

After completing the adoption process and bringing your new charge home, help him adjust to his new surroundings and lifestyle

# The Transition Period



ANNE M. EBERHARDT PHOTOS

TRACY GANTZ

**R**emember the first time you traveled away from home for more than a few days? No matter how exciting your new adventure was, homesickness likely hit at some point. It might have taken you a while to make friends and adjust to your surroundings.

Any horse entering a new environment will go through a similar transitional period, which is magnified when that horse is an adopted animal. Maybe he suffered abuse, starvation, and neglect and needs a great deal of TLC. Perhaps he used to be a racehorse and now he not only is confronted with an unfamiliar environment but also has to learn a new job.

No matter the circumstances, when you adopt a horse you face a different and greater set of challenges than you would if you had purchased a “made” horse. Instead of flinging a saddle on his back and going for a ride immediately, you will need to give your adoptee time to adjust to his new life and patiently teach him what he needs to know. Along the way, you might find yourself bonding with this horse in a way you haven’t with any other animal.

Cassie Sprenger of Lakeville, Minn., and Leigh Gray of Bradbury, Calif., each train and rehabilitate rescued horses for

adoption. Sprenger and her husband run the Complete Equestrian Company, where Cassie trains horses and riders of all disciplines. Cassie was the grand champion of the 2010 Trainer's Challenge of the Unwanted Horse at the University of Minnesota, conducted by the Minnesota Hooved Animal Rescue Foundation (MHARF). The competition gives trainers an opportunity to show off their skills after putting about 90 days of training into a rescue horse. Then people can adopt these horses, knowing the animals have a base of early training on which to build.

Gray manages Winner's Circle Ranch, a racehorse layup facility in Bradbury, Calif., owned by Don Shields, DVM. She also operates the Thoroughbred Rehab Center Inc., which finds new homes and careers for former racehorses in California. Gray has placed more than 250 ex-racehorses that have been retrained as eventers, show horses, and trail companions.

Regardless of the type of horse you adopt, before you bring your new charge home you'll want to know as much about him as possible. Most adoption facilities are happy to provide you with information and help you choose a horse that will be the best fit (as discussed in Part 1 of this series in the August issue).

The longer the adoption facility has had a horse, the more barn manners he might have learned. For example, while a horse is under Gray's care, she teaches him to cross-tie, load and unload in the trailer, and stand quietly for bathing and clipping.

When you ask the adoption facility about the horse's personality, be sure to also find out about any nutritional and health needs. Reputable facilities will not put a horse up for adoption that isn't well on the road to recovery from any health issues that arose from his previous situation. However, you might need to continue work that the facility began.

Julia H. Wilson, DVM, Dipl. ACVIM, an MHARF board member, recommends closely assessing the condition of the horse's teeth and determining his prior deworming schedule.

"If they haven't been in the rescue for very long," says Wilson, "I would pay extra attention to the things that are common in the neglected horse. Has he eaten poisonous plants or sand? Does he have a parasite problem?" Work with your veterinarian to pinpoint any potential problems.



After giving your horse time to adjust to his new surroundings, saddling should be done gently and quietly, especially if you are dealing with a horse coming from an abusive situation.

The rescue facility should inform you where the horse is in his feeding program, dental care, and deworming. If the facility is still working to put weight on the horse, (as with any horse's diet) you'll need to ensure any dietary changes that come with moving to your farm are gradual. For example, if you feed a different type of hay or grain than the adoption organization, switch the horse over slowly. He has probably been under more mental and physiological stress than a normal horse, and you need to keep that stress to a minimum to help maintain his gastrointestinal health.

As with any new equine addition, you will initially want to keep your adoptee separate from other horses on the property. Not only is this good quarantine practice, but an adopted horse might also take longer to adjust to his new surroundings

than another transplant would. Introduce him to prospective barn or pasturemates incrementally.

Also ask the adoption facility about the condition of the horse's feet and any problems caretakers might have been addressing or managing. Few neglected horses have experienced regular hoof care or trimming, and their feet might be long and in poor condition. (Keep in mind that a neglected animal might have little experience with farrier handling, so determine his behavioral history with foot care and make picking up his hooves part of your initial groundwork and training.) Or, you might encounter horses that have been trimmed and shod regularly but might need some adjustments to achieve alignment. Former racehorses often have a long toe and short heel, for example. Work with your farrier

to adjust the hooves gradually. Abrupt changes in how the hoof is trimmed or shod could lead to lameness.

### Give Your Horse Time

It's important for you and your horse to get to know one another in a positive, low-stress environment. First lessons should emphasize the basics, such as proper handling and ground manners. Even if the adoption agency assures you that a horse has good groundwork, it's still a good idea to introduce him to his new life slowly by reinforcing the things he already knows.

When Sprenger gets a rescue horse, for example, she spends the first few days simply letting him adjust to his new environment. While you might be eager to ride your new charge, if you spend some time getting to know him first, the later training and riding should come more easily. "For the first couple of weeks, it's all groundwork," says Sprenger. "We do a lot of grooming, stretching, massaging, leading, longeing, backing—a lot of respect work. We want the horse to be aware of where we are and aware of where they are."

Along those lines, Gray recommends walking your horse around your facility, watching how he reacts to things and interacts with other horses. Taking the time to get to know the horse will help you discover his personality, comfort level, and perhaps what possible traumas he went through, she says. If a horse is going to shy at something, better to find that out when you're leading him on the ground rather than when you're in the saddle.

This slow acclimation is especially important for horses coming out of an abusive situation. "Many of these horses have a lack of trust with humans," says Sprenger. "Patience and love are the best things with them. They want to know that they're safe with you."

As you would with any horse, establish a routine and stick to it (e.g., feeding the horse at the same times every day). This will also help him adjust to dietary changes and settle in to your barn dynamic.

### Monitor Emotions

During this adjustment period Sprenger says adopters should evaluate a horse three ways—physically, mentally, and emotionally—noting that the emotional aspect can often prove the biggest obstacle.

Sullivan, the 3-year-old Sprenger won the 2010 challenge with, had his own

## DON'T GIVE UP IF THINGS GO WRONG

Many horses put up for adoption come with baggage. They might have been starved or abused, or at the very least they likely had a different job than the one you have in mind for them. As someone who wants to give one of these horses a second chance, you've probably already done your homework. You've asked the adoption facility for as much information as it has, and you've chosen a horse you think meshes with your personality and whose quirks you can manage. But what if things don't turn out the way you expect? Though some adoption facilities will take a horse back, don't be too quick to pull the plug.

First be sure the problem doesn't stem from health issues. For example, if your horse is throwing his head, is he having trouble with his teeth? Does the saddle fit properly, or does it hurt his back? Is a hidden lameness causing what looks like bad behavior?

Also be on the lookout for emotional issues. Leigh Gray of the Thoroughbred Rehab Center Inc., in California, recalled one horse she placed who lost weight in his new home. When she checked in on him, she discovered that he allowed a neighboring horse to eat his food. Moving him away from the bully solved the problem.

Don't hesitate to review earlier lessons. A horse coming from an abusive situation, for example, might take longer to learn new things.

"Try to find confidence-builders," says Gray. "Take little steps so that the horse can pretty much always succeed. You want to give the horse the chance to do the right thing."

Also don't be afraid to ask for advice. Get a friend to give you a different perspective, or take a few lessons with your horse from a professional trainer.—Tracy Gantz

emotional problems.

"He was physically and mentally old enough to handle everything that we were going to put him through," Sprenger says. "But ... about a month and a half into (training), he was abscessing like crazy and losing weight."

Sprenger interpreted the abscesses and weight loss as physical responses to Sullivan's emotional stress from training. She backed off of the lessons immediately

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CASSIE SPRENGER

and gave Sullivan more time to adjust. Sprenger almost didn't enter him in the challenge because she didn't want to add more stress to his life. But her husband pointed out that the reason to put the training into these horses was to get them adopted into good homes, so Sprenger gave it another shot.

"He was a little angel all day," says Sprenger of Sullivan's championship-worthy performance.

As it turned out, Sullivan's new home wasn't new at all. Emily Carmichael,

a 13-year-old who takes lessons from Sprenger, had fallen in love with Sullivan and convinced her father to adopt him. He's back at the Sprengers' training barn, enjoying a pampered lifestyle.

### Desensitizing Techniques

Once your new horse is comfortable with you, your facility, and the other horses on the property, you can step up his lessons. Some trainers such as Sprenger practice desensitizing methods in an enclosed area such as a round pen to develop a horse's mental soundness.

"I will often throw a rope up over their neck, their withers, the middle of their back, around their legs," she says. "I want to get them listening to me. You want to stand at a 45-degree angle off their shoulder while you're doing that in case they try to spook away from you or into you."

Sprenger works both sides of the horse and watches him closely to see how he reacts. She might put a piece of plastic on the end of the rope or use a Hula-Hoop to help with this stage. She also teaches the horse to disengage his hindquarters (to move laterally by placing one hindleg in front of and across the other), turn on his haunches, and flex his neck.

Saddling should be done gently and quietly, especially if you are dealing with a horse coming from an abusive situation. Sprenger starts with a Western saddle to give the rider more support.

As you graduate to riding your horse,

begin by teaching him the same lessons from the saddle that you taught him on the ground. Gray uses exercises such as shoulder ins, leg yields, and bending properly on circles to get the horse listening to her.

In some cases training an adoptee can be more challenging than working with even an unbroken horse, since you aren't familiar with what this horse knows or doesn't know. He might seem to have advanced training yet is missing out on some of the basics. Former racehorses, for example, often don't have well-developed trots because their race training has been at the canter and the gallop. Your initial patience and moving at the horse's individual learning pace should pay off in the long run.

**Take-Home Message**

Establish a routine and give your adopted horse time to adjust to you and his new surroundings before starting training. Also address any health challenges such as dental care, parasites, or changes in diet. Spend time grooming, walking, and being around your horse to get a sense of his personality and any quirks. Graduate to



Some trainers use desensitizing methods to develop an adopted horse's mental soundness.

ground lessons, followed by lessons under saddle, but be prepared to go back to the basics if necessary. The more time you take with your adopted horse, the better companion he should be. 🐾

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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