

Start Your Weanling's Training using TTEAM Techniques

By Marie Hoffman

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The fall brings thoughts of frisky horses, colorful scenery for trail rides, and time to wean the foals that were born later in the spring. After the whinnying has stopped is an ideal time to bond with the foal and teach him the important kindergarten lessons he will need for the rest of his life.

Some foals have not been handled and need their first education while other foals have been handled from birth on and only need a refresher on their kindergarten training. This training is to lead at the walk and trot, tie, stand for grooming and fly spray, and stand for the shoer. At our farm we handle our foals daily until they are one month old and lead them with their dams when they are turned out. Then at about 6 weeks old they stay out day and night. At this time we touch them daily but apart from the routine shots, worming and hoof trimming we let them be babies.

We wean them at 5 to 6 months old waiting until the foal is very independent. If the foal always hangs close to his dam we wait until he is more interested in his friends or the other mares and then wean we him. We wean them in a stall and leave the mare out with the other broodmares. We leave them in a stall for about a week. They usually are upset for three days. During this time we leave them alone except for feeding them. Once the foal settles down we go in and touch them using the TTouches.

These are circle touches that activate their nervous system in a way that encourages the foals to be calm and in a thinking state of mind. When they are in an instinctive state of mind they are thinking of flight and fight and are unable to learn as well. When we are with them, we want them to be in their thinking state of mind. They are calm and learn new lessons easier.

These touches are done with your long finger leading the rest of the fingers in a circle pushing the skin not rubbing the hair. They start at 6 o'clock go clockwise to 12 then around past 6 up to 8 o'clock and the back down to 6 o'clock then lifting. The touches can be done with the finger tips, pads of the fingers, or most of the hand making the circle.

TT.E.A.M. has names for the different touches. Finger tips with nails touching is raccoon touch. Pads of the fingers touching is called clouded leopard. When most of the hand is resting on the horse and is making the circle it is called lying leopard. Abalone is when the whole hand touches the horse and makes the circle. With all the TTouches the heel of the palm and thumb should always rest on the horse. The person's other hand should also be touching the horse somewhere.

To hold the foal, I put the halter on him. Then using a long light weight lead, I loop it around the bars or a post in the stall wall. I attach the lead to the side ring of the halter because the pressure on the halter there is less likely to trigger the foal's instinct to push into pressure. He pushes into the pressure on the back of his head and causing him to pull back against what ever is causing the pressure. I hold the lead in one hand letting the lead slide around the post should the foal want to back up. I let it slide while I am encouraging the foal to walk back up to where he was. I will tap the foal on his rump and I might even push him back to where he was. I want the foal to stay calm. I will let the foal bump the wall behind him with his rump if I am unable to encourage him forward before that. I hold the foal this way until he is easily coming forward from pressure on his halter.

Holding him with the lead around the post is called by TT.E.A.M. Taming the Tiger. While he is held this way I will do all his training to be groomed, touched and fly spray training. I use Taming the Tiger method of holding the foal whenever I am introducing a new step in his training, because of the sliding motion of the rope the foal does not ever feel trapped and will be less likely to go into his instinctive state of fight.

Then I will tie him with an elastic tie or with a bicycle inter tube with a short rope attached. The stretch will encourage the foal to come forward again instead of panic and start pulling frantically back. I do not tie to a solid rope until the foal demonstrates he will easily come forward from halter pressure when tied to the elastic rope.

I will put on a body rope if the foal is having trouble standing still. This is a light weight rope, like a ¼ inch climbing rope, that goes from his withers around the base of his neck then across his back and around his rump about where a butt rope would go, then back to his withers. Tie it in a bow after twisting the ropes together. This helps the foal feel his body and feel contained. It also helps the foal maintain his balance while you are picking up his hooves.

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Part of the foal's kindergarten training is to pick up his hooves for cleaning and trimming. I like to do T.T.E.A.M. leg circles when I am first handling the foal's legs and feet. The movement of the circles seems to stop the panic pulling away and kicking that some foals do when they have their legs handled. If the foal has never had his legs touched, I would start by stroking his legs with the wand, a four foot stiff whip. I will stroke his body and then his legs. Some foals are so afraid they will kick at the wand when it touches their legs. I will then stroke higher on the leg until I find a place the foal will accept the firm touch of the wand.

Then over a period of days I will gradually stroke farther and farther down the leg always going back and quitting on a part of his body or legs the foal will accept. At no time will I hit the foal for kicking. He is scared and his instinct is to keep his legs free to flee. His instinct is to kick anything off his legs that may trap them. So when he feels the wand he will kick at it to make it sure his legs are free. Hitting him will only confirm his fear that the wand will harm him. Using the wand as an extension of your hand also works on the foal's body if he is too afraid to let you touch a part of his body. I continue this until the foal will let me stroke his legs and will chew while I am doing it. I will use my fingers to rub the roof of his mouth or feed him a bit of grain.

Then with my hand I will stroke down the leg in quick strokes a few at a time making sure I am not pushing the foal's acceptance level. If the foal is still wanting to kick at me when I lift his leg, standing at his shoulder, I will slide a thick cotton rope around his leg down to his pastern and lift the leg with the rope. I will lift it with the rope over several sessions until he is comfortable with it. Then I will lift it with the rope, slide down the rope with my hands and without squeezing the leg hold the cannon above the fetlock. I quickly do a couple of small circles at the height the foal wants his leg to be, then place the leg down. The circles are parallel to the ground and 3 o'clock is even with the other leg. Then I would stroke the leg a couple of times with my hand to help the foal get over his fear of my hand touching his legs.

Gradually I stop using the rope and stroke the leg with my hand then pick it up. I will continue the leg circles stopping a few seconds, then circling again. The time I hold the hoof still is increased until I am able to pick up the hoof to clean it. I only do circles if the foal wants to take the foot back. The motion of the circle helps stop the foal from struggling to take his hoof back. The foal does not feel trapped if his hoof and leg are in motion. A horse or foal needs to feel safe to willingly let you handle his legs.

Once the foal will let me pick out his hooves easily, I will hold the hoof as the shoer does. I start with a few seconds and gradually increase the time. I make sure I hold the hoof as low as I can so I do not throw the foal off balance. I found when I use the body rope the foals maintain their balance better. When they feel balanced they do not struggle to get away.

Another important lesson is to get used to fly spray. I use a sprayer with water in it. I hold the foal using Taming the Tiger and position them against one wall with their butt also against the wall and in a corner. I do this so they cannot move much to get away from the spray. I reposition them before I spray the other side. I stand near their shoulder holding the rope in one hand and the sprayer in the other. I start by rubbing the sprayer all over the foal's body. When I actually start spraying, I spray the foals shoulder and back area. I use the sprayer slowly and quietly at first. I keep it up until the foal stands still for a second, then quit until next session even if it is only one or two sprays. Then in the next sessions I gradually spray the rest of the foal increasing the area a little each session. If the foal is quiet I might spray his whole body but if he is frightened I might take many sessions before I am able to do his whole body. I find containing the foal this way helps them learn to stand still quicker. Once the foal is standing quietly I will stay in the stall but not position him against a wall. After he is standing well in the stall, I will spray him in another part of the barn. I will position him against a wall if needed.

By now the foal is over the worst of his weaning experience and is ready to start his lessons on leading or get a refresher course in leading. In training the foal to lead, I use a well fitting halter with a light rope attached to the lower side ring. I also use a wand (four foot stiff whip) to signal the foal on the top of the croup to move forward (T.T.E.A.M. Dingo leading position). This is done by holding the foal from walking forward with the lead and stroking his back a few times. This teaches the foal to wait for the proper cue. Then at the same time, I signal lightly on the top of the croup with the wand, I will cluck, and signal on the lead for the foal to move forward. Once walking, I change my wand to my hand farthest away from the foal. I hold the middle of the wand with the handle end in front of the foal's head while we are walking (T.T.E.A.M. Elegant Elephant). To stop, I then will signal on the chest to stop along with whoa and a signal on the lead. If the foal bolts ahead, I

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stop him, reposition and start again. If he should hang back I will go back to the Dingo position and signal him to move forward. I am persistent and patient.

I am forming the foal's attitude toward future training. Should the foal want to play while leading, I will calmly get him under control and continue as if nothing happened. When he finds the same response to his actions he will soon stop asking if he can play because I give him the same answer every time. That answer is no. I use the wand, signaling on his chest to not move forward or on his croup to move forward. I do this without scaring him yet teaching him his to limit his behavior while he is handled. Doing his training in a way he can understand easily will help him to be a willing student and build his confidence.

It is best to start the leading training after the foal has been out to play. He will be able to focus better and will not try to play as much while you are training him to lead. This is especially true when training to trot in hand. To train the foal I will use the dingo position and tap the opposite side of the croup from where I am standing on. This helps keep the foal straight. I will cluck and start trotting with my feet. Once he starts to trot I let the lead slide so I do not accidentally jerk on his head for trotting. After a couple of times, the foal will have the idea and I can hold the lead and go into the Elegant Elephant while I am trotting along side the foal.

We lead our foals from both sides an equal amount of time. Once the walk work is well established I will lead the foal over poles and a trail bridge. This helps in hoof eye coordination and eventually trailer loading. I take the foal for walks all around the farm and down our little traveled gravel road. This helps build his confidence for experiences in his later life.

Keep your training sessions very short. If the foal is not responding in a manner you want, look at your methods. What could you change to make it easier for that foal to understand what you are asking of him? Set up the situation with whatever you do with your foal to be successful.

The foal's kindergarten training is the foundation for his future life and education. The use of T.T.E.A.M. techniques helps the foal understand his first lessons and encourages a willing attitude for his future training.