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Free Jumping Young Horses

By Bob Henselwood

Free Jumping is a valuable tool in the evaluation of young horses. It is however just one of many and in young horses sometimes is given greater significance than it deserves. Movement, conformation and pedigree are also very significant in the early stages.

Free jumping in the early stages is best used as a culling tool rather than a selection tool. Horses that free jump poorly by hanging their legs or refusing jump or consistently having jumps down will generally stay that way all through their development. The good ones stay good but will change in the ranking order as they get older. It is thus a very useful tool to cull youngsters that are not going to pay their way. It is hard enough to have a profitable breeding operation without raising youngsters that will never be good enough.

I believe you need to be very strict about how good the youngsters have to be to keep them for another year. I believe that every horse in the barn should pay his or her way every year in some way or another. The bad ones will eat you out of house and home regardless of how good the good ones are.

We generally free jump the foals after they have been weaned for a month and have settled into a life without mom. We introduce them to the chute by putting the poles on the ground and walking the foals over the poles with a little encouragement from behind. If you have a few to do, you can turn them loose two at a time and that will help them find their way through the chute. Don't be too judgemental the first time through. Some will amaze you and disappoint you later and others will dummy up and get better in a few days.

Young horses have an attention span of about twenty minutes. You should take a couple of days to get the youngsters used to the concept. After a couple of days, they will start to show you which ones have the knack for it and which ones do not. You can not train them to free jump. The whole point of the exercise is to see which ones have the natural inclination to go to the jump and jump it with good form and technique.

Horses learn by repetition and therefore it is good to free jump them two or three days in a row and then leave them alone for a while. They are certainly able to jump obstacles when they are small but are not able to withstand repeated free jump schoolings. We free jump the youngsters once or maybe twice a year if we are home. You should record how they jump or even video tape it for future reference and a proper evaluation.

The purpose of free jumping is to see how horses jump, technique and attitude, not how high horses can jump. The late foals and yearlings shouldn't jump much more than two and a half feet. Two year olds three foot and three year olds three foot six.

The technique we are looking for is jumping up through the wither, bringing the front legs up like a classic hunter, flexibility through the back and opening of the hind legs over the jump. The horse should show good scope and carefulness. I like to see them make a mistake and have a jump down. It tells me a lot the next time they come to the same jump. They have three choices: first they can come and make the same mistake again, two not want to come to the jump at all, or three come to the jump and try harder. that tells you a lot about how good an athlete they are going to be.

If you try to do too much at one time, you will see there performance deteriorate in ten to fifteen minutes. You should keep this short and sweat so they think the whole thing is fun and not hard work.

The jump material should be very simple poles with a ground line. Keep the same material every time you do this as you are trying to see well they jump not trying to train them to jump different jumps.

As much as free jumping is a useful tool for evaluating the foals to two year olds, once the horses are broken to ride, the whole free jumping exercise is over. Horses often react very differently with a rider on their backs. The good free jumpers are often not good with a rider. Just as a reminder, the bad free jumpers will be bad with a rider as well. Find a home for them!!!