

Cosequin Presents Aftercare Spotlight: What Racehorses Already Know

by **Jen Roytz**

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Coady Photography

By the time they break from the gate the first time, racehorses already have a wealth of knowledge

Nobody will argue that getting a horse straight off the track and teaching it to be successful in a new discipline is a project. That's why they're often called "project horses."

Have you ever taken a break from focusing on what they don't know and considered what they already do know? By the time a Thoroughbred gets to his or her first race at age two or three (let alone his 10th race, 30th race, etc.), he has learned more lessons than most non-racehorses learn by the time they're twice their age. Most likely, he has been clipped, bathed, trailered, bandaged, bridled, saddled, ridden (both alone and in groups), given meds, stood for the farrier, had their mane pulled and more.

“There's a lot of work that goes into retraining a horse from the racetrack for a new career, but there is also a lot that goes into preparing a young, yet-to-be racehorse for the racetrack and beyond,” said Tara Murty, who works at Blackwood Stables and gallops at the racetrack for trainer Vicki Oliver and others. An eventing rider growing up, Tara is at home on the backs of Thoroughbreds. At Blackwood Stables, she and other riders start young Thoroughbreds under tack and prepare them for their introduction to the racetrack.

The average racehorse learned how to carry a rider at the end of their yearling year or early in their two-year-old year. Much like a person being taught how to ride, there are an infinite number of methods people use to teach a horse to be ridden, but there are also some constants among them all.

Whether using long lines or bellying up and eventually swinging a leg over and sitting on a horse, one of the first lessons a young horse is taught is left, right and stop.

“We teach our trainees to drive and lunge before introducing a rider's weight. Once under saddle, they do a lot of figure eights in fields to learn to steer and pick up the correct leads,” said Tara. “A good rider will also teach them to move off of their leg and maintain appropriate contact. It makes them easier to gallop and, later on down the road, easier to retrain if you start them right from the beginning.”

Often, horses learning to be ridden will go out in groups. They learn to be comfortable with horses on either side of them, in front of them and behind them and learn to focus on their riders' cues in situations where they can easily be distracted by outside influences. This not only prepares them for morning training hours at the racetrack, where numerous horses are training on the track at the same time, going various speeds and both directions. It also prepares them for their life after racing in situations like a busy warm-up ring at a show, group riding lessons, and trail rides.

Another key lesson for horses at this stage is an introduction to the starting gate. If started at a training facility, the horses will often be introduced to the starting gate at the farm, being led through it with a rider aboard before or after they have trained. Eventually they learn to stand in the gate, then stand with the doors closed and gently opened, then walk or jog out of the gate. This graduated process culminates with a horse learning to stand in the gate with the doors closed and gallop out of the gate when the doors open. The process typically takes several weeks.

The average racehorse is a well-traveled beast. Most Thoroughbreds traveled on a horse trailer or van several times before their first race. If they were sold at a public auction as a weanling, yearling or two-year-old in training, they traveled to and from the sale grounds (and in many cases to a farm that prepared them for sale prior to being taken to the sale grounds). They then go somewhere to be started under saddle before traveling to the racetrack.



Tara Murty aboard Union Rags

Once a racehorse, their travels continue, shipping from one racetrack to another for various races or meets, or to a farm for refreshing or layup. If they run in claiming races (which, chances are good they have, as it's not horses like Exaggerator or Nyquist who will be looking for second careers as a budding 2'6" hunter in a few years), they have probably traveled even more, going to a new barn and often a new track if and when they get claimed.

Young Thoroughbreds get handled a lot, and by a lot of different people. When in the process of being trained, most Thoroughbreds are turned out for part of or all of the day and night (depending on weather conditions) and are brought in daily for grooming, training, bathing, farrier work, veterinary appointments and more. Once at the racetrack, their typical day includes being ridden, bathed, hand-walked (typically more than once a day), groomed, fed and legs bandaged after strenuous exercise. By the time they retire, they have been handled and ridden by a variety of people with different looks, smells, handling techniques and riding styles.

“Racetrack horses have had a multitude of riders, equipment bits so it makes them so adaptable,” said Tara. “Many horses that have not raced often have had only one or two riders, and they have only been taught to do things one specific way. I think adaptability is one of the biggest advantages the racetrack teaches a horse.”

So, the next time you're thinking about your OTTB “project horse,” and all he or she has to learn, take a moment to assess all of the knowledge they've already got stored away. Usually, the difference between what you're teaching them to do and what they've been taught to do is a simple matter of connecting the dots.

Jen Roytz is a marketing, publicity and comprehensive communications specialist based in Lexington, Kentucky. A native of Cleveland, Ohio, her professional focus lies in the fields of equine, health care, corporate and non-profit marketing. She holds board affiliations with the Make a Wish Foundation, Thoroughbred Aftercare Alliance and the Retired Racehorse Project, among others. While she currently has no plans to build an arc, she is the go-to food source for two dogs, two cats and two off-track Thoroughbreds.

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