

Baby Boot Camp: Prepping Yearlings

BY NATALIE VOSS ANNE M. EBERHARDT PHOTOS

nyone who's watched scruffy, awkward weanlings playing in a pasture may wonder how they ever turn out to be the pristine, polished yearlings seen heading to sales rings across the country. No matter the size or location of the auction, a solid sales preparation program is crucial for presenting yearlings at their best at sale time. This includes a specific regimen of exercise, handling, nutrition, grooming, and hoof trimming to transform bubbly babies into marketable investment opportunities.

Off to school

Consignors have their own preferences about when to begin yearling preparation in relation to a sale. Generally, the program begins at least 60 days before yearlings ship to the sale location, but some consignors prefer as much as 120 days.

Many consignors avoid sticking rigidly to a formula in favor of tailoring the time line to a horse's individual needs. Heavier horses or those physically or mentally immature may require supplementary feed and more exercise to achieve the same look as their peers.

Many consignors will let farms prepare horses themselves if owners prefer. Taylor Made Sales Agency is one of these consignors that monitor yearlings' progress regardless of whether they are



Handwalking builds conditioning in young horses and teaches them how to handle themselves when led



going through the process at Taylor Made's facility.

"Most of the people we deal with know the breed and know the animal, so they do a pretty good job," said John Hall, yearling manager at Taylor Made.

Of course, the process of preparing a horse for its sales and racing career can really be said to begin much earlier than 60 days ahead of their ship date.

"It really begins at the moment of conception," said Barbara Vanlangendonck of Summerfield Sales in Morriston, Fla. "This is someone's investment...and by the time it comes to us, it already has two years in it."

For Vanlangendonck, thorough foal management includes carefully constructed nutrition plans, specific hoof trimming to encourage a good walk, and medication of minor cuts and scrapes to prevent permanent damage or scarring.

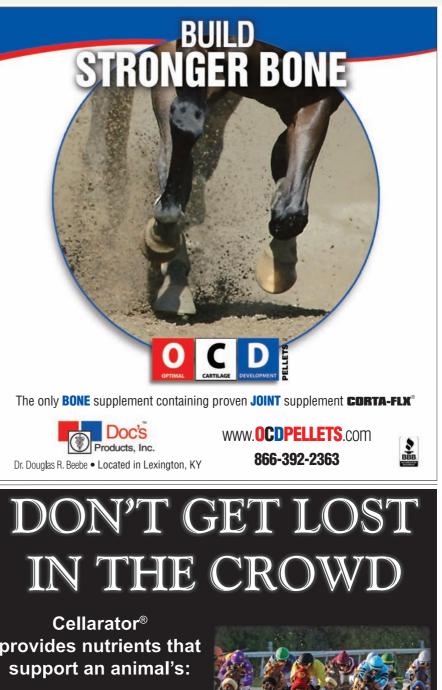
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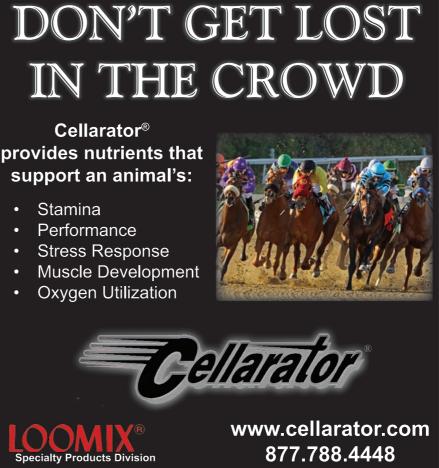
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Today Quillin produces nearly all of its merchandise on the premises and specializes in rush and custom orders. Mail and website orders account for most of the business. However, Quillin gets a boost in store traffic during the sales and Keeneland race meets.

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Handling foals from the beginning also contributes to their eventual preparation for sale, according to Padraig and Aveen Campion of Blandford Stud.

"It starts the day they're born, when you teach them to walk [on the lead]," Padraig Campion said.

Nutrition: Clean your plate

Nutritional balance is fundamental to stimulating the growth and muscle development needed to help a horse look its best at sale time. The ideal feeding plan depends on its location as well as its individual requirements, so there are no hard-and-fast rules about feeding sales yearlings.

For yearlings in Kentucky, where grass is freely available for much of the spring and summer, turnout time results in a happily munching, satisfied yearling. Many Kentucky programs call for a grass and alfalfa mix hay to be fed inside each horse's stall.

For horses being prepared for sale in areas with lower, sandy soil, particularly in some areas of Florida, pasture management is especially important to keep grass from becoming overeaten or stressed, resulting in fewer available nutrients. Hay is also fed outside as well as inside.

Sand colic, which can occur when sand accumulates in the intestine, can also be a concern, although Vanlangendonck reports it is not as typical in her area as commonly thought. Even so, she is careful to survey, supplement, and rotate pastures regularly to give soils a rest.

Grain is typically fed several times a day according to each consignor's preferences. Typically, yearlings will receive either a pelleted or textured ("sweet feed") grain with between 12% and 14% protein. Sales-prep grain may also have a higher fat content to maintain weight. Consignors may work with local feed





European-style freewalkers are a low-risk way to build muscle

companies to tailor a custom grain mix to their preferences, or to complement the nutrients naturally available in the grass on their facilities.

Many sales-prep nutrition plans also include supplements. Corn or rice bran oil is commonly added to feed to provide extra, palatable fat in the form of omega fatty acids that improve skin and coat condition. Flaxseed, either whole or crushed, is also an excellent source of these omega fatty acids and is sometimes used in combination with oils. Beet pulp is another good component in the diet.

Biotin supplements are also popular among many managers feeding a Thoroughbred with delicate feet. Biotin is a B-vitamin naturally found in many horses' diets but one they cannot produce themselves. It is involved in many metabolic processes in the horse's body and is believed to stimulate hoof growth, a huge positive for horses with thin hoof walls that are prone to cracking and chipping.

While some consignors believe in a minimalist approach to supplements, others are constantly trying new products in hopes of gaining an edge for their sale prospects. Denali Stud yearling and sales manager Donnie Snellings reports he is feeding this year's sales yearlings a joint supplement containing glucosamine, chondroitin sulfate, and MSM, all of which promote cartilage growth and reduce inflammation to help protect young legs from early injury.

Taylor Made Sales uses supplements, which are rich in gamma oryzanol to support growth and stimulate appetite.

Vanlangendonck said Summerfield has an arsenal of supplements available to meet individual needs of their horses.

Taylor Made's program places nutrition at the foundation of the yearling preparation pyramid, citing it as the most critical component of building a successful sales prospect and racehorse. They make an effort to balance the entire diet according to the maturity level of their pastures in order to achieve consistent growth in yearlings. Taylor Made management is particularly concerned with lowering the amount of sweet feed in the diet, as they have found this can lead to growth spurts and resulting damage to young joints.

Virtually all farms will begin keeping sales horses inside during the day in late spring, which provides the opportunity to split grain rations into two to three meals.

For many growing horses, the volume of feed they receive daily (up to 18 to 20 quarts for some) proves too overwhelming to finish at one time. Snellings, for instance, has found yearlings will clean up their buckets best if they are fed three times a day, a practice that may also prevent colic.

Exercise: Baby steps

There is at least as much variation in exercise programs from consignor to con-

signor as there is in feed programs. Every yearling's exercise regimen should include instruction on walking politely on a lead, turning and "setting up," a specific way of standing in which horses stand squarely so potential buyers get a clear view of each leg when they assess the horse from the side.

"I can't tell you how important it is for the animal to handle itself," said Vanlangendonck. "If the horse is on its hind legs, you can't sell it."

Taylor Made estimates that a horse's

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for a gradually increasing period of time

walk can often have between a 25% and 30% effect on sale price.

Horses should walk briskly, striding out to demonstrate their athleticism, and ideally should appear to have a good disposition. Those wearing halters are trained to wear Chifney bits, metal loops that sit in the mouth and clip onto the halter to provide extra control. Some consignors show their horses in bridles with snaffle bits to achieve a different look in the walking ring.

Beyond basic schooling, there are several ways to condition sale yearlings. The most traditional method is handwalking

each day. This is sometimes done in the barn aisle, but may also be done around the farm to allow horses to build muscle on gently rolling hills.

"It's one of the most important training tools you can have," Snellings said of handwalking. "It's absolutely a training emphasis. You have to teach them to walk together [with you]; no pulling.'

In addition, or instead of handwalking, many facilities have one or more European-style free walkers, in which horses are separated by moving metal mesh gates. In time they learn to move behind the front gate and do not need to be tied to the walker, allowing them a greater sense of freedom and reducing the risk for restraint-related accidents. Some consignors only walk horses in these machines, while others jog them there as well, eliminating the need for hands-on labor while building muscle on the horses.

For some yearlings, handwalking and jogging may not do the trick. Taylor Made and Denali both ship heftier horses to facilities with equine swimming pools for more intensive, no-impact exercise.

Snellings noted this also is particularly helpful for horses that have conformation or radiographic issues because the nogravity work will not stress joints.

Padraig Campion of Blandford Stud also likes to put heavier horses under



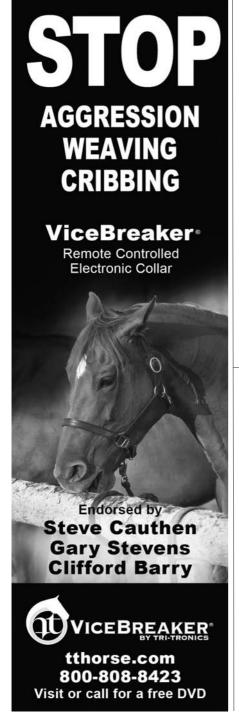
ViceBreaker is manufactured by Tri-Tronics, which has been engineering sophisticated electronic equipment for dogs since 1968, and ViceBreaker since 2002. The concept of ViceBreaker is the same as electronic dog collars, but they are not alike or interchangeable. Correction levels on ViceBreaker have been engineered specifically for horses.

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tack with side reins and longe them in a roundpen. The side reins help yearlings move more efficiently by putting pressure on their mouths, encouraging them to drop their heads and lift the muscles across their necks and backs. This sort of schooling can help them walk more athletically at sale.

Campion thinks this approach gives his yearlings a little head start on the breaking process, and it provides him with a little extra control as he jogs and canters the horses on a longe line.

Grooming:

Daily coat care is vital to achieving the sleek, shiny look desirable at sale. The most successful sales consignors agree, however, that the first part of coat care is keeping yearlings out of the hot summer sun as soon as they begin their prep program. Horses come in early in the morning and do not go back out to pasture until shortly before sunset to prevent bleaching of dark coats and sunburn, which results in dry, dull haircoats.

Sergio de Sousa, managing partner at Hidden Brook Farm, prefers to body clip yearlings with sunburned coats as the prep work begins and start from scratch.

The regimen for sales horses includes a grooming session at least once daily, with a lot of currying to remove dead hair and bring up natural oils in the coat and rubbing the coat with a soft rag. Some programs use spray conditioners on coats, while others restrict this type of product to manes and tails for detangling purposes. There isn't much additional treatment needed for coats other than the occasional bath.

"If our feed program is working, they look good," said Campion.

Maintaining thick tails can be problematic, according to Taylor Made yearling manager John Hall. Yearlings will sometimes chew each other's tails, so Taylor Made horses' tails are rubbed with baby oil and cayenne pepper to make them less tasty for naughty pasture mates. He also notes it is important to detangle tails by hand, not with combs, which can yank and remove tail hairs, leading to gradual thinning.

Trimming and shoeing: "No foot, no horse"

Equally important to strengthening the body is maintaining young horses' feet. Most consignors have a go-to foot expert who is on the farm often to trim and reevaluate yearlings' feet. A skilled blacksmith will trim according to a horse's conformation to correct undesirable growth and improve a crooked gait.

"I don't mind having a horse that's not perfect in conformation but if they're not perfect in their feet, then you have two

"Back to Basics" Barn Bag Feeding Program

Grazing animals are capable of manufacturing nutrients within their gastrointestinal tracts. Microbes convert plant cellulose, minerals, and water into their entire daily nutrient requirement. In comparison, animals with simple stomachs including humans, canines, etc., do not have these "microbial factories" and must consume additional nutrients in order to survive.

In the horse, the bacterial action on cellulose is the main calorie source rather than the sugars and carbohydrates that simple stomach creatures must obtain from their diet. Cellulose equals calories for horses, while cellulose is fiber for humans and other simple stomach species. Horses evolved consuming grasses and grass seed as their diet. The terms "grass seed" and "grain" are interchangeable. Oats are the most common grass seed fed to horses.

A diet of grasses and their seeds (oats) most nearly meets the daily nutrient requirement for horses than any other diet. This diet requires the least amount of nutrient supplementation. The Barn Bag® supplies the nutrients to balance and increase the feed efficiency of the grass hay and pasture diet. Add whole oats to the diet, if necessary, to maintain body condition. Individual horses may have "special needs," such as joint or hoof problems, and can benefit from additional supplementation.

According to J. Frank Gravelee, founder of Life Data Labs, "Over-supplementation is a common problem facing the horse today, often resulting in interference of proper metabolism. Grass hay and/ or pasture, along with the Barn Bag® supplies nutrients to fulfill the nutrient requirements of the typical horse without over supplementation and has the additional benefit of controlling starch and sugar intake."

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problems to deal with," said de Sousa.

For most consignors, painting the hoof walls with a standard hoof dressing daily or weekly is a central part of the grooming routine. Hoof dressing strengthens hoof

walls to reduce the number and severity of cracks or chips a horse may suffer during a dry period when the ground is hard and to toughen the foot during a rainy period. Summerfield also packs horses' feet as

needed to strengthen the hoof walls.

Most yearling managers like to let their horses go barefoot for a portion of their preparation program, but virtually all will wear shoes at a sale. Besides the element of tradition in applying sale plates, Snellings says that the gravel dust surfaces at larger auction venues such as Fasig-Tipton and Keeneland can be hard on horses' feet if they have thin soles and low heel bulbs.

While some programs call for the first set of shoes to be put on several weeks before the sale and reset before shipment, others wait until just before the horse leaves the farm to apply shoes. For some it's a choice between letting the foot grow naturally and protecting it from unsightly chips in the last few weeks before yearlings are presented to buyers.

Campion elects to shoe three weeks before a sale to let the young horses adjust to the feeling of walking in shoes in addition to providing them protection from hard surfaces.

"It's just like when you get a new pair of shoes; you need to beak them in," he said.

The Big Picture

More important than adhering to a plan, the most successful consignors agree that individualizing their programs is vital. At Blandford Stud, Campion watches the yearlings particularly carefully when they turn out every night to check for new behaviors or physical conditions that might indicate they need a change.

"It's different looking at a horse in the stall from looking at one in the pasture," he noted.

"Basic nutrition, grooming, exercise, and handling—there's 100 different ways you can do those things and they're all right," said Vanlangendonck.

Taylor Made, Denali, and Hidden Brook pride themselves on quality care tailored to each client and horse.

"The biggest thing involved in [dealing with] this number of horses is it's important to treat each as an individual," said Hall. "Don't expect every horse to conform to one program."

For de Sousa and Snellings, a central part of individual treatment is knowing when to avoid pushing to prevent possible injury or mental stress to young horses.

"Treat them as natural as possible ... the sales ring is not the end of their career; it's not even the beginning for a horse," de Sousa said.

In the end, though, the whole point of sales prep is to present the yearling in the best possible light on sale day.

"We make them bloom; horse sales have always been competitive ... buyers are going from barn to barn, and your horse has got to hold up," said Vanlangendonck.

Circle T Farm

Ask Danny Turner of Circle T Farm, near Lexington, Ky., about the most important element of his operation, and he'll always tell you it's the horse that comes first. Danny started working with horses on the farm as a young man before moving to the ranks of management. A high point in his career came when he managed the farm that raised 2007 Kentucky Derby winner Street Sense. At that point he decided to venture out on his own and established Circle T Farm, a family business that he operates with his sons, offering boarding, sales prep, breaking, and training. Danny, a hard-working professional horseman, prides himself on giving each horse his personal attention. He makes sure every horse is taken care of as if it were his own, and works directly with his clientele to help them enjoy the experience and get the most out of horse ownership and the sales experience. His sales prep team works with each prospect to make sure the individual is at its best, in both appearance and attitude. Circle T preps for all types of sales including yearling, breeding stock, weanling, and 2-year-olds in training. Its facilities include a freestyle four-horse walker that helps prepare young horses physically and mentally for the demands of the sales ring. Danny's hands-on style of communication and individual goal-setting deliver a custom program that puts each horse exactly where it needs to be for optimal sales success. Danny currently has his race training operation stabled at Churchill Downs and is accepting horses for training as well as taking sales prep candi-

For more information, contact Danny Turner, Circle T Farm, 2672 Newtown Pike, Lexington, KY 40511. Phone: cell: (859) 707-3020. E-mail: dorjturner@aol.com or visit Circle T on the Web at www.circletfarm.com.

