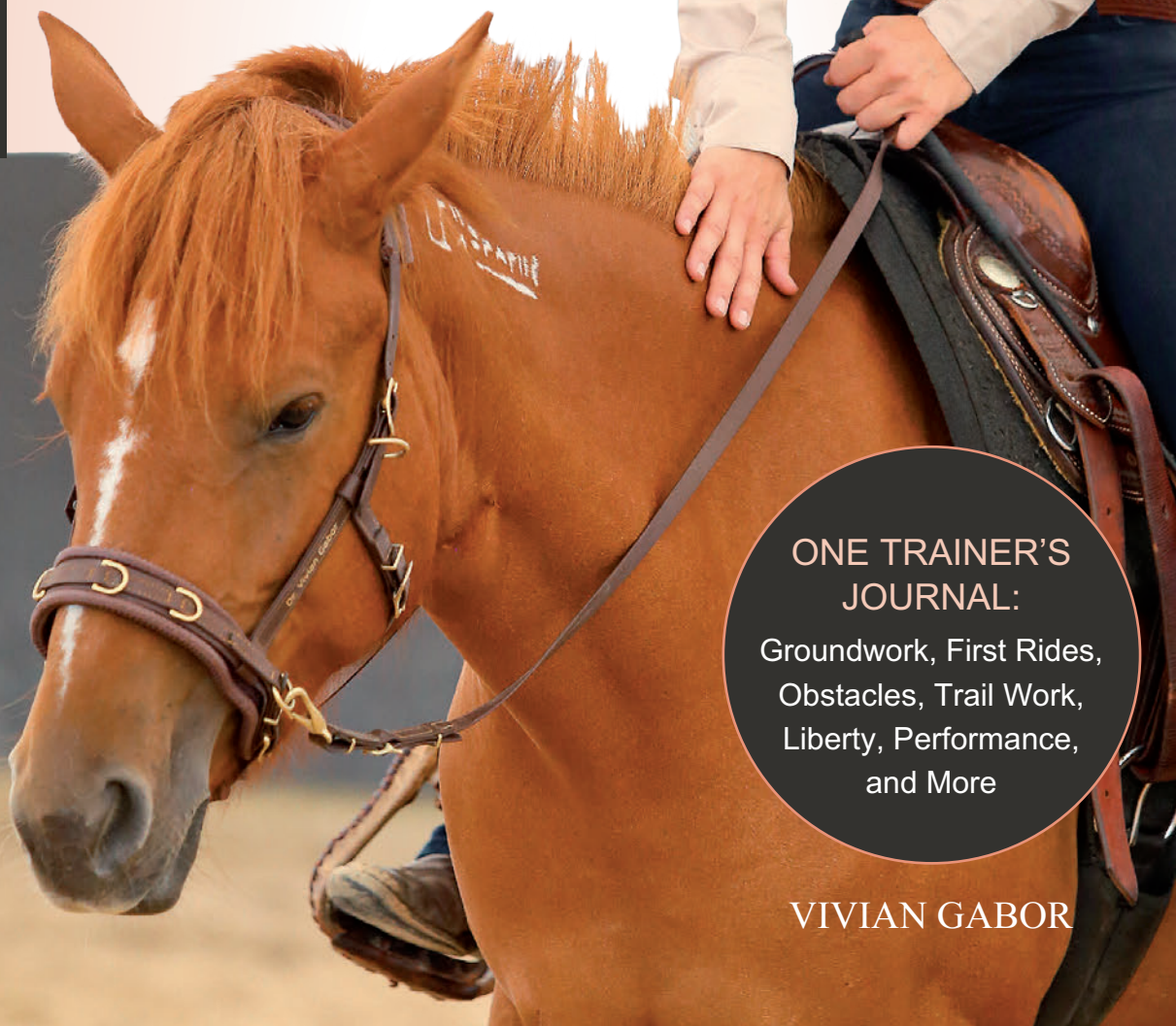
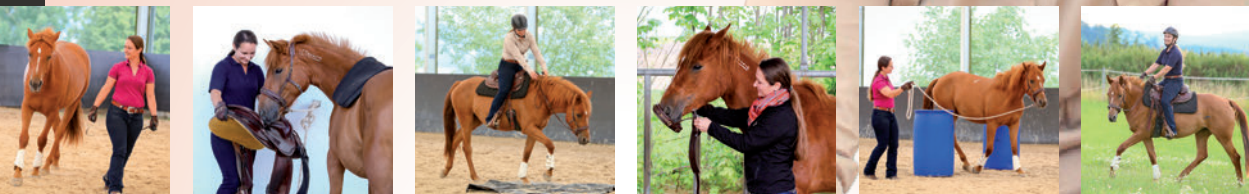


MUSTANG

FROM WILD HORSE TO RIDING HORSE



ONE TRAINER'S JOURNAL:

Groundwork, First Rides,
Obstacles, Trail Work,
Liberty, Performance,
and More

VIVIAN GABOR

CONTENTS

Preface	vii	<i>The Fifth Day</i>	21
Introduction	1	Paying Attention to Handler	23
Mustangs in America	1	First Hoof-Handling Exercises	24
The Mustangs Arrive in Frankfurt	2	The Farrier Meets the Mustang	25
Getting to Know You—The First Touch ...	4	<i>Curiosity Ensures Survival</i>	25
The First Month	5	<i>The Sixth Day</i>	26
 		<i>The Feeling of Self-Efficacy</i>	27
Week 1	5	<i>Outsmarting Destroys Trust</i>	27
<i>Follow My Leader</i>	7	Her Own Space—The Stall	28
 		<i>Why Horses Equate Restriction</i> <i>with Threat</i>	28
<i>The Second Day</i>	8	The First Girthing Exercise	31
<i>Fight or Flight</i>	8	<i>The Stop Signal</i>	32
<i>Learning in the Wild</i>	9	 	
<i>Praise: The Secondary Reinforcer</i>	10	<i>The Seventh Day</i>	33
 		<i>How Buildings Interfere</i> <i>with the Horse’s Nature</i>	35
<i>The Third Day</i>	11	 	
Allowing Touch	12	Week 2	35
<i>Conditioning: Rewarding a</i> <i>Chance Behavior</i>	13	The Ability to Concentrate	35
Yielding to Pressure	14	The Tying Area	36
<i>Head-Lowering for Relaxation</i>	15	<i>Tying</i>	37
 		The First Brush	37
<i>The Fourth Day</i>	16	The Challenge: Picking Up the Feet	37
<i>Horses Naturally Pay Attention</i> <i>to Body Tension</i>	16	Daily Mucking Out—A Threat?	40
Habituation Exercises	16	First Suppling Exercises	41
<i>Why Touching a Horse Isn’t Normal</i>	18	<i>Introducing Rituals for Security</i>	41
Skepticism About Strange Food	21	<i>Short, Rewarding Sequences</i> <i>for Effective Learning</i>	42
 		The First Ground Pole Exercise	42
 		Saddle Pad and Girth	44

Week 3	47
Making Training Positive	47
Lateral Movement Toward Me	48
<i>Distinguishing Between Sending Away and Inviting In</i>	50
Working with Different Objects	50
<i>Concentration During Training</i>	51
“Parking” at the Mounting Block	51
First Visit from the Farrier	53
First Saddling	55
<i>Why Wearing a Saddle Goes Against a Horse’s Nature</i>	57
Practicing Standing Tied	58
Ground Driving	60
<i>Transferring Knowledge to New Situations</i>	62
First Time in the Indoor Arena	62
Trailer Training	64
Week 4	66
First Work at Liberty	66
<i>Horses Lie Down When They Feel Safe</i> ...	69
First Figure Eight at Liberty	69
A Visit from the Osteopath	69
<i>Associating Situations with Something Positive</i>	70
Mounting for the First Time	70
<i>Mental Overload</i>	72
First Steps Under Saddle	73
<i>The Horse’s First Experiences with a Rider</i>	73
A Little Fright	74

The Second Month	75
Week 1	75
Planning Our First Outing	75
Our First Appearance in Front of an Audience	76
<i>Generalization—Transferring What Has Been Learned to New Places</i>	78
Steering Under Saddle	79
<i>Working with Tension and Relaxation Under Saddle</i>	79
Putting on Boots for the First Time	80
<i>Why Working in the Round Pen Is Easier in the Beginning</i>	81
Steering in Trot	82
Riding in the Indoor Arena for the First Time	82
<i>Why Not Use the Outside Track Right Away?</i>	85
Getting Used to the Electric Fence	85
<i>Why Pressure Creates Counterpressure</i> ...	86
Week 2	87
“Open Day”	87
<i>When Familiar Surroundings Change</i>	88
Lateral Work Under Saddle	90
<i>Early Lateral Work with Young Horses</i> ...	90
Training in Public	91
<i>Tuning Out External Stimuli</i>	93
Week 3	94
First Canter Under Saddle	94
Useful Exercises Under Saddle	95
<i>Working with Obstacles</i>	98
Training at Liberty Adds Variety	99

Week 4	103
Working on Softness and Self-Carriage Under Saddle	103
First Canter in the Arena	105
<i>Why Run When There Is No Danger?</i>	105
A Scary Moment—A Well-Aimed Kick	105
<i>Staying Neutral and Fair</i>	106

The Third Month

Week 1	108
Other Horses in the Arena	108
<i>Concentrating on What Has Been Learned</i>	108
Carrying an Object—When the Scary Item Comes with You	109
Wariness of Confined Spaces— Riding Between Barrels	110
<i>Gaining More and More Trust</i>	113

Week 2	113
First Trail Ride	114
<i>Important Foundations Before Riding Outside</i>	114
I Am Still the Guiding Figure	114
<i>Riding Out Alone with a Young Horse</i>	116
Habituation to the Bit	116
Working on the Turn-on-the-Haunches ...	117

Week 3	82
Preparing for the Makeover—The Event Draws Nearer	119
Riding with a Flag	119
Practicing Sequences	122
Exercises for the Freestyle	122

<i>Maintaining Your Own Concentration</i>	122
Not Putting Yourself Under Pressure	123
Pressure Creates Counterpressure—Working on “Throughness” Under Saddle	125
Training the Horse to Respond to Subtle Aids	126
Controlling Your Own Body Language ...	126

Week 4	127
New Ridden Experiences	127
First Unfamiliar Rider	128
Walk, Trot, and Canter in an Open Space— How Good Are Our Brakes?	129
Keeping Calm Before the Makeover	135
How Much Can I Ask of Her?	135
Should I Ride With or Without a Bit?	136
The Makeover—Pure Emotion	137
A Test for Us Both	139
Saying Goodbye	149
Postscript	150
Acknowledgments	152
Index	155





THE FIRST MONTH

1 2 3 4 5 6
8 9 10 11 12 13 14
15 16 17 18 19 20 21
22 23 24 25 26 27 28
29 30 31

THE SECOND MONTH

1 2 3 4
5 6 7 8 9 10 11
12 13 14 15 16 17 18
19 20 21 22 23 24 25
26 27 28 29 30

THE THIRD MONTH

1 2
3 4 5 6 7 8 9
10 11 12 13 14 15 16
17 18 19 20 21 22 23
24 25 26 27 28 29 30
31

Mona's hooves have not been able to wear down naturally during the past two years in captivity. The farrier needs to work on the mare's feet soon, as a matter of urgency.

I consider one of my most important jobs to be preparing Mona for her life with us. As I've said, this includes allowing herself to be handled and touched—preferably all over—before even thinking about riding. Obviously it makes no sense for a wild horse to tolerate being touched by a human, which might, in the case of wound care, even be painful for him. That makes specific preparation all the more important.

Mona has a small wound on her lower jaw, because the halter that she has been wearing for a long time rubs against it when she chews. This open wound is constantly being irritated. I was able to loosen her halter slightly on the first day. Today I am able to carefully dab some wound cream onto the affected area, which will certainly have briefly been painful for her, but she tolerates it. I hope that I will soon be able to remove the halter completely.

That's why I keep working on handling, and today we go back into the round pen, where I can work with new objects in a small area. The round pen gives horses a sense of security, because its boundary constitutes a safe area for them, but they can still be aware of everything that goes on around them. They learn to focus on the stimuli coming from me, despite any external stimuli. I immediately praise them for this. This is what I do with Mona. After a few days, she is familiar with work in the round pen, and I can gradually do new habituation exercises with her.

I touch her shoulders and back with the lead rope, and stroke it over her croup. I then put the lead rope over Mona's back and allow her to walk around after me. The rope swings gently against her barrel. The object stays on her, but I want her to realize that it isn't dangerous. I walk calmly in front of her and praise her as we go. My gaze directed at her shoulder and the whip, which is pointing in this direction, are enough to signal to her that she should keep coming toward me. This gives her something to do, and the loose rope on her back fades into the background.

Paying Attention to the Handler in Unfamiliar Situations

The method of getting a horse to concentrate on me when he encounters something new or frightening has proven itself. A horse can only pay attention to one thing so I direct his attention to me and my signals. It also habituates the horse to the new object or situation. The horse learns more and more to focus on the person and to trust her, even in situations where he feels unsure.

When habituating her to the rope, I do what I did with the plastic bag and encourage Mona to actively cooperate. She has already accepted touch on her back and belly. However, it is important to me that she experience more and more situations that might initially trigger apprehension but then—a short time later—end well. This lets me teach her that, if she encounters something unexpected, the solution is to pay attention to the human's behavior. The more often this principle is effective, the more reliably the horse will follow it. How do I deal with the scary object? Am I tense or relaxed? If the horse learns to understand my intention, she will be able to follow me in these moments, too.

The right mix of apprehension and curiosity helps horses to survive in the wild. Both of these behaviors are very pronounced in Mona. I give her enough time to get to know her new environment.



I move the lead rope in front of Mona, starting small and then gradually increasing the movements. The rope occasionally falls onto the ground and makes noises. I observe her closely. I want her to react and find a solution, but I only increase the stimuli cautiously. As with the plastic bag, the mare initially wants to escape this stimulus. She goes backward to put some distance between her and the rope. I use the same principle as the day before and swing the rope in the direction of her shoulder. My posture remains totally relaxed as I do so. Mona recognizes the same pattern and approaches the swinging object. I have to make sure that my posture is relaxed but also inviting. I adopt a slightly stooped posture and move backward, away from her. This creates room for her to approach me, and helps her to find a solution more quickly.

FIRST HOOF-HANDLING EXERCISES

When it comes to habituating Mona to having her feet picked up, I proceed with great caution. Mona has already become familiar with being stroked by the rope and the whip. It makes sense to use a whip for touching the legs for the first time, because it allows me to be slightly out of the “danger zone,” especially at the hindquarters. I can also remain upright and don’t need to assume a crouched position next to the horse that she might find threatening. At the moment, Mona is more comfortable if I don’t touch her with my hands. I can also build up steady pressure over an area by stroking her with the whip. Horses tend to flinch from very light and delicate touch—we know this from how they twitch their skin or stamp their feet when a fly lands on their body. Because I obviously want to be able to touch Mona with my hand at some point, I use the “overshadowing” method. To overshadow a new stimulus, you use the appearance of a new—possibly frightening—stimulus, by drawing the horse’s attention to a stimulus that they already know and do not respond to with flight or defense. In this case, I increasingly replace the repeated, impulse-like strokes with the whip (like brush strokes) with strokes with my hand. I gradually work my way down from the horse’s elbow area to the sensitive areas on the cannon bone (see photos on p. 13).

If Mona finds something strange, I immediately notice the change in her expression and the tension in her face. The behavior is often accompanied by her laying her ears back and snapping with her teeth. I realize that she doesn’t really want to bite me. She just reacts this way to tell me that this contact is new and unfamiliar to her and outside of her comfort zone, which she doesn’t like. It’s important that

THE FIRST MONTH

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8 9 10 11 12 13 14
15 16 17 18 19 20 21
22 23 24 25 26 27 28
29 30 31

THE SECOND MONTH

1 2 3 4
5 6 7 8 9 10 11
12 13 14 15 16 17 18
19 20 21 22 23 24 25
26 27 28 29 30

THE THIRD MONTH

1 2
3 4 5 6 7 8 9
10 11 12 13 14 15 16
17 18 19 20 21 22 23
24 25 26 27 28 29 30
31



Mona greets the farrier curiously. Getting to know each other over the fence is the only item on the agenda today.

I don't reinforce her behavior and remove the contact if possible. I leave her in peace as soon as she tolerates my touch on her leg for one or two seconds. She understands this approach very quickly. Today, I even manage to get her to briefly lift her front hooves, and then praise her immediately.

I am aware how much trust Mona is already showing me. Losing her contact with the ground, and the stability that goes with it, constitutes a very big loss of control for a wild horse. When a horse is standing on four legs, she can immediately use her most important means of flight and defense. When you consider that I'm putting my hand around the leg, which is what a predator might do with its mouth, then the gravity of what I'm asking for from the horse becomes clear.

THE FARRIER MEETS THE MUSTANG

I am fortunate enough to work with a farrier who makes time for a project like this,

without doing his actual job: working on the horse's feet. Today, the Mustang and the farrier meet for the first time over the paddock fence. Mona approaches him curiously and sniffs his hand. I realize how important it is that this horse hasn't built up any negative associations with people, unlike the horses I normally work with. Constant curiosity seems to be deeply rooted in this wild horse and often supersedes her apprehension.

Curiosity Ensures Survival

Curiosity is a horse's essential drive to explore his world. He sizes up what could possibly be dangerous, but also what could help his survival. It could be a new source of food or water, but also an encounter with a horse that might become a new companion. Curiosity is closely linked with learning behavior and dealing with new situations. Being curious enough to assess an unfamiliar situation is, therefore, important for survival.

The green halter is finally off! Mona investigates the new bridle with curiosity. She even puts her nose through it as if she knows what it is for.



THE FIRST MONTH

1 2 3 4 5 6
8 9 10 11 12 13 14
15 16 17 18 19 20 21
22 23 24 25 26 27 28
29 30 31

THE SECOND MONTH

1 2 3 4
5 6 7 8 9 10 11
12 13 14 15 16 17 18
19 20 21 22 23 24 25
26 27 28 29 30

THE THIRD MONTH

1 2
3 4 5 6 7 8 9
10 11 12 13 14 15 16
17 18 19 20 21 22 23
24 25 26 27 28 29 30
31

THE SIXTH DAY

Taking off the Halter for the First Time

After Mona has worn her halter for almost an entire week, today we managed it. She has been getting better and better at being touched on her head and allowing me to care for the wound on her lower jaw. I've found her a new bridle that can be used as a halter, as well as for work as a cavesson, and later, for riding. It is made of soft Bio-Thane® webbing with extra padding in sensitive areas, such as the jaw, nose, and poll. Its major advantage is that the headpiece fastens over the poll with a buckle at the side, so you don't have to pull it over the horse's ears every time you put it on and take it off. Mona still finds movements near her head threatening.

I start by hanging the bridle in her paddock. I don't know how she will react to the new object, so I don't want to overwhelm her. Her curiosity wins again. Mona investigates the new object and actually sticks her nose into the noseband. Allowing her to explore this new thing without forcing her gives the mare confidence.



The Feeling of Self-Efficacy

Even if we can't say precisely how horses feel, we can definitely ascribe to them the ability to experience a kind of self-efficacy—that is, they are able to influence the environment through their own behavior. Being an active participant in interaction with the environment, new objects, or a person stimulates problem-solving behavior, and develops the motivation to deal with new things. I believe that you should consciously encourage this behavior in horses when you train them. We humans are obviously concerned with steering the horse's activity in the direction that makes sense for us and the horse in training. An example would be, when getting the horse used to a new halter, rewarding him as soon as he approaches this object, or even stretches his nose in the direction of the halter noseband.

I hold the bridle and stroke Mona's neck with it. She can then approach it by herself. As soon as her nose is even slightly in the noseband, I slowly take the bridle away from her again. I don't want to overwhelm her, but show her that interacting with the object is the right decision. She has to understand that she always has a way out and that cooperating won't result in her being trapped, so she becomes more and more curious. Putting her nose into the bridle is still her decision for the time being.

Outsmarting Destroys Trust

Far too often, people are too quick to exploit a moment—whether during loading, saddling for the first time, or even putting on a foal's first halter. This causes the horse to quickly lose trust in the human's actions. In this case, being outsmarted only shows the horse that cooperating, being curious, or even listening to the person is punished. The feeling of self-efficacy is taken away from the horse.

After Mona has tolerated the halter being in contact with her head for a few seconds, I reach under her throatlatch and lift the end of the poll strap along the off side of her head with my hand. She still isn't sure about my hand being on her head, but she accepts it. I don't want to overwhelm her, so I lower my hand again. I repeat this movement until Mona stops finding it threatening. Only then do I slowly place the strap across her poll behind her ears. When I can calmly fasten the buckle on my side of her head, I praise her with my voice. Then, I take the halter off again, and she can finally stand in her stall without one!

Mona still watches attentively as I brush her. She is becoming more and more practiced at having her feet picked out.



PRACTICING STANDING TIED

Mona and I are getting into more and more of a routine together. I now groom her in our tying area in the barn more often, where she still behaves differently than she does outside. She can't see around her and she feels restricted. To help her to stay calm, I have to move very deliberately when I approach her, groom her, pick up her feet, or walk around her to turn her around.

Because I don't want to tie up Mona properly yet, I keep repeating the tying exercise by pulling the lunge-line rope through the tying ring. I take a gentle hold of the rope to create light pressure on her poll. When I notice that she intensifies the pressure, I tap her hindquarters gently with the whip to show her that the solution lies in moving forward. As soon as she takes a small step forward, I immediately stop touching her and release the pressure on the rope. This teaches her to look for a solution by going forward, and not to lean into the halter. She should put this into practice later when she is tied up properly.

This exercise is already routine for her. A gentle hold on the rope gets her to take a step forward, and I release the pressure again.

I can now touch and groom Mona all over, and picking out her feet is becoming more and more established. Since I only put the

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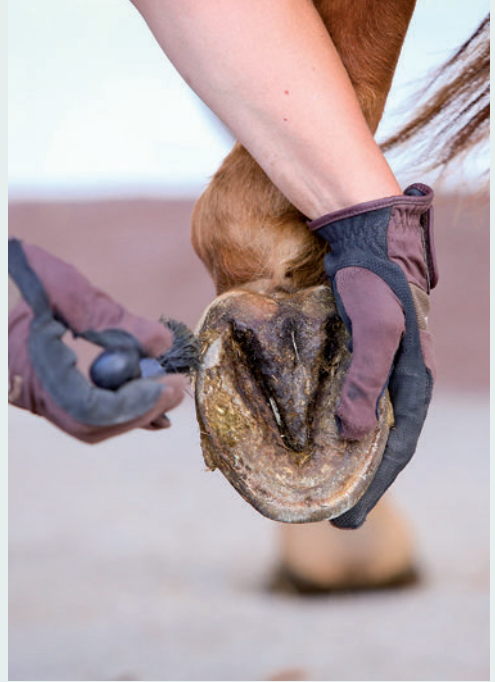
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29 30 31

THE SECOND MONTH

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THE THIRD MONTH

1 2
3 4 5 6 7 8 9
10 11 12 13 14 15 16
17 18 19 20 21 22 23
24 25 26 27 28 29 30
31



saddle on her for the first time yesterday, I obviously don't do it at the tying ring yet. That would be too dangerous for everybody involved. She is clearly much more relaxed in the round pen than in the grooming area. I get the saddle and the pad ready in the round pen first and then go there with Mona.

I repeat the saddling exercise, following the same calm routine as last time. Mona stands quietly and lets me fiddle about. Today, I want to keep working on the groundwork exercises, but with the saddle. I begin our groundwork exercises right away, leading Mona on the rope. I get her to do exercises that she is familiar with, so the saddle becomes incidental. She focuses calmly on the things she already knows. Then, I get her to first walk then trot around me in a circle on the lunge line, for the first

time under saddle. The sound made by the stirrups and the buckles becomes louder. She listens behind her and speeds up slightly in trot. I let her come back to walk quietly and then trot on again. I don't want her to feel in any way pursued by this "thing." The second time she trots on is much better and I let her go onto an ever-increasing circle. I encourage her to lower her head again so that she notices that the tension on the girth decreases when her trot is relaxed and long-and-low. This actually works well. If I give her a brief impulse on the cavesson with my driving whip hand slightly raised, she lowers her head. I then lower my whip hand again and relax the rope. I want to give her the freedom of the whole round pen for the canter, and take the rope off her. Now she can move a bit more freely. I raise my body tension and give the verbal

The saddle feels different in trot to walk. The swinging stirrups don't unsettle Mona.



command, “Canter,” and sure enough, she takes her first canter strides under saddle. The rhythm now causes the stirrups to swing more by her belly. Mona doesn't relax quite as much in canter as she does without a saddle, but there is no wild bucking or resistance. I'm glad that I took so much time.

Typical of Mona, she soon wants to slow down again. I push her on, get her to canter again and she does a few slightly rounder canter strides, but you definitely couldn't call it bucking. They are probably more caused by my own increased body tension than the saddle. Once she has done another lap of the round pen, I let her come back to walk and then invite her into me for a break.

GROUND DRIVING

To prepare for riding, I like to “drive” horses from the ground. It's a kind of long-reining work that gives young horses their first understanding of steering, halting, and going backward, without anybody walking in front of them or sitting on them. You could call it an intermediate stage between groundwork and riding. It is a great way to teach the horse that people can give signals from a different guiding position and to trust them from this position too. To drive

THE FIRST MONTH

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
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29 30 31

THE SECOND MONTH

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26 27 28 29 30

THE THIRD MONTH

1 2
3 4 5 6 7 8 9
10 11 12 13 14 15 16
17 18 19 20 21 22 23
24 25 26 27 28 29 30
31



the horse from the ground, you gradually have to get the horse used to the feeling of the lunge lines touching his sides and hindquarters. Some horses do not react well to being touched by the rope along and down their hind legs.

Mona is already familiar with the lunge line touching her hindquarters from the preparatory work for picking up her feet. Nevertheless, I still proceed with caution. It's essential that she doesn't get a fright or panic when I begin the first exercises with her. I stroke her all over with the lunge line and also prepare her for the stirrups moving when I pull the lunge lines through them. I lunge her with the single lunge line first. The stirrups move farther away from her when I take up the rein. They come into her field of vision, which she finds quite strange at first. By taking up and releasing the lunge line, I can control this movement well from

the inside. This is also good preparation for later being ridden, because the horse will be used to these movements in the saddle. I lunge Mona like this in both directions until she is walking and trotting around me very calmly.

I then attach both lunge lines to the sidepull function of the cavesson, feed both of them through the large stirrups of the Western saddle and stroke her hindquarters with the lunge lines again diagonally from behind. To familiarize the horse with this guiding position, I get her to walk around me in a small circle again, like I did before, except this time, the outside rein is containing Mona from the outside and also resting gently against her hindquarters. This causes her to speed up, but she neither panics nor charges off. She just doesn't know what to think of this unfamiliar encircling contact yet.

I soothe her and get her to walk again, which also releases the pressure on the outside rein. I get her to walk around me on both reins (similar to lungeing with two lines) before positioning myself behind her. The next thing I want to show her is halting in response to a voice command—which she already knows—and gently taking up the reins. It's especially important to me that I can always get her to halt. She has to get to know the meaning of the reins as a boundary from the ground, before I sit on her for the first time.

To make the meaning of the reins for steering clear to her, I stand close in front of her and give pulses to the side on both sides of the cavesson. I release the reins as soon as she yields in the respective direction. I repeat this several times on both sides. She very quickly learns the right reaction for releasing the pressure: she realizes what a

sideways pull on the reins means and that the solution is to release the pressure. She is familiar with the word “Walk” for going forward to walk from halt. I have my whip in my hand, give the command and tap her gently on her hindquarters to get the first steps in the “driving position.” After a few steps, I halt again, then slacken the reins and let them swing gently against her. I release the reins for a moment and let her stand—and, lo and behold, Mona lowers her head. Because this gentle swinging movement has often meant lowering her head, we astonishingly have our first command for relieving tension at a distance—how wonderful!

I let her walk on again and try the first turn. To do this, I tap Mona gently on the outside of her hindquarters and hold the outside rein against her body. I use a slight inside bend to show her the new direction and the first small turn actually works. I immediately get Mona to halt and praise her. I am very surprised that she also accepts me from this position, and can transfer my commands so quickly. Now I try the first steering exercises on both sides. After a successful halt, we finish the exercise. I take off the saddle and bridle and we leave the round pen.

Transferring Knowledge to New Situations

Transferring knowledge to different situations further establishes what has been learned. You can make use of this when transferring to different leading positions.

Driving from the ground or long-reining shows the horse that different leading positions are possible. The horse learns to transfer signals into this new situation and later to being ridden. The driving position diagonally behind the horse is an interim stage between walking in front of the horse (next to the horse’s head) and riding (leading position on top of the horse). The horse transfers the signals to this new position, and understands being led and guided from above.

FIRST TIME IN THE INDOOR ARENA

I set off with Mona toward the indoor arena, where she hasn’t been before. I wanted her to trust me before getting to know this large, enclosed space. Our indoor arena has an open design. Tarpaulin walls and wind nets make it very light, and you can see outside on all sides. When it’s windy, you can hear the straps flapping or,

THE FIRST MONTH

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8 9 10 11 12 13 14
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22 23 24 25 26 27 28
29 30 31

THE SECOND MONTH

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5 6 7 8 9 10 11
12 13 14 15 16 17 18
19 20 21 22 23 24 25
26 27 28 29 30

THE THIRD MONTH

1 2
3 4 5 6 7 8 9
10 11 12 13 14 15 16
17 18 19 20 21 22 23
24 25 26 27 28 29 30
31



The indoor arena is a new place that Mona is getting to know. Because the walls of the arena are open and give a clear view outside, she can also relax in this new environment.

occasionally, the tarpaulins fluttering. All of this has stopped me from showing her the indoor arena yet. The arena has a spacious entrance area with a 15-foot-wide entrance door, so Mona doesn't have to go through a narrow passageway, which is a big advantage. She hesitates the first time I try to take her into the arena. After a brief moment, I am able to convince her to come with me, and we walk onto the soft, sandy floor.

She looks around, but she doesn't appear to feel particularly hemmed in here. This is probably because there are no solid walls and she has a clear view outside. I intentionally don't walk around the track with her to show her everything. Instead, I want her to rely on me and take her lead from my calmness. She is obviously allowed to look around, but I immediately start getting her

to do small exercises so she concentrates on me, which is always what I do with horses in a new environment. I don't want to let them be responsible for deciding whether or not something is dangerous. She is welcome to sniff new objects, but I don't want her attention to be on the new things. I want to bring relaxation and calm into the new situation with familiar exercises.

This is what I do with Mona, too, by getting her to do our familiar groundwork exercises. I keep getting her to halt, take a few steps back, yield her shoulders and hindquarters and stand for a few moments in a relaxed halt.

She accepts it very well, even though I can tell that she is more tense and a little unsettled by these new surroundings. I only work with her for around 10 minutes, before leaving the arena.