



Ali is a ten year old Egyptian stallion that has been used for breeding and some shows. At the age of 5 he was sent to a trainer for 30 days, and after that he was taken home. He started showing some problems, not going forwards and rearing, so after a short time they stopped riding him and he went back to just breeding again. A little while ago they decided to get him going under saddle again so they sent him to me.

The horse had a really sweet disposition, but he had not been taught manners at all. When one tried to lead him out of his pen he thought that it was breeding time, and he started crying out and bouncing around. He paid no attention to the handler, or so it seemed. The horse would bounce, yes, but he never pulled on the lead rope and he never walked on me, so this was not a case of a horse that didn't have

any respect, it had just never been expected of him to walk quietly alongside the handler.

One can not expect the horse to follow rules they don't know about, and he had simply not learned to lead properly.

So this is where we started, leading lessons 101..

I got him to start when I started, stop when I stopped, yield to pressure and to wait for me to indicate the speed. In the beginning we did it in a field away from

other horses, and as he started to understand what I wanted we could work in more difficult circumstances, like close to other horses and out on the back roads.

It didn't take him very long to catch on, but of course he had a long habit of not paying attention to the handler, so it was vital that I really paid attention to him at all times. If I can't be consistent I can't expect the horse to be consistent either. Every time I lead him from one point to another it was a training opportunity.



I also started working him in a round pen. He had obviously been trained to lounge on a line, so he knew the rules for that. However my rules were a little different from what he was used to. In the past he had been taught to run round after round in a trot, but he wasn't asked to pay attention. He would keep his head to the outside, looking for other horses. Easy to train his body, but not so easy to get his mind to work, and without his attention I couldn't teach him anything.



In the beginning I rewarded him for just giving me an ear, I rewarded by backing away from him and letting him get stopped. When he didn't I would go with him, but I didn't chase him, just walked the rounds with him. The reason I didn't chase him is that I didn't want to MAKE him give me his attention. I wanted this to be his idea, and if I chased him he wouldn't have a choice. Soon he discovered that he didn't HAVE to run around, that this was up to him, and he started to look at me as if I was something really strange.

A stallion is just a horse, one can't say that a horse behaves this way just because it is a stallion, or because it is an Arab, or because it is white or anything else. Every horse must be judged on their individual behavior, because if one starts to generalize one only finds excuses for not being able to solve a problem.

However there is one thing that is a bit special for most stallions. Stallions are usually kept away from other horses, and they have by nature a very strong need for social contact. This makes a lot of them socially frustrated, and they will do a lot just for attention.

Ali was like this, he so wanted to interact with someone, and although I realize that I was the second best thing, he really wanted other horses of course, at least I was there.

This, too me, often makes stallions great to train, they are usually so very willing to learn and interact.

When he had started to figure out that it was communicating I wanted, not just for him to run around in circles, we started to become friends. After a few days I could sit on him, although I

still hadn't started using a saddle. We had a real hard time finding one that fitted him, it took about 10 days before we found something that worked.

Bareback and with just the halter he seemed to be okay, although it was clear that he didn't have a clue of what was expected of him when someone was sitting on his back.



I usually start riding horses with just a halter because the horse is already familiar with this equipment, and I try not to introduce a lot of new things at one time. Later I will ride them with a bridle. Often the owner of the horse will just continue to use the sidepull or just the halter when they see that they don't need the bit to control the horse. In Alis case the owner wanted me to use a bit, so to prepare him for this I started using a sidepull after a few days of riding with the halter.

The sidepull has the reins attached in much the same way as a snaffle bit, and this usually makes the transition from a sidepull to a bit is easy.

When we finally found a saddle we could use I started to ride him with a snaffle. After a few minutes the horse started showing signs of trouble. The first day he had a little trouble with the right turns, then the next day he was having more trouble and finally on the third day he couldn't do a turn to the right at all, as soon as I touched the right rein he tensed up.

At this point he was showing signs of rearing again, he wasn't doing it, but he was getting ready. I decided to take the bitt off him again, and after just a little while in the sidepull he was OK again.

I could not be sure, but I suspected that he had a tooth problems, and the owner confirmed that he had not been checked for a while. I decided that until this was sorted out I would just keep on working him in the sidepull where he seemed comfortable.

Teeth are a common source of problem, and if a horse starts “acting up for no reason” there usually IS a reason, and teeth can often be it. Unfortunately we didn't get a equine dentist to check him while he was in for training, however this would be done as soon as he got home.

Meanwhile he was doing fine with the sidepull, so well that the owner decided to just continue riding him with it even after his teeth was checked. Bits can be good for refinement, and some shows requires that one has a bit in the horses mouth, but this horse was to be used for trail riding only so there was really no reason to not continue to use what the horse was the most happy with.



The saddling was not a big problem, but it helped me figure out one thing about Ali. In the beginning when he came this horse yawned a lot. No matter what I did. Then it got better, and it really wasn't until I started using a saddle that I started to see the connection with his feelings and the yawning. The yawning occurred every time I started with something new. It could be as minor as a different blanket.

He seemed fine with everything, except for this habit of yawning, and after a few times with the new thing he didn't yawn anymore. I finally figured out that the yawning was a sign of nervousness, that he was really unsure. It was hard to tell by the rest of him, but this was the only conclusion I could come to.

It was during the saddling that this became apparent to me, he never liked getting cinched up, and started to yawn right away. However if I went really slow with the cinching he was okay and didn't yawn. This was actually very good!

It meant that I had a very obvious sign to see when I was moving along too fast for him, because the yawning happened in every situation that he wasn't comfortable with. After I had figured this out the rest was fairly easy going.



My goal was to work him without getting a single yawn, and if he did then I would find out what he could handle and what he couldn't handle. Such a clear signal from the horse can be a really great advantage. If I had ignored the yawning he would have gone further and given me signs of distress that would be more obvious, like he did when we had the bit in his mouth.

He was yawning a lot when I used the bit, but I hadn't understood what that really meant, so he had to get braced before I understood what he was trying to tell me.

Now I had a way to avoid getting him into a situation he couldn't handle, simply by not pushing him when he started to yawn because that meant he had reached his limits for what he could cope with.

This was a breakthrough for us, I had a better understanding for him, and he started to trust me since I showed that I was listening to him.

The reason this had me so stumped was that he didn't show any other signs of distress, and the fact that he learned so fast made it too easy to proceed to fast. But Ali was really an unsure little fellow that needed a lot of time and patience. He is the kind of horse that will give you anything he can provide he feels that he can give it to you and that he understands what it is you are after, but if you try to demand it from him he gets upset and even irritated. A horse like this can really teach people to ride!



To ensure that he was really okay with the saddling I always did it with him totally loose and free to go away if he wanted to. This is something I do with all horses in the beginning if I have a roundpen available, and they all make an effort to stand still. If they don't stand they are simply telling me that they are not ready yet. By giving a horse a chance to let me know how they feel about things I can easier adjust my training to them and this is really the faster way

in the long run.

Ali would yawn before he walked off, and if I only went slowly enough with him he would stand very happily for the saddling, even when I tighten up the girth. So many saddling problems can be solved, or at least greatly approved by just considering the horse a little more during the process.

Later there is of course nothing wrong with having a horse tied up while saddling, this is something I do in the beginning to see what the horse thinks of things.

After having placed the saddle on the horse and tightened up the cinch just enough to hold the saddle in place I move the horse around a little. This way I can see if the horse is okay with carrying the saddle, and to check that the saddle is in the right spot. It is also better for the

horse to cinch the saddle up in increments and not all at once.

Sometimes I let the horse run in the roundpen with it, if the horse is very new to carrying a saddle I like to have it move in all gates with the saddle on before I get on him, not just for the first day but for the first week or so.

When you are starting a horse that is not used to carrying a rider they can get a little muscle sore after the first few rides, so even if the horse didn't buck the first few days it

might have a reason to do so on the third or fourth day. If the horse is showing signs of discomfort it is better not to ride it, or just take it very easy that day. There should be no hurry.

I believe that if the horse is sore I will not be able to teach him anything positive about riding that day. That that time is better spent doing something else. A good opportunity for ground driving out for a change of scenery for instance.

One does not have to have a roundpen to move the horse around, in fact this is a good opportunity to practice leading at different gaits. Spending time with the horse on the ground is never a waste of time, and will only make the time in the saddle better and safer for both horse and rider.





I use a mounting block or a fence to get on a horse whenever I can, especially when the horse is green. This makes it easier for the horse to keep his balance, and it is safer for me. When you mount from the ground the saddle will get pulled to one side, and this is not very comfortable for the horse.

There are people that are able to get on the horse without pulling the saddle off to one side at all. I have seen some that can get onto a saddle even without a girth strapped to it at all, but since I am not one of those people I would rather not

have the horse pay the consequences for my lack of athleticism.

I will get the horse used to being mounted from both sides, and from the ground, too, but for the most part I will use the mounting block.

This, I think, has another little advantage. The horse knows what is coming when I line him up to the mounting block. He knows that I will get up on him from there, and if the horse is not sure about being mounted he will usually let me know by not wanting to line up for me to mount.

Another way to look at it is that when the horse does line up to the mounting block and stands there and waits for the rider without any restraint it means that he is okay with it.

Ali was a very curious horse and eager to learn new things, but at the same time I couldn't proceed with the riding work too fast because he wasn't too sure about that part. To get a little variation, and because I think its fun I started to clicker train him to kneel. He really got into that, and it had some extra advantages.

One of the reasons I started clicker training him was that the only time this horse was a little rude was in connection with food. He had a tendency to pin his ears and show impatience about it, so I wanted to use clicker training with food to see if this would change his way of asking for a treat.

The only reason he was rude about asking for food was that he didn't know of any other ways to get it, and in the past he had been fed despite his facial expressions.

Ali, of course, thought it was because of his expression, so I wanted to give him a nicer way to ask for food. It didn't take long for him to figure this game out at all, and after the first session he would lift a front leg when I came with his feed instead of pinning his ears.



Lifting the front leg is the beginning of the kneeling. How easy it is to call it attitude when a horse is putting back his ears, and how often it is just the result of the horse not knowing what else to do.

The kneeling had a couple of other advantages, too. One is that I have found that this is a really good stretch for a horse, it will supple a horse's shoulder area very effectively. For that reason it is very important to do it equally on both sides, just as one should do everything on both sides of a horse.

The other advantage was something that I could have looked at as a disadvantage. When I first started to ride him and asked him to go forward he started doing two things. One was to back up, and the other was to lift his front leg.



These behaviors were things we had worked on the ground a lot, the backing in connection with the leading lessons, and the lifting of the foot was of course the beginning of the kneeling, and something he really enjoyed. However I was wanting him to go forwards, so how could this be an advantage?

What it told me was that he was very willing to do what he thought I wanted him to do, and that he didn't have a clue of what that

something was, so he was offering the behavior that had been encouraged recently. It proved to me that it was not a matter of him being difficult or stubborn, after all both backing and lifting one leg high in the air is a lot more work than simply taking a step forward.

I went back to ground work, and added a voice cue for him to go forward. When I later got back on and used the same cue for going forward he understood right away and complied happily.

This happened on other occasions, too; when he didn't know what I wanted he tried to lift a leg up high, so this became a good communication tool for me to understand when he was trying, but not understanding what I was asking of him. When that happened it was obvious that “upping the phases” would not make things clearer, and that I just had to find another way of explaining to him what I wanted.



The riding got better for each day and he kept on improving as long as I was willing to adjust the training to his speed. One really nice thing about training a horse that is already well matured is that they usually are less nervous about their surroundings. He had already seen most of the things that could unsettle a very young horse, so it didn't take long before we could ride outside of the roundpen.

He really seemed to enjoy riding in the field, in fact he seemed to enjoy all the attention he was getting. After he had been with me for 30 days it was time for him to go home, but I talked the owner into letting me borrow him for another week. Not for training, but for my own pleasure, and she happily agreed. That last week we had some really nice rides together, and I think that the horse now is happy as a trail horse at home with his owner.

I know I will miss him.

