

Start 'em up

Know when to start serious training with your sport horse prospect.

By Cindy Hale

Horse Illustrated August 2006

One of the biggest questions concerning young performance horses is when to start their serious training. Being too hasty can risk both physical injury and behavioral problems. Horses mature at various rates, and their readiness to work needs to be evaluated on an individual basis. While many stock horses used for ranch work as well as Thoroughbred racehorses are started under saddle as 2-year-olds, that's not typically recommended for the larger sporthorses. Olympic dressage rider Lisa Wilcox explains her regimen for the young horses she trains from her base in West Palm Beach, Fla.

"In general, I start with the warmbloods at 2 1/2 years of age in preparation for their mare and stallion testing (the keurings). This isn't riding them, but longeing and basic handling. By the spring of their third year we are just beginning to back these young horses," she says, referring to low-impact riding where the young horse gets accustomed to carrying the weight of a rider.

If a young sporthorse is maturing at a slow rate or is a bit gangly, he's left to grow up. "We weed out the horses that are croup high or having balance problems and give them time off, or we cut back on their training."

Those anxious owners looking for a fixed timeline to start working their show prospects are out of luck. Patience is indeed a virtue.

"There is no recipe," Lisa says, preferring not to assign some arbitrary date as to when a young horse is fit to start serious training. "I use my eyes and my feeling to decide if the work is fair."

If both owner and trainer can be observant and fair-minded, the young horse stands a better chance to develop into a champion. Then no one around the barn will be singing the Baby Green Blues.