

What is a good 'foundation' on a horse?

By John Moore

Author's note: This is the first of a series of articles that are currently appearing in the Swedish riding magazine Hästfynd. Although some of the breeds are different in various parts of the world, the basics of horse behaviour and putting a solid foundation on a horse are the same no matter where you live. The criteria listed at the end of this article have been extremely helpful to me personally, and to my clients in judging the progress of a horse, as well as the effectiveness of a training program.

The training and gentling that is done early in a horse's experience with people, as part of a regular training program and everyday handling, is called the "foundation". Just like a building with a weak foundation, a horse that doesn't have a strong foundation is set up to have problems later on. These problems may show up as behaviour or manoeuvrability problems, or both.

Building a good foundation into your horse begins with your earliest interaction with it, and requires that you have a good training program that works, and that you are consistent. Often times we don't think of our casual interaction with our horse as "training", but in reality it is. It is important to remember that every time you interact with your horse you are training it.

Most people realize that for a horse to perform well at dressage, show jumping, reining, cutting or trail riding it must be taught the basics of these styles in a certain order, from the beginning. This is called building a foundation into your horse for your chosen style of riding. However, sometimes we concentrate so much on the parts of the foundation that prepare the horse for a specific event or style of riding that we forget some very important things that should also be part of a horse's foundation.

For example, it's nice to have a horse that can win the reining class or the hunt seat class at the show, but it's not so nice to have a fight with that horse when it won't go into the trailer after the show. There are lots of show horses who win in their classes but who won't stand still while the rider mounts, or are difficult to lead because they run over you, or who bite, kick, are difficult to shoe, tough to load or are hard to catch. There are also lots of trail horses who have these same vices in addition to spooking at objects along the trail, not crossing water or jiggling all the way back to the trailer. And these are just a few of the vices that horses can develop, but are generally avoidable if they are taken into account while building the foundation into the horse during training, from the beginning. They can and should be dealt with as part of the early and continuing foundation work along with the rest of the training program.

The biggest benefit of teaching the horse things like standing still while being saddled, walking into the trailer calmly and easily, not being spooky, and being easy to catch is that it makes it so much easier to teach the horse the more complicated manoeuvres of dressage, jumping, reining or dealing with new experiences along the trail, because the horse will have learned during this process to listen to you, trust you and respect you.

Some people have the ability to start their own horse and hopefully build a solid foundation into it that will prepare it for all of the things they will do with it for the rest of its life. Other people may choose to send their horse to a trainer who is more experienced at building a good foundation. If this is the case, I strongly recommend that the owner also take lessons and attend the training sessions as much as possible. They should ask questions and educate themselves all they can so that the good foundation the trainer puts into the horse will stay there and not be lost because the owner couldn't maintain it.

I have included here a list of things that a horse with a solid foundation should be able to do after 30 to 45 days. Some of these things can be taught immediately upon starting the horse's training. Other things will take a bit longer to develop, but certainly should be reasonably established in the horse's behavior within the first 30 to 45 days. Whether you are training your own horse or paying a trainer to start your horse for you, these things should be developing in the horse as a result of the training program. It is important to realize that these things must be taught in a certain order, and some things must be taught before other things can be taught.

It is also important to remember that a horse who has been handled or ridden in any way has started building its foundation. And a horse who has learned something undesirable can push the 30 to 45 day time frame way beyond 45 days, because you will not only be trying to teach something to the horse, you will be trying to simultaneously unteach something. And once a behaviour has become a habit (which happens remarkably fast) it will pop up over and over for a long time, and in some cases may never totally go away. This is why a good start on a good foundation is so important.

Remember, you are training even when you think you're not training. The horse is always learning, and any information you give it, good or bad, consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally, becomes part of the horse's foundation. So, look the list over carefully and ask yourself if your horse has a solid foundation or if there are some areas where you and your horse still need some work. In upcoming articles we will discuss each of the things on this list and teach you how to get them to happen.

A horse with a good foundation should...

- be easy to catch
- not try to run over you or past you when you are leading it
- have a healthy respect for your space without being fearful of you
- not bite or threaten to bite
- stand tied quietly
- not be unreasonably nervous, jittery or spooky of ordinary things
- lower head and open mouth easily to be bridled
- stand still while being saddled
- stand still while being mounted
- trailer load willingly and easily
- ride in trailer quietly
- not come out of trailer until asked
- should come out of trailer quietly
- stand still for the farrier or veterinarian
- move out easily
- move with impulsion
- travel in all gaits (stand, walk, trot, canter, gallop and back-up) on a loose rein without trying to run away with you
- stop easily according to his level of training, with a good head and body position
- back up easily and in cadence, with a proper head set
- have a soft feel
- have good lateral flexion
- have an understanding and respond correctly to a direct and indirect rein
- have an understanding and respond correctly to a leading and supporting rein
- have an understanding and respond correctly to proper leg cues
- be able to laterally move hindquarters, with forward impulsion, from the riding position as well as with the handler on the ground
- sidepass
- have an understanding and be able to perform basic lead changes
- not buck or rear
- have a willing attitude
- be sensitive to cues while being insensitive to everyday things