

Barn Basics: How to Help the Ex-Racehorse Feel at Home

Retraining an OTTB begins with three simple steps

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OTTBs need some time to unwind and learn to relax after retiring from a racing career. An off the track Thoroughbred (OTTB) can have a difficult time transitioning from the high pressure routine of the racetrack to the more leisurely lifestyle of a second career. With patience and a little planning, an OTTB can be re-schooled into the horse of your dreams. But before you begin plotting your OTTB's training goals and show schedule, follow these three tips to help him segue safely into his new surroundings.

First, your OTTB requires a stable that's the proper environment for a horse needing to de-stress and unwind. Racehorses spend the majority of their day in small box stalls. They have little chance during racing season to merely hang out and relax. Bereft of any outlet for their pent-up excess energy, many OTTBs come to their new homes with nervous habits like stall pacing, walking the fence line, wood chewing and pawing in the cross-ties. As a form of emotional detox, make sure that your OTTB has access to pasture or a turnout paddock where he can make the choice to run and play or take a snooze and sunbathe. That will help him realize there's more to life than just going really fast. Surrounding your OTTB with calm horses who act as mentors will also help create a serene environment. While at the track, many racehorses rely on the companionship of lead ponies and other four-legged barn buddies. Your OTTB will soon find comfort in the local population of laidback creatures at your barn, whether it's a kitty, pygmy goat or miniature horse.

Second, consult with your vet to adjust your OTTB's diet. While abrupt changes in feed should always be avoided, the typical racehorse is pumped full of high caloric, high energy hay, grains and supplements. Before you can begin re-schooling your OTTB, you'll have to switch him to a low octane feeding program. Otherwise you'll be climbing aboard a Ferrari. Follow your vet's advice and gradually replace rich alfalfa with grass hay or other forage that will satisfy your ex-racer's voracious appetite without contributing high amounts of protein and energy. As his body adjusts to the new feeding program, and his body is rid of vitamins and tonics, he might actually lose a few pounds. That can be dismaying, because one of the first things every OTTB owner wants to do is transform their ribby, sinewy greyhound into a plump and curvy show or pleasure horse. This awkward stage of adjustment is referred to as "letting down." But once the OTTB lets down and adjusts to his new diet, he'll begin to bloom and pack on some pounds.

Finally, spend the first thirty days or so getting your OTTB used to the routine around your barn. It'll take him a while to comprehend that the workday doesn't begin before dawn. Be prepared for certain stimuli to send him into overdrive. Simply being groomed and having his legs booted up or wrapped may evoke a sense of racehorse déjà vu. You'll know he's mentally heading for the post parade if he starts to flip his head, stomp his feet or become antsy rather than standing still. Don't slap, snatch or yell at your OTTB for this almost instinctive behavior. Instead, reassure him and then continue with your workmanlike duties.

Consistent repetition of a calm routine will teach the OTTB that galloping around a track or heading to the starting gate is not the high point of each day. Sometimes he just gets the spa treatment, a few hours of turnout, and then he goes back to his house for a siesta. Even the most hardcore ex-racehorse can learn to appreciate the easy life. It just takes some wise barn management and lots of patience.

Read more about taking on an ex-racehorse.