

# The Transformation

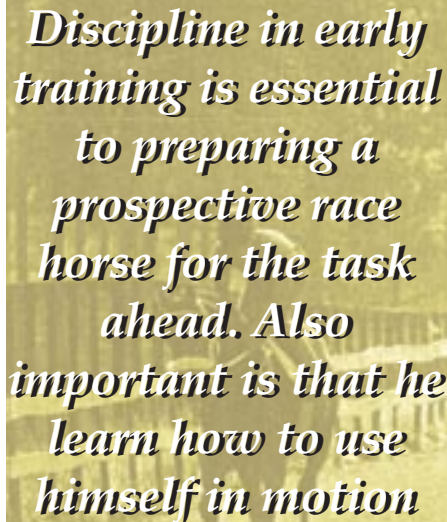
By Paula Turner

You are an exercise rider, jogging your horse back toward the barn along the outside rail, having just galloped one and a half miles. "Heads up!" you hear someone shout, and you automatically scan the entire race track to see what the trouble is and prepare to deal with it.

There is a 2-year-old coming from behind you, running off and completely out of control. You get your horse's attention, push him up into the bit, quicken your pace slightly, and let him know he has got to be listening to you. Suddenly the 2-year-old is plunging past you, much too close for comfort, the rider hopelessly sawing on his mouth. Your mount shies, but stays in hand. As you calm him, a nauseous feeling rises in your stomach, for you see a disaster about to unfold: The 2-year-old has bolted for the inside rail, wrong way, while two horses are working on that same rail, about to come around the turn. Their riders cannot hear your shouts, and you cannot watch the crash.

When you look back, one horse is running loose; two riders and one horse lie still. The third rider is limping to the other two, while the remaining horse tries to get up, but cannot. Before the hour is out two riders will be hospitalized with serious injuries, and two horses will be dead.

There is no excuse for it.



***Discipline in early training is essential to preparing a prospective race horse for the task ahead. Also important is that he learn how to use himself in motion***

Somewhere in that 2-year-old's early training, vital lessons were overlooked, those of discipline, obedience, and confidence in himself and his rider, required for a horse to listen automatically to, and obey, the rider, no matter what craziness goes on around him.

## ***Plenty of Everything Except Time***

In racing's game of high finances, it seems amazing that so many people are willing to invest plenty of everything, but time, in race horses. Rush is the name of the game. The question "How quickly can you get them to the races?" has provided the pressure

to push many horses too far, too fast, causing many breakdowns that should have been avoided. The question also has been encouraging rough shod, hurried, half-way training techniques in the breaking industry. Green horses plus green riders are a bad mixture, yet it is a frequent situation.

Thoroughbreds deserve teachers well schooled in horsemanship. The average, sensitive young horse enters kindergarten one day and in a few short weeks is pushed on to high school. Like many graduates of public schools who arrive at college sans the basics, an appalling number of horses arrive at Race Track University with a very poor education.

There is a considerable amount one can teach the animals—other than turning left and right, galloping around a track, and pulling up—to make their job easier and safer.

We are dealing with an animal bred not for intelligence or disposition, but to fight. In racing, driving to the wire against other horses is tantamount to fighting. For this reason, it is important that their early training be half physical and half psychological. The psychological aspect often is overlooked, but it is vital for molding a happy horse—unhappy horses do not win races. The best horses often enjoy pitting their will against the riders' with tremendous energy to back it up. If that will is not disciplined, that energy channeled in a positive

direction to teach them to enjoy their job, you have the makings of a cheater. That kind of horse may have all the physical ability in the world, but—like so many we have come across second hand, was too tough or smart for someone in the early training. These horses' ideas of winning are not performing when it counts; they often run brilliant races to the eighth pole. The only things they do well are drive the trainer nuts and cost the owner a fortune.

### *“Ready for The Track” A Broader Definition*

Many horses are sent to the track that not only are what we consider hardly broken at all, but also are a menace to themselves, their riders, and any other horse which happens to be on the track at the same time. It is not easy to remake these horses on the backstretch somewhere between the barn and manure pit. Hence, we have taken over the early training of youngsters, continuing until we considered them “ready” for the track. That definition of “ready” came to encompass a good deal more than the average race horse ever was introduced to in the breaking process.

Our technique is not put forward as representing the only way to train a young horse, but was gleaned from experience and from some of the finest horsemen in this country—not to mention a number of pretty classy horses who made their own additions to the recipe for effective early training.

Our horses earn nicknames around the barn (there's usually a “Dingbat” every year). For expediency's sake, we will use Scrapper as the name of an example. He arrives much like a 4-

to 5 year-old child who never has been disciplined, has no desire to work, and an attention span that is almost non-existent. The first task, therefore, is to get his attention, most easily done within the confines of a stall.

Great use is made of body language—a natural means of communication—in teaching “walk” and “whoa” while lunging with a chain shank. You never know what kind of handling these animals have had or what reactions you are likely to encounter. It is not a bad idea to carry a whip and be light on your feet in case the colt has illusions of being a trainer himself. With this type of animal, kicking, pinning you against the wall, and rearing to check your hair for dandruff with the front hooves are all to be highly discouraged. He must learn here and now that this behavior will not be tolerated.

Five minutes might be the limit of the attention span in the first sessions. It is better to use several sessions than pressure him when his mind is elsewhere; that is begging for trouble, and trouble is something you want to avoid right now. Later, when the horse has enough training, you have solid control, and know you can win, you may want a fight to make sure he understands obedience is a must—but not now.

Once Scrapper understands “walk” and “whoa” and is responding promptly, yet is relaxed and at ease with his handler, we demand that he march with a businesslike attitude rather than just shuffling around. This requires a greater degree of his attention and gains much more of his respect. When he obeys voice commands despite opposite body language (standing in front of or behind his center of balance) you know he is really

listening, and therefore, ready for tack.

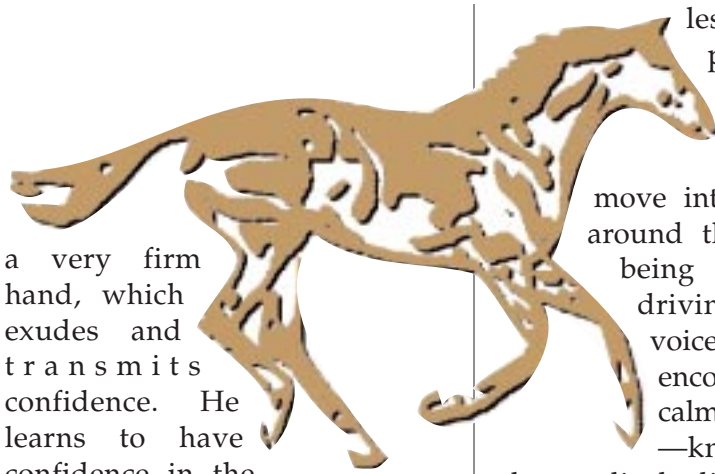
After a short reminder session (to be sure we have his attention) a bridle with no reins is slipped on over the halter and shank. Then, while he is busy with the bit in his mouth, he is allowed to smell the surcingle, feel it on his shoulder and back, and have it buckled just tight enough to keep it on. All the while he is commanded, “whoa.”

Usually, horses pay little or no attention to being girthed this way, but when there is a negative reaction, such as bucking or rearing, it is quickly squelched. With the aid of shank and whip, the handler easily gets his attention and demands proper response to “walk” and “whoa.” Gradually, the girth is tightened as the handler keeps Scrapper's attention, and the above is repeated.

A horse easily can injure himself if allowed to buck and fight. In this lesson, he is being taught that this type of behavior is totally unacceptable. It will be a long time before he feels a rider on his back, but when he does, he will remember and act like a gentleman.

It is the trainer's job to see just how much Scrapper can take during each session. He is gradually being worked for longer periods of time as his attention span is slowly stretched. Each animal is an individual and is asked to progress only as fast as he can thoroughly understand his lessons. The smart ones go on ahead, the less intelligent take more time and patience, while the troublemakers must be dealt with firmly.

Each time Scrapper responds properly to commands he is told what a “good boy” he is and is often patted at the same time with



a very firm hand, which exudes and transmits confidence. He learns to have confidence in the handler whose consistent reactions transmit authority.

If he is not pushed too fast, but allowed to learn each of his lessons at his own pace until he thoroughly understands before moving on to the next, he will become every bit as self-confident as his trainer. The horses not taught this all-important self-confidence tend to remain dull and erratic all through their careers.

### *Introduction To The Driving Lines*

As soon as the surcingle is old hat to Scrapper, he is ready for driving lines. We connect a lunge line to both sides of the bit. One end will be put through a ring in the surcingle, slide over his quarters, and rest above his hocks; the other will go directly from the bit to the trainer's hands.

At this point, Scrapper is so used to being handled that he does not even care when he feels the line wrapped around half of his body. His old lessons are repeated, this time incorporating the use of the bit through the driving lines.

Now, Scrapper graduates to a small round pen outside. Here, despite many distractions, he learns he must still give his full attention to his handler and his

lesson. After he performs properly several times, he is asked gently to move into a relaxed trot around the trainer while being guided by the driving lines. With voice and reins, he is encouraged to move calmly and steadily—knowing already that disobedience of the commands is punished immediately. As soon as he is relaxed and listening, we start teaching him to move with rhythm—energetic yet unhurried. With a steady rhythm, he will acquire the balance of a professional dancer, a great aid to the developing athlete. It also teaches him to think “forward”—an attitude no race horse should be without. He becomes so used to driving forward, that later his rider will only have to guide, not force, the movement.

Within a few days, Scrapper advances to driving in a large paddock where he learns to drop his nose and move freely up into the bit. By this time (usually about two weeks into training), his attention span has been stretched enough to last as long as we want to jog him. It does not take much to overtax his legs physically at this point. The amount of work he can handle will gradually increase as he grows stronger.

### *Efficient Movement*

As he gets fitter, he is not just sloppily jogging around in circles. He is being taught to reach up underneath himself with his hind end and drive forward into the bit with more and more collection. This not only insures development of the proper topline

muscles, but, like calisthenics, it is concentrated exercise. Scrapper is not crazy about this. It is hard work, and he would rather leave his hind end out behind him while taking in the scenery. He learns this is business, however, and he must work three times as hard as the uncollected horse—without increasing his speed. Herein lies the beauty of the system: A young horse can learn much faster at a trot than a gallop. The gallop generates excitement, and the horse has not been disciplined long enough to handle excitement without losing his composure. He is being fully developed as an athlete, with fine balance and coordination, to maintain a steady rhythm. He is working like a Trojan by using the proper muscles to drive forward from underneath and collecting into the bit. At the same time, a good mouth is being put on him.

He is working harder than the youngster who is galloping without having learned good balance yet. The difference in the stress on the legs of the animal carrying a rider on one leg at a time (at the gallop) and the horse carrying only himself on two legs at a time (at the trot) is tremendous. It is much easier to keep the latter horse sound while he gets fitter, learning to use himself more efficiently each day. In the long run, the horse with the most efficient stride has energy to spare when coming down to the wire.

Scrapper now understands what is expected of him. He is working honestly and obeying his commands promptly. He has learned figure-eights on the lunge lines, changing the bend of his body in the middle without losing impulsion, and carrying himself on one outside rein, then the other. Now that he can be trusted

to stay in hand, he is ready to see the world.

At this point, he is driven through a large field, jogging 20-meter circles around his handler, who is walking. Along the way, they encounter numerous imagined monsters that Scrapper wants no part of; in fact, he would like to leave the vicinity altogether, but finds that the human at the other end of the driving lines has him pretty well under control. He may decide to debate the issue heatedly. If so, his handler knows the horse has had enough training now to understand he is supposed to do as asked, even if it means walking right up to a monstrous tree stump. This is a good time for a fight, because now, with enough control, it is relatively easy for the trainer to win. After a few discussions, or sometimes one good debate, the animal invariably decides it is more fun to be on the side that wins, and he crosses over to it. Later, when it is time for his introduction to the starting gate, he will walk in and look for a hay net.

### *Introducing A Rider*

Soon Scrapper is jogging at least two miles a day, driving forward steadily and rhythmically, using himself to the fullest extent. As a result, his way of moving has become light and athletic. His musculature has developed to the point that we decide he is strong enough to carry a rider easily, without stressing his legs. At the end of a work session, he goes back to the stall where a good ground man will handle him while a rider gradually puts more and more weight on his back, and finally climbs aboard. We have had many people who come around hoping

to see a little action the first time our youngsters are ridden. Invariably, they grow bored and leave disappointed. Nothing happens, other than the horse walking around and stopping when he is told. He has learned so much and become so obedient at this point that you can just about ride off into the sunset.

We do not spend too much time on his back immediately because we do not want to make it sore. Each day he will be ridden just a little bit longer, with his preliminary work sessions gradually decreasing in proportion to the time spent on his back. That back is slowly strengthened the same as his body was, but no training time is lost because his work sessions have continued.

Later, he will be sent out with older, experienced horses that will set a good example and help build his confidence, while exploring varied terrain. His rider finds it easy to keep him moving forward strongly because Scrapper has become so conditioned to doing so, and his mouth is quite good for a horse that has been ridden so little.

Scrapper's lungs will get a workout from jogging up hills. He will not like the idea of crossing a stream the first time it is asked of him, but two weeks later we will have to kick him to make him stop splashing and get out. In exploring new territory, he learns to stand close to gates while his rider opens them, and will maneuver around for them to be closed. He is quite happy now; he loves his work, goes anywhere, and fears nothing.

### *Ready To Gallop— Already Fit*

He gets fit, his muscles firm, on these long jogs. One day he feels so good he can hardly contain himself letting you know he is ready to gallop. In a cantering session, he changes leads perfectly about the first time he is asked. It is easy for him, because he has been using himself so well for a long time. When finally allowed to gallop, he eagerly reaches underneath himself and moves forward with the precision of a finely tuned engine. He has a definite edge on horses that try to learn this while galloping.

This horse became quite fit before ever galloping. Now he gallops like a champ, and, just as importantly, thinks he is one. Training this way takes more time each day than sending horses directly out to gallop, and a broader understanding of horsemanship than the average exercise rider may have, but the payoff is in the overall, long-term effect.

In all fairness to the horse, we consider it vital that these lessons be given step by step, to condition him physically and—just as important—mentally. The animal deserves the best we can give. After all, we will one day ask the ultimate of him.

## *Paula Turner Training Stables*

817 Emerson Cook Road  
Pittsboro, NC 27312  
919.542.0571