

Baby Talk

Amy Romeo's foal training techniques help owners make the most of their horse's "kindergarten" years.

By BREANNE HILL



Amy Romeo says it's simply common sense. She claims anyone who raises horses eventually realizes it's easier and safer to eliminate a horse's fears when it is a foal as opposed to when it is fully grown.

"I would sit through these 'problem' clinics and watch people trying to get their horses to do things," remembered Romeo, whose Wet Paint Farms, Inc. in Missouri Valley, Iowa, produces world-class Paint Horses. "And I would think, 'Well, why didn't they work on that when it was a baby?' If you observe foals it seems so obvious. They're easier to teach than the older horses because they have more curiosity than they have fear."

The idea that birth through weanling age can be a highly productive part of a horse's learning cycle is something Romeo has believed in since she was a preteen. Now, more than 25 years after she first began working with horses, she is putting her theories and training tips into a program she calls Baby Talk: Foundation Foal Training™.

"This program has been a long time coming," said Romeo. "It just kept mushrooming over the years as I would try different things with babies. My hope now is that people will see the opportunity they have with foals and benefit from this lifelong project."

Amy Romeo's techniques for training foals capitalize on the youngsters' capacity to learn because they have more curiosity than fear.

PAULA J. HARRINGTON





PAULA J. HARRINGTON

Safety comes first. When working with the foal, the mare should be calm and, if necessary, safely tied.

Who? What? Why?

Foundation Foal Training™, as described by Romeo, is a new guide to interactive foal training and behavior that uses common-sense psychology and physical communication to teach horses from birth through weaning age.

“It’s a program designed for what is easily the most ignored age for traditionally training a horse,” said Romeo.

The techniques range from the simple (scratching the foal) to the advanced (typing the foal’s personality), and all applications were designed with the horse’s well-being in mind.

“Among many other skills, our babies have learned to tie, trailer load, longe—all the basics, with minimum resistance,” said Romeo. “With the right tools, a foal can learn a great deal and have a good experience while doing it. The key is to develop ‘try, trust and trainability’ before the foal is of weaning age.”

She says the focus of Foundation Foal Training™ is to help owners understand how to teach within a foal’s physical and mental ca-

pabilities without pressure or stress, and she takes great pride in the fact that the program isn’t exclusive. Everyone can use it.

“Anybody can work the exercises by just understanding the concepts and trying some things,” said Romeo. “I think it is user-friendly, and that’s the whole point of it. You

don’t have to be a professional trainer to teach your foal.”

She claims all you really need is a small-sized pen with solid walls, or a stall that is safe for your horses.

“You don’t have to have a million-dollar facility, but it is important to have a confined, safe area to work in,” Romeo said. “For example, our horses are not

stalled all the time, but during foaling and handling, we do use the stall to accomplish this training, especially during the first two months.”

The dam’s attitude is also something Romeo considers before beginning her work.

“You have to be able to handle mom,” she said. “You cannot let a nervous mare run around as you chase her foal. She must be

“A foal can learn a great deal and have a good experience while doing it. The key is to develop try, trust and trainability.”

safely restrained, but also kept in very close proximity to the foal. You never want to come between the mare and foal.”

Indeed, safety for horses and handler comes first with Romeo. Second comes finishing what she starts.

“A lot of people will ask what the difference between this and imprinting is,” said Romeo. “Well, most people think they’re done when they’re finished with imprinting after three days, and that’s only the beginning of what you can accomplish with a foal.”

While Romeo supports imprinting, she stresses it isn’t the only method available to horse owners.

“Foundation Foal Training™ is also different from imprinting in that I personally don’t feel that if your mare foals and you aren’t there for the birth, that you’ve missed your window of training opportunities,” she said. “I believe that if you start within the first three days you’re fine. You will have missed some windows, but it’s all right in the long run.”

Romeo insists that the most important prerequisite to her program is the “sacking out” of the handler’s mind—the dispelling of three common myths about foal handling.

The first of these beliefs is that it’s best to just turn a baby out and “let him be a horse.” Romeo shakes her head at this idea.

“A horse has 23½ hours a day or more to be a horse,” she said. “By working with your foals, they’re still going to be a horse. Most people are worried that if you handle a foal, it will automatically become spoiled. It will only become spoiled if you don’t instill equal measures of discipline and trust.”

The second widely believed theory is that foals have no attention span, so they can’t learn very much.

“Completely false,” said Romeo. “Foals are more open-minded, more curious and have more absorption and acceptance of training before they’re weaned than they ever will again.”

She says if you remember to keep sessions short, simple and repetitive, a foal’s learning potential is unlimited.

“This program has a lot of parallels to raising and teaching children,” Romeo points out. “A 2-year-old child can often learn a foreign language a lot faster than a high-school kid can. While this is not a mystery in teach-

ing children, it is sort of a secret in the horse world.”

The third idea is that, at such a young age, horses shouldn’t be pushed to learn.

“The whole point of Foundation Foal Training™ is that you are going to work within each individual foal’s mental and physical abilities,” said Romeo. “You’re never going to push them in any way other than positively.”

She claims that most of the program’s training sessions set up the foal with learning opportunities that parallel its natural curiosity level, and, therefore, it will not overextend the foal’s mind or body.

“And after working these exercises,” said Romeo, “the only thing an owner won’t

be able to do is get on a foal and ride it down the street.”

A little bit of this and that

A huge part of Foundation Foal Training™ is curbing the fear that horses, as prey animals, have naturally. To do this, Romeo relies on

“Foals have more absorption and more acceptance of training before they’re weaned than they ever will again.”

“What’s this?” A foal’s curiosity will often overcome its initial fear when presented with new and unfamiliar objects.



PAULA J. HARRINGTON



PAULA J. HARRINGTON



PAULA J. HARRINGTON

Top: Romeo says a foal can “train” itself with a tarp while the owner completes chores.

Above: Playtime can become learning time simply by placing ground poles in the foal’s turnout area.

everyday household items in the training process.

“You don’t have to spend a lot of money on props,” said Romeo, “and since many of the training sessions are tailor-made for the person who doesn’t have a lot of extra time to work with their foals, using things that are easily found around the barn works out well.”

With the busy owner in mind, Romeo has developed exercises that actually prompt the foal to learn on its own. As long as the baby is kept within sight, these sessions can give an owner time to do chores or complete projects around the farm.

“A great training tool for these exercises is a plastic tarp,” said Romeo. “Of course, make sure the dam is not afraid of the tarp first, then put it down in their stall while you’re feeding or cleaning. You’ll be amazed at what happens.”

Romeo says, a foal’s curiosity will lead it to start training itself with the tarp.

“They’ll go up to it, sniff it and pretty soon they’ll be walking on it, dragging it around and having a great time,” said Romeo. “Meanwhile, they will have gotten themselves accustomed to the noise and the sight of a big scary object.”

It’s also not unusual for Romeo to put learning tools out with a foal during its “playtime.”

“If you only have time to put the foal out, place some poles on the ground in their turnout pen,” said Romeo. “It will be the same reaction as they had to the tarp. They’re learning without you even touching them, and it’s reinforcing not to be afraid of foreign objects.”

Of course, there are many Foundation Foal Training™ techniques that require a hands-on approach. For these sessions, Romeo’s rule is spending time with a foal in small increments and often.

“First of all, if you are going to work with a baby, make sure you’re not interrupting its eating, sleeping or natural exercise patterns,” said Romeo.

She says that if she is training a foal, no matter what she is doing, if they want to eat, she lets them.

“I may pet them or rub them while they are nursing,” said Romeo, “but I never get in their way.”

While she does recommend sitting by an older baby’s side while it is lying down to get them used to having a person behind them for riding, she says she will never bother a sleeping foal.

"You don't have to interrupt their natural processes," said Romeo. "You can fit your training schedule into their needs. This ultimately also promotes a willing attitude in the foal."

Romeo also says she will never fight with a foal, but reinforces discipline with a calm demeanor.

"A good disciplinary ground rule to follow is that if it isn't cute for a 1,200-pound stallion, then it shouldn't be cute for a baby," said Romeo. "Don't let them get into bad habits of pressing your space or nibbling, because that baby is only going to get bigger and stronger. Keep a cool head and make sure they respect you."

She stresses that her program is a step-by-step process and one in which you can't cheat.

"I equate a 2-year-old horse who's never been worked with but is being taken to the trainer to a new-born baby in the hospital going straight to kindergarten," said Romeo. "Just because you have a horse that's a certain age doesn't mean that horse is automatically prepared to handle certain types of training."

Pointing out that there are no quick-fix substitutes for working with a foal every day, Romeo says she likes to consistently prepare her own foals for their futures. She does this with techniques such as using a plastic bag and an ace bandage to make a makeshift saddle and girth.

"Now when I do this, I don't just throw the plastic on their back and then sit back and watch the rodeo," Romeo said. "I gradually get them used to being around it."

She accustoms her foals to certain objects and processes by using what she calls her number-one training secret.

"My number one training secret is scratching," said Romeo. "I scratch them while I'm rubbing the tarp on their back and so forth. It's communicative, it's something they do to each other and it causes trust and enjoyment. It's built in. I've just learned to take advantage of it."

So effective is this training tool that Romeo says she tries not to scratch her horses unless she is training them in some way.

"I don't scratch them without an object in hand very often because it's so useful," said

"A good ground rule to follow is that if it isn't cute for a 1,200-pound stallion, then it shouldn't be cute for a baby."

Romeo's foals are free to interact with their dams during training. Nursing is never interrupted. Neither is napping.



PAULA J. HARRINGTON



PAULA J. HARRINGTON

Romeo uses scratching any time she introduces a foal to something new, such as the halter.

Romeo. "You can use it when you give shots or when you're introducing clippers, or anything you want them to be relaxed about."

And Romeo says she always stops a training session when the foal is happy and content. This is a direct result of what she calls her Foundation Foal Training™ success theory.

"My success theory is that, from the very beginning, you set a foal up to give you a 'yes' response every time you ask it to do something," said Romeo. "You set it up to succeed by building trust in bits and pieces through consistent handling over a period of months."

Gimmicks or tricks are a good way to fail, according to Romeo, and she believes patience

is the only way to accomplish a goal with a horse.

"Learn to wait and read a foal," she said. "If you think about it, you usually know when a horse is going to refuse to do something, but for some reason you ask anyway. Foal training should always be done with a flexible approach."

By setting a foal up for a positive training experience, Romeo says a handler will be able to ask it to learn more exercises with increasing complexity.

"For example, you can teach a foal to longe by having it walk in just two circles," said Romeo. "That's what Foundation Foal Training™ is about—learning simple mechanics and maneuvers at a reduced level. You can build on the program as the horse ages."

Learn to type

Every foal will have its own unique way of handling the pressures of growing into adulthood. As a result of studying these individualities, Romeo developed an idea called "ABC Personality Typing" for young horses, in order to get the most from the Foundation Foal Training™ concepts.

The idea behind typing is that personality tendencies such as calmness, stubbornness, aggressiveness and gentleness affect the way in which a horse should be trained. Romeo believes that identifying how a foal reacts and what he or she reacts to opens up communication lines between horse and owner, and, therefore, training sessions will be more productive.

"Foal personality types are evident within the first few days of their lives," said Romeo. "It's important to remember when you start this that there are no 'good' or 'bad' types. They all have their own unique positive and negative qualities."

Romeo says foals will generally fall into one of three categories: type A, which represents foals that are alert and sensitive; type B, which represents bold and aggressive foals; and type C, which represents foals that are calm and gentle.

"You will see that personality-typing foals in this way will accentuate positive personality traits and minimize negative ones," said Romeo. "Observe your baby and identify what you're dealing with and there will be a difference in your results."

For example, when working with type-A foals, who tend to be easily excitable and nervous, Romeo suggests more repetitive training sessions and a lot of review. She says that consistent, slower handling is a must, and the

owner should anticipate the foal overreacting to normal situations.

“Stay calm with this type,” she recommended, “and be conservative with physical discipline. Type A’s tend to take things personally.”

Type B’s, on the other hand, can be confident, stubborn and pushy. Their nature is dominant, and aggressive behavior such as kicking and biting is a possibility.

This type’s “fight before flight” mentality requires the handler to consistently reinforce his or her authority.

“Demand respect for your space,” said Romeo. “Try to anticipate and react strongly and quickly to aggressive behavior. Don’t leave room for benefit of doubt.”

Dominance and control sessions should be repeated often with a type-B foal.

The most poised of the three categories is the type-C foal. This baby will be confident, quiet, extroverted and brave. Laziness and pushiness are also common to this type, but training sessions can be less often and move at a faster pace.

“Keep it fresh, challenging and moving forward with these foals,” said Romeo. “Reinforce your space and reinforce that you want a response when you ask for it.”

Although this kind of problem-solving looks simple on paper, Romeo stresses that not every foal will be easily identifiable as a certain type.

“Personalities can be classic cases or, more often, are combinations of two types, such as A/C or A/B,” said Romeo. “And it’s not unusual for a foal to break type, such as a C getting spooked or a B being sweet. You have to adjust your handling accordingly.”

Romeo says that perhaps the most beneficial result of understanding a foal’s personality type is that doing so can identify in what areas it will excel as an adult.

“The more you observe, the more you’ll know what that horse wants to do with its life,” said Romeo. “We have babies that are a week old and just want to lope circles on their own, like little reiners.”

“They’re just like little kids. Some like art, some like science. If you see what they like you can end up not wasting a lot of money on training later.”

As Romeo delves deeper into preparing her complete program for public release, one thing is clear. For her, it is all about communication with foals and ensuring that the partnership of owner and horse is as fulfilling as possible.

“People need to know that birth through weanling age is a window of training that is crucial, beneficial and not difficult,” she said. “Everybody could be working with their foals during this time and reaping the benefits no matter what they’re planning on doing with their horse.”

For more information on Foundation Foal Training™, go to www.foundationfoaltraining.com. **PFJ**

Below: By watching foals interact with one another, Romeo learned to communicate with them.

Bottom: Romeo with friend and Foundation Foal Training™ partner, Linda Werner.



PAULA J. HARRINGTON



JERRY CIRCELLI