

STARTING YOUR COLT

Taking the first ride carries responsibility

By Joe Wolter

More people are beginning to realize how starting a colt can affect the rest of their lives – the horse and the people who'll be riding him.

Colt-starting clinics are popular these days for students and spectators. Horsemen make it look easy, but there's a lot involved. And there's a lot at risk. Besides the rider getting hurt, I think we risk compromising that horse's career in ways we don't usually link back to those first days or months of handling.

Perhaps we get more spectators at colt-starting clinics because the horses make such big changes – dramatic changes. They go from independence, wandering around, grazing all the time, to accepting a halter, a saddle and a person on their back.

Compared to that, you might not see a real high percentage of change in any one ride. Watching a horse's day-to-day progress becomes more like watching grass grow. It doesn't seem like anything's happening, but after a few days or weeks, you see measurable change.

I guess that saying, "You reap what you sow," applies to horses, too. Those first couple of rides, you're sowing seeds that grow into something else later. Hopefully, you're sowing something of value, but it's easy to unintentionally plant a few weeds in there, too.

A lot of people aren't real particular about who gets on their colt the first time, or how much feel this person has for young horses. Some folks might

even plan to have the horse professionally trained, but let anyone who's not afraid ride him first. I can't say it's wrong, because a lot of horses that we consider good horses got started despite us. I just personally wonder

how different it might have been for the horse, or for the person riding him next, if that horse had gotten off to a really good start. And I wonder how much better that horse might have been.

A lot of people take pride in starting a colt themselves, and I sure understand that. I just hope they think about it

first. Decide if the risk is worth the reward. I'm not just talking about physical risks. The potential for injury is greater for someone who isn't experienced, but not even the best cowboys are immune. Also think in terms of the risk to that horse's potential.

People often send horses to a trainer to finish, or sometimes to "fix," as the case might be. Perhaps they'd be ahead to let someone experienced start the horse. If a horse has a good foundation, later on he may get confused, but we can go back to that good foundation and rebuild our good horse.

Picking who starts your colt might require more research. Starting colts isn't a high-profile job, but there are a lot of people who specialize in it who want the colts they rode first to succeed. Like in any job, look for some-



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The first rides

can affect a horse's attitude and confidence for a long, long time.

one who likes what he or she does – especially someone who genuinely likes horses, for there are some who don't.

On the other hand, starting your colt yourself could be the most rewarding experience of your life and you might give your horse the best start he could get.

Either way, just realize your responsibility to your horse. ☺

Joe Wolter of Whitt, Texas, worried that readers might think he picked this subject because starting colts is his main business. We assured him that a guy who can't remember to carry business cards and is too shy to tell people he has a video for sale isn't likely to be called a self-promoter. His AQHA-affiliate clinic schedule is on page 58.