



Puzzle Pieces

BY JASON SHANDLER

Breaking yearlings, like solving jigsaw puzzles, is best done piece by piece

For Gene Vosler, breaking Thoroughbred yearlings is similar to piecing together a jigsaw puzzle.

When you first set sight on a jigsaw, Vosler said, you look at the picture, take one step at a time beginning with the corners, continue adding pieces to the inside, and if need be, spend more time on the difficult parts. Never move to another step before completing the one you are currently working on.

Likewise, with yearlings, according to Vosler, you must visualize the finished product before starting, begin with the easy steps, and only teach young horses something else when they have mastered the previous task. If you are patient and meticulous, the final outcome will be a sound, thriving horse ready to move on to the trainer.

“If you break it down into those small parts, it helps you stay focused on what you’re doing,” Vosler said. “You don’t want to overwhelm yourself or the horse.”

“To me, it’s crucial to know what the end is going to look like from the very beginning. Because if you don’t know, the horse sure as heck isn’t going to know. All they have been doing up until this point in their lives is eating grass and drinking water. It is up to me to teach them what to do.”

A lifelong horseman, Vosler uses this thorough training method at Margaux Farm near Midway, Ky., where he has been breaking yearlings since 2006. His job, he said, is to teach yearlings the basics of being a racehorse correctly, and to keep them sound. From there, it is up to talent and the trainer to take over.

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“My job is not to get the horse ready to race,” Vosler said. “I want to make sure he leaves the farm sound and with the right attitude.”

Vosler, 43, has decades of hands-on experience to draw upon. Though this is his first stint breaking horses for a major farm, Vosler grew up around horses in rural Ashland, Neb., halfway between Omaha and Lincoln.

“On my dad’s side, our whole family has been involved with horses going back to my great-grandfather,” said Vosler, who lives with his wife, Julie, and their two children in Georgetown, Ky. “I was on the racetrack with my dad, who was an exercise (rider) and trainer for many years, from as far back as I can remember. My brother and uncle were in the business too, so it’s all we know.”

Vosler’s career with horses has taken him all over the country—Nebraska, Arizona, Texas, Louisiana, and Chicago—where he has galloped, trained, and shod horses for many people. In 2004 he moved his family to Kentucky and took a job as an outrider at Keeneland.

As an outrider, it is Vosler’s job to watch the horses on the racetrack and make sure the riders are following the rules. He is also there to catch runaway horses and react to emergencies. It is this latest position that has helped Vosler pick up on key training elements—many of which he uses when breaking yearlings.

“Being an outrider forced me to



Gene Vosler introduces a yearling to a saddle pad in the round pen at Margaux Farm in Kentucky

ANNE M. EBERHARDT PHOTOS

learn some new things, especially knowing what to look for with horses with physical issues,” Vosler said. “I think a lot of what you see on the racetrack is also applicable to yearlings.”

In 2006 Vosler was introduced to Margaux co-owner and managing partner Steve Johnson, who was beginning to have a change of philosophy when it came to yearlings. In the past Margaux would send most of its young horses to South Carolina or Florida to be broken. But after seeing some of them come back to the farm with soundness issues, Johnson decided to do the work right on the 320-acre farm. That is where Vosler came in.

“We were finding that the majority of our young horses were coming back to us with physical problems, whether it was issues with shins, tendons, splints, whatever,” said Johnson. “With some of the larger programs, it is incumbent on them to follow a schedule; to get the horses in and out during a certain period of time. We always felt there was a better way to do it and to integrate the process right here.

“Gene is a team player and understood what we were trying to do. He is a complete horseman who basically has lived his life on the back of a horse. He has the ability to look at the big picture. He realizes that not



Vosler with the tools of his trade

every yearling is going to be on the same schedule. Soundness is our main goal.

“We just recently had our first horse come back to the farm (with a minor phys-

ical ailment). After breaking more than 20 horses (per year) for us, I think that is remarkable.”

BREAKING PHILOSOPHIES

Though each trainer has his or her own philosophy and each horse is different, Vosler believes it is very important to introduce yearlings to ponies right from the start. So from day one, he will take them to the round pen for an introduction to both pony and rider.

“Because I sit up here on the (Keeneland) racetrack all day long, and typically watch for horses that people are having trouble with, the main common denominator that I see in horses having trouble training is they are not broke to the pony,” Vosler said. “They are scared of the person on the horse next to them. It’s not the pony they are scared of, it’s me being up there. So, from the very beginning, I take them out of the stall and right to the round pen.”

Vosler, who will usually begin his training in the early part of January, likes to turn the yearlings loose in the round pen so they can move their feet. He’ll move his pony next to the yearling, expecting the young horse to be afraid at first. But gradually it becomes more accustomed to having company around, and will let Vosler pet and brush it.

“I feel like if you can’t ride up to a horse with a pony and put a halter on them, they are not ready to ride,” Vosler said. “They are used to seeing people on foot, but you have to get them used to us on another horse.”

Once a yearling feels comfortable with this step, Vosler will add the saddle. He expects the horse to buck a bit at first, but after about a week it should feel comfortable enough to have a rider on its back. In week two Vosler will move the horse to Margaux’s indoor arena, which is about 100 x 200 and has safe footing for horses to move on. It is typical for them to run and play in there, which Vosler encourages. Midway through the third week, they have made their way to the racetrack, or in this case, Margaux’s 1½-mile uphill turf gallop area.

“We’re not asking a whole lot of them at this point; we’ll just walk or jog them,” Vosler said. “We just let the horse start to feel comfortable (being ridden).”

At this point the young horse should be able to be controlled with reins, but only to a certain degree.

“It’s all about being able to control their feet,” Vosler explained. “If you can do that, you don’t have to be perfect with their face or mouth; that part will come later. A lot of times, people want more control over the yearling’s face from the beginning because they aren’t able to control their feet.

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I would rather control their feet first, because when you're riding horses, it's like a boat—you can't control it if it's not moving. Once it starts moving, you can just help it along."

At the end of 30 days, Vosler said it is reasonable to expect to be able to stand up on the yearling and jog them like a racehorse. By the end of 60 days, he expects to be able to gallop it. It is at this point where Vosler said another key, but often overlooked, aspect of breaking should begin: teaching the horse to change leads.

It is Vosler's opinion that horses must be taught, from the beginning, to run on their right lead. The reason is that when a horse begins racing, it must leave the starting gate breaking on its right lead and then switch to the left lead around the turn. It must be an automatic response since there is no time for a jockey to teach them. If it isn't automatic, poor balance will be the result, which can eventually lead to unsoundness.

"A horse should never think it's OK to start out galloping on its left lead, and it's up to me to teach him," Vosler said. "I'll help him move to the right to begin with, and somewhere along the line, maybe after 200 yards, I'll switch him to his left. That's the way they do it in races, so it should become an automatic thing for the horse. They'll pick it up with a little bit of practice if you teach them correctly.

"The gallop is somewhat unbalanced by nature, so when they are on their right lead, there is a time when all of their weight is on that right leg, and vice versa. So it's essential that we teach



Margaux has a 1½-mile uphill turf gallop

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Margaux Farm

Location: Near Midway, Ky.; at current location since 1993

Co-owners: Steve Johnson, managing partner; Dr. Ira Mersack, Dr. Joseph Fowler Jr., and Lynn Fowler

Acreage: 320

Staff: 30

Stallions: Cryptoclearance; Devil His Due; Petionville; Kela; The Cliff's Edge. Also have ownership in Fairbanks, who stands at Northview Stallion Station in Pennsylvania

Horses on farm: 220, including 120 mares, 60 foals, and 40 yearlings

Mission Statement: "To breed, raise, and develop high-caliber Thoroughbred racehorses, while maintaining respect for the horse, land, our clients, and our employees."

Philosophy: "Our main goal is to develop bone," said Johnson. "Our emphasis is on producing sound horses in a relaxed environment without too much stress. Our management philosophy is to care for the horse first."

"We're mainly a commercial breeding operation, but in the last few years we began racing and putting together racing partnerships."

"We've tried to model ourselves after some of the successful farms that integrate all aspects of the industry—mating, breeding, raising, breaking, and racing horses. Having the complete package is important to us."



them to switch leads to stay balanced.

"I see so many horses on the racetrack that are confused because they haven't been taught this. They're trying this and trying that, but they aren't doing it the right way. Changing leads is everything for keeping these horses sound. They have got to stay balanced."

Because Margaux and Vosler put such an emphasis on soundness, it is important to them not to overwork a yearling during the first few months of training. Vosler said the cold winter weather

in Kentucky is not necessarily a negative, and, in fact, it can be beneficial.

"You don't want to over-train these babies," Vosler emphasized. "Sometimes in places like Florida, where it is nice every day, it is too easy to overwork them. So in Kentucky, on days when we're getting bad weather and we don't want to go outside, we can go to the round pen or arena, and that's when you can break up the training and focus on other things. That time off is very important to a young horse. You have to give them a break."

"We're going to get these horses where they need to be eventually. But the focus at Margaux is to let them do it at their own pace. We are trying to avoid those little, nagging injuries that can be so prevalent. And so far, we've been able to do that." □

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