

May 2010 Beyond the Basics

Colt to Horsemanship Series – Part III

First Saddling – Dead Cow on Board!

In the progression of bringing a young horse along, the first saddling should be a non-issue. However, it seems that our human desire to speed life up and accomplish tasks in record time, all the while missing critical foundational elements often comes into play when throwing the saddle on. Once again, as with most horsemanship tasks, saddling should not be about speed, but rather the desire to establish good habits that will create a lifetime of good, positive, and safe experiences for you and for your horse.

Preparing the Horse & Rider for Dustless Saddling:

(Note: Most of this article will discuss the first saddling using a Western-style saddle. However, all of the elements still apply to English-type gear.)

It is critical that prior to the first saddling that you have sensitized the horse to objects coming in and out of his field of vision. The ground school exercises discussed in Part II of this series are a prerequisite to the goal of saddling. Of particular importance are the skills developed by tossing the end of the lead rope or the popper of the lunge whip as your horse moves easily around you on a circle. Remember to start from a low place and toss to a higher place, allowing the rope to settle on various parts of the horse. Accomplish this first with movement, and then change your intentions to see if the horse could stand while you perform the same tossing exercise. Working from above the horse, off the fence or atop another horse, is another great maneuver that prepares the colt for objects appearing in and out of his vision.

Other important preparation exercises include:

- Ground riding your colt, in the same position that your saddle will sit, try reaching over, leaning slightly on the horse, as you flow around the pen
- Placing the lariat or ring rope around the girth area, applying a little squeeze, first as the horse moves and second at a stand still. (Caution: The lariat or ring rope may well find itself back around the flank area, so be prepared for the reaction! Remember to keep a 'feel' on the rope until the colt makes a change (Example: A change from bucking to a trot) and then release the pressure right before the change occurs. If you let go while the horse is agitated, you'll teach him the wrong thing, and he'll look to bucking as an appropriate release.)
- Tossing the saddle pad or a larger blanket or tarp, again with movement first, and then change your intentions to ask to horse to stand still while you bring the blanket from a low place to a high place, and brush him all over. His feet should stay still, with slack in the lead rope.

“Please Stand, While I Throw This Dead Cow”:

When you think about it, we ask quite a bit of a young horse when we begin saddling. How would you feel about having a dead cow on your back, when the only other thing that has touched you in that place was your Mom's head and neck? I know what it feels like to put on a wet swimsuit and try to get everything to fit right. Now add a tight corset to this first-time experience and you begin to get a picture of what the colt must feel. Take your time and apply good preparation skills!

Saddle Prep

- Latigo secured for easy release
- Back cinch & girth secured
- Breast collar secured over saddle seat
- Off-billet & latigo quality checked
- Cincha/Girth appropriate size for colt



Make the Saddle the Resting Spot:

I want to create a situation where the horse is comfortable waiting and resting by the saddle. I will first place the saddle on its side and cuddle the stirrups up inside, so the horse could not easily step in a stirrup. I'll help facilitate this by next placing the pad over the top. Now it's time for a little ground work. Walk-trot transitions and maybe even a little sideways on a circle...all around the saddle. When you rest, encourage the horse to stop with his head over the saddle and give slack in the lead. Once your colt begins to hunt up the saddle as his resting spot, you are ready for the next step.

Use Your Pad as a Brush:

I find it effective to have a saddle pad that is easy to handle, that I can toss with one-hand, then put a little 'feel' on to use it like a big 'ol brush. Toss on the back, rump, and neck - from both sides - in a rhythmic manner. Don't be bashful! For the last toss before saddling, let the pad land a little ahead of where it will eventually sit under the saddle. Allow the lead rope to rest in the crook of your arm, and if the colt must move off, go with him, but keep his head slightly tipped towards you. Start over if need be, until the horse can stand quietly while you toss the pad.

Discus Swing Saddling...No Lifting Required:

There is an art to politely putting the saddle on a horse's back. It involves placing the saddle on your hip, in a balanced manner, where the sheepskin guts are turned towards your hip, and your arm holds the cantle in a relatively straight position, similar to a thrower holding the discus. The idea is to rotate your body and the hip furthest away from the horse, as you stand perpendicular to the shoulder and facing the tail. With the action of the discus throw, you'll swing the saddle up and towards the shoulders, as you rotate your hip on a half-circle. You want to 'place' the saddle on your horse's back, like you would place a hat on your head.

Once the saddle is on the colt be prepared to move with the horse, holding on to the gullet, and keeping yourself in a position that if you needed to take the saddle off - you could. This is a critical point. If the saddle slips off you may have created a situation that will take quite some time to reassure the horse that the dead cow on his back was a good thing!



Apprentice Sarah Seymour – First Saddling for a little sorrel colt from California.



Changing Sides & Getting Prepared for the Girth:

Take your time at this point! Lift the saddle and pad a little bit to allow air in and let everything settle into position in line with the horse's hair running from his ears to his rump. Check to see that your saddle strings are hanging free. If you saddled from the left side of the horse, politely move to the other side by placing the lead rope on your arm nearest the colt as you look out past his nose. Reach under the neck and place the side of your hand on the outside of the jowl furthest away from you. Lean your body weight away from the horse, and ask him to change eyes by bringing his nose between your shoulder and over your elbow. Once he yields and therefore sees you in his right eye, simply pet down the neck and prepare the right side of the saddle.



As you let the back cinch and girth out of their keeper, be polite about the situation. Stay close to the horse so that you are always ready to find the gullet to balance the saddle should the horse have to move. Before returning to the left side of the horse, check the girth to see that it will be balanced on each side once you get the cincha tightened. Upon returning politely to the left side of the colt, undo the half hitch that is securing your latigo. With your lead rope on your left arm, gently reach under the girth area, feeling with the back of your hand, and watching the hind feet of the horse. While holding the girth, draw the tip of the latigo through the buckle in a smooth motion. If you have prepared the latigo correctly, it will unfold easily. Do not drop the cincha. Keep a feel on it to give the horse a little security. If there is anytime to hurry a little bit in the first saddling...this might be the spot. You need to get the saddle on tight enough that if the horse should have to leave, he won't take your beautiful saddle for a ride around his belly. You'll be happy that you have a latigo at least 6.5 feet long, so that you can go through the lower buckle three-times, making it easy to tighten the cincha without jerking. (Reference: www.tnhorsemanship.com/articles/ 08 July Beyond the Basics - Part I Knots) Secure the latigo with a quick-release knot. Next find the back cinch in the same manner as the girth, and make sure you tighten it snuggle against the colt's belly. You don't want a hind foot to get caught.

Now you are ready for the final, and perhaps most dangerous part of the saddling...securing the breast collar. Reach over the top of the neck with your right hand, exchanging the left side of the collar into your left hand as it reaches under the neck. Once you have secured the collar to your saddle at the shoulder, reach between the legs to secure it to the girth. This is tricky, because you are in a bad position should the horse move off. Pet - talk - rub and get it done! I like to use a breast collar on the first saddling due to the fact that the colt will often let out quite a bit of air as he moves off for the first time. The breast collar will keep a loose-girth saddle from going under the belly of the horse.



Move Him Off:

As you ask the horse to move off, be ready! He may see being on top of you as the best place to be once he realizes there is a dead cow on his back! Be prepared to get bigger, put your hands up if necessary and create pressure that gets his feet moving. (Note: You may handle this a bit differently when dealing with the nature of a stallion.) Once he is moving nicely having traveled in different gaits both directions, let him rest with you, and find comfort with the saddle, which is now on his back. (Note: Find the entire slideshow of saddling at:



<http://picasaweb.google.com/atrindle/FirstSaddlingWithNoDust#>)

Decommissioning - Unsaddling with Purpose:

Unsaddling politely and with clear purpose is just as important as the saddling process. Remember to take your time and that everything comes "off" in reverse order from how it went "on". (i.e Breast collar, back cinch, girth, secure latigo, secure cincha and back cinch, roll saddle off with reverse discus rotation, secure stirrups within the saddle, and cover with the blanket.) Pet and praise profusely!

