

Pay off in the long run

by Chris Irwin

Wherever I go, at almost every clinic, I find a rider or two struggling with a Thoroughbred “off-the-track.” Despite their incredible heart and athletic ability, Thoroughbreds from the track are notorious for being unpredictable and volatile.

One of the biggest challenges facing anybody who wants to transform a race horse into a riding horse is that while a race horse has been ridden, it has not necessarily been “schooled.” What I mean by this is that while it may be easy to put a saddle and bridle on an ex-race horse it will most likely also come with a lot of frustrating issues that need to be resolved.

A common issue of retired race horses is that they are not likely to stand still for mounting. Nor are they very often comfortable with the use of the whip. A trainer working with a horse on the lunge line may need to reach out with the lunge whip and gently ask a horse to move his or her haunches “out” more on the circle, so that their hips are better balanced as they travel on the same track as their forehead. Or, perhaps to send a gentle push “out” to tell the inside shoulder to not fall into the circle.

While most horses will indeed speed up a little before moving their haunches or shoulders out into a better balanced and more comfortable way of moving, most Thoroughbreds from the track are simply going to start galloping and get themselves more stressed as soon as the whip is brought into the picture.

Then there are the trot poles. While Thoroughbreds are generally very bold horses (the fact that three-day eventing is dominated by them should speak volumes as to just how willing and brave they can be) it is almost comical the way so many race horses react the first time they see a trot pole laying on the ground. They are so conditioned to running on a



This is Anne Zander of Cookstown, Ontario, riding Caliente Kisses. “Cali” is an eight-year-old Thoroughbred mare, who raced in both Canada and the United States. In this photo, it is obvious that Anne and Cali have become incredible partners. What appears in this photo to be a “dream come true” cross-country horse, however, started out as a nightmare.

When Anne started with Cali as a three-year-old fresh off the track, she soon experienced a horrible disaster. Cali bolted during mounting and ran full speed back into the barn, with Anne only half on, and when Cali slipped on the pavement, both horse and rider hit the cement so hard that Anne’s helmet was shattered.

Anne then went to Chris for help training Cali to stand quietly for mounting, which was achieved in just one session. Once Anne was safely up in the saddle, it immediately became apparent that Cali was very “hot” and was extremely upset about any contact, becoming extremely evasive and aggressive about any thought of bending from an inside leg into a supporting outside rein.

Chris rode Cali a few times, finessing her into not only accepting, but enjoying the support that comes with quality contact, and then coached Anne with a few helpful hints on some exercises when riding Cali in order to help her relax, stay between the aids, and also become supple enough for the “schooling” to fences that Anne would eventually teach Cali. Now Cali is nursing her newborn filly, but last year Anne and Cali, now confident partners together, consistently placed in the ribbons at horse trials they competed in at training level together.

photo 1



Because Mr. Big has a chronically inverted spine, his hindquarters and back are underdeveloped.

racers into jumpers or dressage horses.

I've seen it happen so many times that a dressage rider gets on a horse off-the-track and tries to ride it "forward into the bit" so that the horse will "round out." It seldom works. The dressage concept of simply "ride them into the bit and they will round out" comes from Europeans riding baroque horses.

Sure, ride a Friesian, Lusitano, Andalusian, or just about any Warmblood, or even most Morgans and Arabians, "into the bit" and these breeds that came out of the womb "born on the bit" will most "round out" when sent forward into the hand. Drive the average "inverted" race horse forward into the bit, however, and it only

clear surface that the first time they are asked to trot over the pole, wow, you'd think those poles were the biggest rattle snakes in the world!

Race horses are accustomed to wearing a saddle and a bridle, but they are not at all familiar with the expectations that English riders bring to the saddle. The horses are often inverted, with little or no concept of working relaxed through the topline, well rounded, level headed or long and low. They do not bend from an inside leg into an outside rein and they will often think that a half halt means "I'm talking hold because it's time to run faster."

As soon as you take contact with your seat, legs and reins in an attempt to channel the forward movement of the horse "between your aids," the typical race horse will either brace its body and speed up, get strong and try to push its way through your aids, or become slippery and evasive in an attempt to wiggle their way out of your aids.

The bottom line is that these horses need trainers who can aid them in making the transformation from their reality of ADHD – attention deficit hyper disorder – into becoming calm, confident, focused, trusting, willing, reliable partners. And just because you're an accomplished rider this does not necessarily mean that you have the ability to help these horses change from

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Chris holds the reins at a 45-degree angle, flexing each rein in time with the horse's corresponding forehand, to encourage him to make contact with the bit.

becomes more braced, more inverted and more stressed.

For instance, in photo 1, Sharlene is riding Mr. Big, a retired Thoroughbred race horse, who is chronically inverted throughout his spine. Mr. Big has worked within this "upside down" frame for so many years that he has never developed his "topline" and we can see how weak and "hollow" or underdeveloped his hindquarters and back are.

Sharlene has been trying to get Mr. Big to "use his hind end" and "lift his back" by asking him to move forward into the hand but Mr. Big will have nothing to do with going forward into the contact.

In photo 2, I have taken contact with the reins and asked Sharlene to send Mr. Big "forward into my hand." Note that I am holding the reins differently. I do not have my hands held straight up and down "on the vertical" with my "thumbs up." Instead, I have positioned/aligned my wrists on 45-degree angles. With this "lateral" alignment in my wrists/hands I am massaging Mr. Big with diagonally flexing of the bit done in time with his weight stepping on to his forehand. In other words, when Mr. Big is standing on his right forehand, I flex the right rein gently to the right and, at the exact moment he is standing on his left forehand I am flexing his left rein to the left. By holding my hands on these angles and by flexing my wrists to the sides, as if I am

his forehand.

By holding the wrists on 45-degree angles we can be sure that we are flexing the horse with a lateral stretch from side to side that encourages him to lengthen and unlock his topline. If I was holding my hands in the classical "thumbs up" position, it would be too easy for the hand to be felt by the horse as a "pull back" instead of a lateral flexing massage from side to side. Unfortunately, riders who try to "jiggle" or massage or do flexing exercises with the bridle while holding the reins "full school" will only be felt by the horse as pulling back on their mouth. Suffice to say that if we pull on a horse that is already going forward with a hollowed back then they only become more inverted. As this picture demonstrates, though, if we can truly massage laterally with the reins, flexing each rein in time with the horse moving on to his corresponding forehand, then this "left to right" lateral massage quickly encourages any horse to stretch forward and make contact with the bit as they quickly discover that the action of the bit is physiologically aiding them in becoming more supple and more able to "come through."

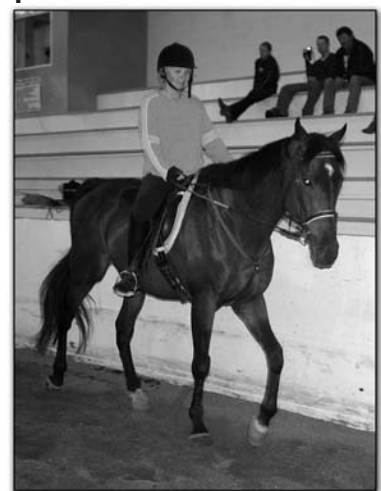
Although this deviation from the "classical hand" will perhaps cause some authorities to find fault here, the fact is that I have seen world class riders and Olympians like Mark Todd and Anne Kursinki ride with their hands

held on these angles when they are training green or problem horses with open reins.

In photo 3, we see that Sharlene now has Mr. Big well on his way to moving forward into her hand so that she can truly aid him in unlocking the resistance in his jaw, neck and topline so that he can finally find out what it is like to come "through" himself in a level headed and comfortable manner. She is now going back to holding her hands up straighter.

Whether the race horse is intended to become a trail horse, or go round in the dressage court, the jumping arena, or cross-country, the Thoroughbred off-the-track rhythmic to a fence with an elasticity and willingness to allow its stride to be lengthened or shortened by the rider. In short, training before schooling means that the race horse will need to "learn how to learn" before it is schooled for a specific discipline. 🐾

photo 3



Mr. Big is moving forward into Sharlene's hand, eliminating resistance in his jaw, neck and topline.