

# STARTING A HORSE UNDER SADDLE

By Sarah Fisher

Starting a horse under saddle is extremely rewarding. The knowledge that you are helping to develop a confident, safe, ridden equine that is happy in his work is one of the many highs of working in the equestrian field. However, as well as being extremely satisfying the art of educating any horse is a huge responsibility.

Creative thinking and patience are two key ingredients. Training at any age and at any level should be fun for all concerned. The horse should enjoy his education and be a willing, keen participant. Resistance comes from resistance and horses that buck when saddled or go into freeze are usually carrying tension around the girth area, through the neck and shoulders and across the loins. Foaling, rough play, slipping in the field and so on can set up tension patterns right from birth which can influence how the horse responds to the saddling process. The growth rate will also affect the natural balance of the youngster and with more demands being placed on horses at an ever decreasing age, he is adapting to changes in his mouth, feet, and posture at the exact time that he is being asked to accept a bit, saddle and rider.

By observing how the horse moves and how he is developing both physically and emotionally steps can be taken to reduce tension through the body. This will diminish the chances of the horse developing unwanted behaviour. Fear, pain and tension limit the capacity for learning and it stands to reason that horses that are tight and braced through the body will be more reactive under saddle. They are more likely to spook, nap, rear, freeze, shoot forward and buck than horses that are supple and relaxed. It is far easier incorporating techniques that stop unwanted behaviours from developing than spending time later on addressing learned and established reactions to being ridden.

In an ideal world, horses should really be started later rather than earlier allowing time for the adult teeth to come through

and for the skeleton to mature. Time spent working in hand using TTEAM exercises and body work that help to improve mind body awareness is invaluable and dramatically shortens the length of time it takes to introduce the rider. Working in hand helps the horse to develop true self carriage and is mentally stimulating without being over taxing. During the period of ground work, the horse can be taught to negotiate a variety of patterns of poles laid on the ground, can be taught to walk over a variety of different surfaces such as wooden boards, plastic sheeting, rubber matting, and soft surfaces, can be led from both sides, and can learn how to use his body in a more effective way without having to compensate for the balance of the rider on his back.

Skeyton Matthew is a stunning seven year old Shire stallion owned by Steven and Tracey Haines of Newton St Loe, near Bath. He came to Tilley Farm to be started under saddle in January 2007 and we were asked if we thought there would be any chance of him being ready to compete at the Shire Horse Society Show in Peterborough in the middle of March. This gave us just eight weeks in total to prepare an un-backed horse for two ridden showing classes and if possible, a dressage class.

## Observations

Watching how the horse moves is a vital part of understanding and addressing any difficulties they may have. Having been shown in hand for the majority of his life Matthew was very one sided. He carried tension through the right side of his neck and as a result was short on the left fore which is typical of horses that are handled primarily from one side. He found it genuinely hard to soften and release his neck and asking him to flex to the right resulted in a pinning of the ears and a swishing of his tail. Horses that respond in this way are not being dominant. They are merely expressing their



Photo 1: Matthew is a 7 year-old Shire stallion who had been shown in hand but never trained under saddle.



Photo 2: Using the Journey of the Homing Pigeon, a handler on each side of the horse, teaches the horse about spatial awareness to avoid crowding, giving information to both sides of the horses brain and encourage straightness.

concern, confusion or discomfort and getting after a horse for this behaviour is unfair. At eighteen hands high, entire and fully mature it would have also been rather unrealistic to 'show him who was boss' and TTEAM adopts the philosophy that it is far better to work with a few pounds of brain than half a ton of body weight.

By having a handler on both sides it was possible to teach Matthew how to organise his body in a more appropriate way and enabled us to work through the ground exercises without being squashed as he had a tendency to fall into the handler on the left side. Crowding and barging are linked to poor spatial awareness and lack of co-ordination. As co-ordination and confidence are linked, improving self-carriage in the young horse is a vital part of starting the horse under saddle. Leading Matthew between two people also enabled each person to take it in turns to work on his neck and shoulders with a combination of TTEAM and Connected Riding body work exercises. These exercises can be done whilst the horse is stationary or on the move. It can sometimes be more appropriate to work on a horse whilst he is moving if he is easily triggered or aroused by body contact.

Teaching any horse to lead between two people is a very beneficial exercise. It not only habituates a horse to be led from both sides but can encourage straightness and balance. It teaches horses to walk in their own space and not follow or lean on their handler for support and enables people to work with reactive horses safely and quietly. In addition it is also useful for horses that are concerned about walking between narrow spaces, horses that have concerns about being handled by more than one person, teaching a horse to stand quietly in balance and improving handling skills and communication.

Matthew was worked in hand for the first week. We incorporated a variety of pole work into his ground work routine and taught him to work through the labyrinth, a simple and highly effective exercise for all horses made with a pattern of six poles laid on the ground in a specific way. The horse learns to release through the poll, neck and ribs which in turn helps the hindquarters to engage. Naturally it was hard for Mat-



Photo 3: The sliding saddle pad helps the horse overcome concerns about things sliding on his back. The horse is asked to stop as the pad starts to slide and is given a bit of food off of the pad.

thew at first but he quickly learned to negotiate the poles with ease. As he worked through the labyrinth his confidence in his ability to turn right began to grow and he became quieter and more settled when handled from the right.

This exercise is usually the first one we teach the horse as it also has a very calming effect allowing a busy youngster (or distracted Shire!) to settle and focus when he is first taken into the arena. It is an exercise that is used throughout the starting process as leading the horse back through the poles once a saddle has been introduced will give you vital information as to how he is truly accepting the sensation of carrying the saddle. If the horse has any level of concern he will rush, panic or freeze as he is asked to negotiate his way around the poles even if he was able to move happily in a straight line or circle when saddled. It is far safer and kinder for all parties if these worries are noted before the rider attempts to get on board.

Every time we introduce any equipment to the horse we influence his balance and the series of ground work exercises enable you to see at which point the horse begins to struggle. When the horse says he won't do something it is because he actually can't. Listening to the horse helps to establish trust and enables you to understand the horse on every level. By watching for the smallest signals of concern you can stop what you are doing or asking the horse to do, give him a break, go back to something that the horse understood, or make the exercise easier. This will have far reaching benefits and a good foundation is paramount for a happy confident horse.

TTEAM uses a unique approach in teaching horses to work on long lines. Instead of attaching the lines straight to a bit or head collar, we start with two long lines attached together around the base of the horse's neck. This teaches the horse to balance by drawing his centre of gravity backwards and releasing the neck and back. Long lines are heavy and can encourage a young or unbalanced horse to work behind the vertical if they are attached to the horse's head in the early days. As Matthew was so habituated to working in hand and listening to the handler by his head, the chest line driving was



Photo 4: Once a horse is comfortable with the pad sliding off of both sides it can then be slid off of the hindquarters. It is done carefully so as not to scare the horse.

a method we could use at every stage of his training when required to teach him to move forward from a signal on his sides.

Teaching the Sliding Saddle Cloth is another useful step in the backing process. With one person leading the horse, a second person walks next to the horse. The saddle cloth is pulled gently from the horses back and is dropped to the floor. A small amount of food is placed on the cloth and the horse quickly learns to stop and turn to take the treat. The saddle cloth is pulled off from both sides and also over the hindquarters and this exercise teaches the horse to stop calmly if he ever feels the saddle (or rider) slip backwards or sideways.

By the end of the first week Matthew was carrying a rider and the ground exercises were repeated with the rider on board. The ridden sessions were kept short for the first fortnight and he continued to go from strength to strength. Matthew was happily hacking around the farm by week four. His balance under saddle was perfect and we alternated between ridden work, body work and ground work for the remainder of his stay at Tilley



Photo 5: Neck line driving is used to help teach the horse to stop through his body. Since Matthew could easily come behind the vertical this helps him learn to open his throatlatch and lengthen his neck.



Photo 6: By The end of the first week Matthew was carrying a rider. Sessions were kept short for the first fortnight.

Farm to ensure he stayed supple, comfortable and happy in his work.

Matthew went to the Shire Horse Society Show and ridden by Lucinda Stockley took first and two seconds in his classes. He behaved impeccably throughout the two day show and gained many admirers. He went on to win the Ridden Championship – not bad for a horse that had only been ridden for seven weeks! Matthew has continued to do well in his ridden classes and won his first affiliated Dressage competition in April. He is the perfect gentleman in hand and under saddle and is the first Super Premium Shire Stallion to be competed under saddle in the UK.

For more information on Matthew and his Shire friends [visitwww.ellstonshires.co.uk](http://www.ellstonshires.co.uk).



Photo 7: Matthew was a star when ridden out in the fields.



Photo 8: Seven weeks after he was started under saddle Matthew, with Lucinda Stockley on board, competed in the Shire Horse Society Show and won a first and two seconds in his classes. He is the first Super Premium Shire Stallion to be competed under saddle in the UK.