

“A MUST-READ FOR THOSE WISHING TO OWN AND LOVE A RETIRED RACEHORSE.”
—Kristin Werner Leshney, Senior Counsel for The Jockey Club and Administrator of the Thoroughbred Incentive Program

BEYOND THE TRACK

RETRAINING THE
THOROUGHBRED
from Racehorse to
Riding Horse
NEW EDITION



ANNA FORD with Amber Heintzberger and Sarah E. Coleman
Thoroughbred Program Director | New Vocations Racehorse Adoption Program

■ Contents

xi	Foreword by Karen O'Connor	
xiii	Foreword by George H. Morris	
1	Introduction	
	CHAPTER 1	
4	Bred to Run: What Racehorses Know	
5	Understanding the OTTB	
8	The Younger Years	
9	Prepping for Sale	
14	Breaking and Training	
17	A Day at the Racetrack	
21	Race Day	
24	Researching the Horse's History	
27	Planning Ahead	
	CHAPTER 2	
28	End of the Race: Now What?	
29	Reasons for Retirement	
29	Injury	
30	Competitive Decline	
30	Reproduction	
30	Retirement Options	
31	Becoming Breeding Stock	
33	Slaughter—The Grim Reality	
33	For Sale By Trainer: Finding a Horse at the Track	
35	The Adoption Option	
	CHAPTER 3	
42	Common Lameness and Health Issues	
43	Pre-Purchase Exams	
43	The Adopted OTTB	
43	The OTTB Purchased at the Track or at Auction	
44	Underlying Problems	
44	A Simple Soundness Evaluation	
45	General Impression	
45	Legs	
47	Feet	
47	Overall Body	
48	When to Get Help	
48	Injuries and Conditions Commonly Seen in OTTBs	
49	Bucked Shin	
49	Tendonitis (Bowed Tendon)	
50	Strained Suspensory Ligament	
51	Splint	
51	Osselets	
52	Sesamoid Fracture	
53	Knee Fracture	
53	Bone Chip (Knee or Fetlock)	
54	Curb	
55	Common Hoof Issues in OTTBs	
55	Bruises	
56	Abscesses	
57	Hoof Cracks	
59	Other Health Issues Coming Off the Track	
59	Dealing with Gastric Ulcers	
60	Getting Your OTTB Healthy and Sound	
60	Rest	
60	Shoeing	
60	Medication	
61	Cold Therapy/Hydrotherapy	
61	Shock Wave Therapy	
61	Surgery	
62	Alternative Therapies	
	CHAPTER 4	
66	The Transition to a New Lifestyle	
67	Planning Ahead	
67	Step 1: A Positive Trailering Experience	
67	Miles Traveled	

- 68 Vehicle Size
- 68 Getting Him In, Getting Him Home
- 69 **Step 2: A Welcoming and Safe Environment**
- 69 Stall Preparation
- 69 Initial Anxiety
- 70 **Step 3: A Good Quality Feeding Program**
- 71 Checking Body Condition
- 71 Determining Feed Type and Amount
- 72 Weighing Feed
- 72 Hay Quality and Type
- 73 **Step 4: Confident Handling**
- 75 **Step 5: A Tranquil Introduction to Turnout**
- 75 Ideal Turnout Environment
- 76 Safety Precautions
- 76 How Much Turnout?
- 77 Transition to Turnout with a Herd
- 78 His and Hers
- 82 Additional Turnout Considerations

CHAPTER 5

86 Developing a Training Program

- 89 The Five Phases of Foundation Training
- 91 General Training Outline
- 91 Timeframe

CHAPTER 6

92 Phase One: Starting with the Basics

- 93 **Improving Ground Manners**
- 93 Breaking the Biting Habit
- 94 Lessons in Leading
- 96 Tricks to Tying
- 96 *Single-Tie*
- 98 *Cross-Ties*
- 99 Good Grooming
- 99 *Dealing with Misbehavior*
- 101 Fly Spray
- 101 Bathing and Hosing

- 102 **Work toward a Healthy, Balanced Hoof**
- 102 Pulling Shoes and Reshoeing
- 104 *The Barefoot Question*
- 105 Recovering from Track Trimming
- 106 Treating Thrush
- 106 **Moving On: When to Start Working the OTTB**

CHAPTER 7

108 Phase Two: Introduction to Longeing

- 109 **The Benefits of Longeing**
- 109 **Teaching the OTTB to Longe**
- 109 Two Options
- 110 **Longeing Guidelines**
- 110 **Equipment**
- 110 The Trainer
- 110 The Horse
- 111 **Environment**
- 112 **Free-Longeing**
- 120 **Longeing on the Line**
- 120 Longeing Techniques
- 123 Tips for Getting Started
- 129 **Training Exercise: Lengthening/Shortening Stride**

CHAPTER 8

132 Phase Three: Longeing with Side Reins

- 133 **Bits**
- 133 Bit Type
- 134 Snaffle Size
- 135 **Dealing with Mouth and Tongue Issues**
- 137 **Introducing the Surcingle**
- 139 **Getting Started with Side Reins**
- 140 Early Lessons
- 144 Shortening the Side Reins
- 147 Common Resistances Solved with Side Reins
- 147 *Head-Tossing*
- 149 *Tense and Hollow-Backed*
- 150 *Rushing at the Canter*
- 152 **Determining when He's Ready to Ride**

CHAPTER 9

154 Making the First Ride a Success

- 155 *Reviewing Your Horse's History*
- 157 *Saddling Up*
- 157 *Preparing to Mount*
- 159 *Mounting*
- 160 *Getting a Leg-Up*
- 161 *Using a Mounting Block*
- 164 *In the Saddle*
- 164 *Taking Up the Stirrups*
- 169 *Relying on Your Handler*
- 170 *Dismounting*

CHAPTER 10

172 Phase Four: Riding with Understanding and Patience

- 173 *Six Tips for Under Saddle Training*
- 175 *Getting Started Right*
- 176 *Seat, Legs, and Hands*
- 179 *Rhythm and Forward*
- 181 *Halt and Half-Halt*
- 182 *Downward Transitions*
- 186 *Bending and Turning*
- 188 *Introducing Canter*
- 188 *Using Two-Point*
- 189 *On the Forehand*
- 190 *Correct Canter Leads*
- 192 *Flying Lead Changes*
- 192 *Lessons in Backing-Up*
- 193 *Identifying Riding Problems and Their Causes*
- 195 *Troubleshooting Three Common Problems*
- 195 *Nervous/Jigging*
- 197 *Rushing at the Trot*
- 199 *Evading the bit*
- 202 *Making Training Fun*

CHAPTER 11

204 Phase Five: Moving toward a New Vocation

- 205 *New Sights and Sounds*
- 206 *Training Methods*
- 208 *Making It Part of the Lesson Plan*
- 208 *The Benefits of Ground Poles*
- 209 *Getting Started with Ground Poles*
- 210 *Longeing*
- 212 *Under Saddle*
- 216 *Guide Poles*
- 216 *Circle Size and Direction*
- 217 *Two Extension/Collection Exercises*
- 218 *Out and About: Leaving the Arena*
- 218 *The Buddy System*
- 223 *Away from Home*
- 224 *Work in the Arena with Other Horses*
- 224 *"Test Runs"*
- 225 *Clinics*
- 225 *Shows*

CHAPTER 12

228 Becoming a Success Story

- 229 *Closing Thoughts*
- 229 *Keen and Hilda Gurney*
- 231 *Courageous Comet and Becky Holder*
- 232 *Why Not Whiskey and Keely Bechtol*
- 234 *Kulik Lodge and Brooke Schafer*
- 236 *Pink Magic and Meg McTiver*
- 238 *American Bond and Valerie Mulgrave*
- 239 *Groomedforvictory and Cathy Gulick*
- 241 *Strong Angel and Buck Schott*
- 243 *Southern Charm and Courtney Safadi*

245 About New Vocations

249 Acknowledgments

251 Index

10

Phase Four: Riding with Understanding and Patience



Now that your horse is comfortable with you mounting and dismounting and walking with a rider up around the arena, you can move forward with his training under saddle. In this chapter, I discuss, step-by-step, the basics of riding the green OTTB. These early lessons are important because they build on the lessons he learned through groundwork and establish the foundation for your horse's later career-specific training. As you go, there will be times when he reverts to old patterns of behavior, or gets confused and misbehaves, but with plenty of patience you can stick with the program and see him through the tough times. It will be your consistent hard work that helps your horse successfully transition to his new job.

Six Tips for Under Saddle Training

By now you may feel you have spent more time thinking about your OTTB's past than you have planning his future! But, before you progress further, it helps to again review how your horse was trained and managed before he came to you. Here are a few important points to keep in mind:

Stick to a Routine

As previously noted, Thoroughbreds are not only used to consistency, they tend to thrive on it. By now you should have established a schedule that your horse is comfortable with so he is able to relax and focus. His "new" ridden work should be a *natural* progression from what he has learned over the last several weeks or months since you purchased or adopted him.

Short Workouts

On the track, horses are usually only worked under saddle for about 20 to 30 minutes. I have found that early in an OTTB's retraining, it is best to ride for no more than 30 minutes at a time. Short *daily* sessions are more useful than longer sessions fewer days a week. When the horse understands the riding lessons and develops the correct muscles, you can increase his work time.

Warm Up and Cool Down

Longe the horse quietly for 5 to 10 minutes to warm up before you ride. It's a good time, as he trots around, to note whether he is paying attention to you or is distracted by his surroundings. Once mounted, *begin* and *end* each ride with a few minutes of walking to loosen up before working and cool down before returning to the barn. Since horses are always encouraged to walk to and from the stable at the track, this mirrors the routine he knows best.

10.1 With time and careful preparation, the ex-racehorse can learn to travel rhythmically forward while maintaining a soft contact.



10.2 Riders at the track commonly “bridge” the reins, keeping a steady pressure on the bit while at the same time stabilizing themselves in the saddle.

Rein Tension Means “Go”

Racehorses are taught to “grab” the bit and run. The jockey or exercise rider “bridges” the reins (crosses them over the horse’s withers and takes both reins in each hand, then presses down on either side of the withers or neck). Bridging keeps the horse “on

the bit” and allows the rider to balance (fig. 10.2). It also allows the rider to maintain a steady hold on the reins and makes his position stronger: the horse pulls against himself rather than pulling the rider out of the tack.

I’ve mentioned before that although it is instinctive for many riders to take a tighter

hold on the reins when slowing or stopping the horse, with an OTTB this can have the opposite, undesirable effect of making him want to go faster! Your longeing practice should have prepared the horse to submit to the bit, but it may take time for him to fully understand the different signals you are giving him from the saddle. Be patient and use your voice commands rather than relying solely on your reins, and learn to give and take the reins rather than just pull (see p. 185).

Keep Going Forward

When the horse is anxious, try to relax and focus on staying balanced rather than shortening the reins and tightening your grip. Keep the reins short enough to maintain control, but give the horse enough freedom of the head and neck so he does not feel restricted. Whether he bucks, rears, shies, or balks, always focus on *directing his energy forward*. Don't attempt to rein him in right away when he goes a little faster than you'd like—as long as he is going forward, he is doing what you asked him. You can slow him down, and work on balance and collection, after “forward” has been achieved.

Gradually Work toward Riding Alone

Do not be in a rush to ride the horse without a handler at your side. As he relaxes and becomes comfortable with you sitting on his back, you can gradually develop indepen-

dence from your helper on the ground. At New Vocations, we use a ground person until the horse is comfortable being mounted and remains calm at the walk—this may only take a couple of days, or it may take over a week. If you are retraining your first OTTB, plan to have someone nearby for several weeks, even after you no longer need him or her to hold your horse, as a safety precaution.

Getting Started Right

It is best to continue your horse's training under saddle in the same schooling area where he was longed, and later mounted and ridden for the first time. A solid rail or wall around the perimeter of the area helps keep the horse going straight ahead and gives you more control. A big open field begs for trouble and gives your horse too much room to run if something spooks him.

For your early training under saddle, choose mild days with little to no wind, when the arena or paddock is quietest and without external distractions, just as you did when you started teaching your horse to longe. And, if your schedule allows, work your horse around same time each day with the same feed, turnout, and grooming schedule as you've already established. Always reserve plenty of time to groom your horse and tack up as it can be a relaxing preparation for ridden work.



10.3 Spend a few minutes longeing your horse in side reins prior to mounting. This encourages him to use his back and neck muscles properly.

Before mounting, longe your horse for at least 5 to 10 minutes to “get any bucks out” and loosen up his muscles and joints (see p. 120). For your first several rides, it is beneficial to include a couple of minutes in side reins, which will help the horse focus on working in a correct outline and encourage him to relax his neck and back muscles before you get on (fig. 10.3).

Get a leg-up or use a mounting block (see pp. 160 and 162), then allow your horse to just walk around, relax, and get used to his surroundings and your weight on his back. Some horses walk more calmly after trotting around a bit first. Insecure horses may find it

comforting to have a person walk alongside them for a while. After a few rides, you will learn what works best for your horse and you can tailor the warm-up routine to his needs and personality.

Seat, Legs, and Hands

Seat

Most exercise riders at the track weigh between 115 and 150 pounds. In the early stages, you should sit lightly on your horse’s back as he gets used to carrying your weight—sitting tall and imagining yourself “light as a feather” can help. While it can work to have a smaller rider start your horse the first few times, the rider’s ability to control his position in the saddle is more important than his actual weight.

Legs

Your legs should rest lightly on your horse’s sides; if he overreacts to even slight leg pressure, put more weight in your stirrups to help keep your leg contact as minimal as possible (for more on leg pressure, see p. 164). As I said in chapter 9, each OTTB reacts differently to leg pressure; some are perfectly fine with it while others are extremely sensitive, especially at the beginning of the ride.

Hands

Your hands must be steady in order to main-



10.4 Racehorses often display a tendency to “hang” on the bit.

tain a light contact to the bit. Relax your elbows so they act like hinges, and allow your arms—and thus your hands—to follow the movement of the horse’s head with an elastic connection. If your elbow joints are tense and locked, your hands will pull against the horse’s mouth. This, in turn, causes *him* to tense up.

Many OTTBs like to “hang” on the bit when being ridden. Exercise riders normally allow this as long as the horse is doing his job (fig. 10.4). But, in his new life as a riding horse, he needs to learn that this is not acceptable; he must learn to accept a light, steady contact on his mouth while moving forward. Longeing with side reins helps cor-



10.5 A & B When your OTTB gets heavy in your hands (A), encourage him to move forward on a slightly longer rein and lighter contact (B).

rect this prior to under-saddle work (see p. 138), but some horses revert to hanging on the bit once a rider is on their back. You can teach your horse to trust the contact by maintaining the elastic connection from your hand to his mouth as explained on p. 177. Follow his motion and encour-

age him to move forward off your leg (figs. 10.5 A & B).

Do not fight with your horse if he also revisits old habits like head-tossing or over-flexing. The answer again is to remain giving with your hands and push him forward.



Rhythm and Forward

Focus on maintaining a consistent rhythm. The horse should be used to maintaining a rhythm at the canter from his days at the track, and your work on the longe line should have begun to establish steady rhythm at *any*

gait. Once you are in the saddle, it is up to you to sense when he is slow or rushing. Do what you can to control your own body in order to have an effect on his—if he wants to rush at the trot, for example, pulling in response will only send an OTTB rushing forward even faster (see p. 174). Instead, use your body

10.6 A & B Early in training, do not become overly concerned with your horse's head position. Even if he fiddles with the bit or throws his head, remain soft with your hands and focus on a steady, forward rhythm.



by slowing your posting down (linger a little longer in the “up” phase), and maintaining a light, steady contact on the reins.

This is not the time to be concerned with the horse's head carriage or where his head position happens to be; working in a correct, rounded outline can come later. For

now, you should simply send—or allow—the horse to go forward. As mentioned earlier, some horses will toss their head, pull against the bit, stick their head in the air, or tuck their chin in toward their chest to evade the bit. Rather than pull against these evasions, send your horse steadily forward and



ride him through the problem (figs. 10.6 A & B). If you do not focus on the bad behavior but instead make him think about always moving forward, he will eventually realize it is more work to trot while tossing his head (for example), than it is to simply trot.

Halt and Half-Halt

A couple of important things for an OTTB to learn early in his training are the halt and half-halt. Racehorses rarely have to stand still for very long with a rider on their back, so at first, do not expect him to stand still for

more than a second or two at the halt. The verbal command “Whoa” should have been confirmed on the longe line, giving you a place to build from under saddle.

Practicing the Halt

Your first transitions to halt should be from walk. Do not practice it from other gaits until your horse’s walk-halt transitions are accomplished calmly, without fuss.

How-To

- 1 Say, “Whoa,” while sitting deep into the saddle with your heels down. Close your leg as you close your hands around the reins. Hold them still until the horse halts. If he doesn’t halt after several strides, give and take on the reins until he does (see p. 185).
- 2 Once he stops, even if only for a second, immediately relax your seat, hands, and legs, and praise him.
- 3 Ask the horse to walk forward several steps before halting again.

This is a simple exercise, but it may take several days for the horse to understand. Gradually ask him to stand still a little longer, and eventually he will pay attention to your seat and hands, and stand quietly until you ask him to move forward again. Once you teach the horse that when you sit deep in the saddle you want him to slow down, you

have taught him a key lesson that will help you ride him well in all three gaits.

Teaching the Half-Halt

A half-halt is an invaluable tool used for many purposes. It can help bring a horse’s attention back to his rider, refocusing him and “waking him up.” It can balance a horse in preparation for a transition, a turn, or any movement such as a circle or figure eight. It can also be used every few strides to rebalance or collect the horse. Whatever your discipline or riding goal, the half-halt is an important lesson.

The aids for the half-halt are closely related to the aids for halt: you ask by *closing your legs, sitting up tall, and closing your hands* all at the same time for only a couple seconds—then releasing the aids. A half-halt is a momentary action; as soon as it is performed, it is done. Concentrate on giving very clear aids in this exercise. OTTBs learn quickly and your horse will respond well to correctly given aids, but he will also get frustrated if you give him mixed signals (figs. 10.7 A & B).

As the horse starts to understand and respond to your half-halts, ask him to go forward while you maintain a steady contact with his mouth.

Downward Transitions

Racehorses do not gallop flat out all the time—they are also trained to make *gradual* downward transitions to canter, then trot,



10.7 A & B The half-halt can be used as a corrective device when the horse loses concentration or fights the rider's hands, or to prepare the horse for a new movement. Close your legs and hands momentarily as if preparing for a full halt—the horse will respond by stepping underneath himself and coming back to your hand (A), and then move forward again refocused and better balanced (B).





and finally to walk at the end of a workout. In fact, riders are encouraged to never pull a horse to a complete stop from a gallop (or even a canter) unless the horse is injured. So, be prepared to allow your OTTB plenty of time to move from a faster to a slower gait when you first begin riding him.

Watch Your Body

Both pulling on the reins and lightening the seat are cues that to the OTTB mean “go forward,” so if you A) pull back on the reins, and B) inadvertently bring your body for-

ward out of the saddle when you do so, you might not get the reaction you are looking for! Instead, many horses respond by getting excited and rushing (figs. 10.8 A–C). You may have seen jockeys standing up in their stirrups at the end of a race as they slow their horse down, but this is to stretch their legs and at the same time give them leverage as they give and take on the reins. It is a practice appropriate for stopping a tired horse after a race, but it does not translate in the riding arena.



10.8 A–C Pulling back (A) and leaning forward (B) mean “go” to the OTTB. If your horse is rushing at the trot, establish a slow, steady posting rhythm to slow him down without getting in a tug-of-war (C).

Give and Take

To get a calm, downward transition from your horse, ask by sitting down in the saddle, keeping your legs still and hands steady as you close them and yet allow them to follow the horse’s motion. Use the verbal cues you taught him on the longe line along with continuous half-halts.

Remember, there is no point getting into a tug-of-war, since the 1,000-pound horse underneath you will always win. If he does not listen and insists on going strongly for-

ward, maintain steady contact with the outside rein while taking a firm contact on the inside rein (pulling back slightly) and then *releasing* it. Repeat this motion until the horse responds. (Note: he may turn slightly to the inside—allow him to do a large circle.) As soon as he does, reward him by resuming the light, even contact.

If you pull steadily on the reins, the horse will either increase his pace as I’ve mentioned before, or eventually become dull and stop paying attention. By giving and