to the rider in future, even if it is such good fun and through time I'm sure they will have a superb partnership.

So to all of you out there who are thinking about throwing a saddle on the oldie out the back, be aware of how nature has prepared your horse for life as a prey animal and approach your oldie with respect and caution.