

Leading Your Halter Horse to Victory

Veteran competitor and judge Bambi Thomas shares her program to lead a halter horse to success.

By Marcia King

1-6-2003

Like contestants in a Miss America pageant they strut and parade their exceptional beauty and perfect bodies. Their glossy coats reflect the sunlight like varnish, emphasizing every movement and highlighting the sinuous curve of muscle rippling as they walk into the arena. You've bought a registered horse with flawless conformation and you think he'd stand a great chance in halter classes — if only he didn't look like such a backyard buddy. His coat doesn't glisten and his muscles aren't defined like the beauties you see at shows. What can you do to give him that winning look?

We've asked judge and veteran competitor Bambi Thomas for her advice on creating a champion out of your "diamond in the rough." Follow her program and you'll see dramatic results — and some blue ribbons on your wall.

Eye of the Beholder

"There are several key factors in preparing, fitting, conditioning, and grooming a horse for halter," says Bambi. "First, you have to start with an individual that has good conformation to begin with, and, in my eyes, the prettier the better." The halter horse is judged on conformation and beauty. The horse should be of correct frame and structure, conditioned and fit, have a gleaming hair coat and, ideally, have that special eye-catching spark. He should also lead in a relaxed but bright manner and stand quietly but with alertness: Head up, ears forward, eyes wide and open, neck stretched and arched.

The ideal temperament depends somewhat on the class and the handler. "I like a horse that's a little high-strung," says Bambi. "More up than you'd see in a pleasure class. I think a horse that walks into the ring and is a little cocky or a little sassy is going to catch your eye. But for youths, you want a horse that's a little more settled, a little easier to handle because they'll do a better job exhibiting that horse." That goes for novices as well.

In a halter class, the handler enters the ring at a walk, leading the horse in a straight line to the judge. Next, the handler is asked to jog or trot by the judge. Finally, in a line-up, the handler squares the horse; for stock breeds (Quarter Horses, Appaloosas, Paints, et cetera) this means standing straight on all four legs, not stretched or parked out. As you may have already discovered, this is easier said than done. Since many handlers are experienced or even professionals, they make it look easy. And it should — look easy that is. But don't be fooled. To get that look, you'll have to spend time and work before you ever enter that ring. Don't worry, though, if you break everything down into steps, you'll find yourself heading into that ring with confidence and a horse worth the final look.

Under the Skin

So your horse has the perfect conformation and the best temperament. In a class full of such physical perfection, how can you maximize your champ's chances? First, you want the judge to see him so healthy he literally glows from inside out. "You have to have them healthy on the inside before they're healthy on the outside," says Bambi. "We feed a pelleted feed by Purina, Strategy, which is 14 percent protein. In conjunction with that, we also feed whole western oats and high quality alfalfa hay." Schedule an appointment with your veterinarian to discuss changes in your horse's diet. Tell her your goals and let her know what your horse is eating now. She may recommend testing your hay for nutrient analysis to get a more exact fix on what he's receiving — so you'll know what's safe to supplement, and what not to overfeed.

A key part of your horse's healthy look is regular exercise. Not only will that firm up and sculpt muscle, but it'll improve his overall health and that will affect his coat.

To get that sculpted look, Bambi works her horses on walk, jog and trot (a stepped-up jog) exercises in a round pen with a 5-inch base of sand, 6 days a week, no more than 10 minutes a day — but she works them hard one day, then lightens up the next. "Every other day I'll really get in there and make him work, make him blow. The next day, he works the same length of time, but it won't be quite as hard. This is how you get the muscles shaped and hardened up: You stress the muscles one day, give them time to repair the next, and they build back stronger."

To help sculpt a finer looking neck, Bambi uses neck sweats. "We want a nice, pretty clean neck with a lot of shoulder definition," says Bambi, "so we work them in neck sweats, and then let them stand, tied in their stalls, sweating in neck sweats for about 60 to 90 minutes." Afterwards, Bambi rinses them off and, after they're dried, curries, brushes and

vacuums the horse.

Which brings us to the final step in creating that healthy glow: grooming. And this doesn't just mean spraying on products that add a sheen to your horse's coat. While these may take up the shine a notch, they should only be used as a supplement to your hard work. Not only does Bambi groom the horse prior to workouts, she also spends time grooming before putting the horse back in the stall. There's just no substitute for "elbow grease." The more time you put into brushing, the glossier your horse will be naturally. Also, avoid overbathing. Rinsing off sweat after workouts is fine, but use shampoo sparingly, and when you do use it, make sure it has conditioners in it, or that you apply a conditioner afterward to avoid drying out all your efforts for a winning coat.

Step at a Time

While you're putting the shine on your halter horse's coat, you should also be polishing your horse's performance. Bambi begins training youngsters as soon as they're weaned, about 3 to 4 months of age. If your guy is older, don't worry: Training youngsters is basically the same as for adults except sessions are shorter and more frequent — about 5 minutes each, three or four times a day. Before starting training, the horse should be accustomed to wearing a halter.

For the halter class, the horse must lead, "whoa," and square up. If your older horse is a bit rusty or rough on these, you might wish to retrain him as if he were a youngster. In teaching a weanling to lead, Bambi introduces the pressure of give and take on the halter by placing the baby in a supervised stall with a drive rope, and letting the youngster step on the rope as he walks around. "After a couple of days of them stepping on this rope and giving to the pressure, they're starting to learn to whoa and to give to the pressure on their face," says Bambi. Then Bambi starts leading them in the stall. "I pick up the lead rope, use a give and release, encourage them to take a step or two forward and reward them. When they crowd, I just bump them over, and reward when they're correct. I do the same when they pull away from me."

To teach the horse to walk toward her, Bambi stands in front of the horse and encourages him to take a couple of steps, clucking and telling him "walk."

Along with leading, the horse learns that "whoa" means to stop and stand still. Because the youngster has already learned to stop when he feels pressure on his face (through stepping on the drive rope), Bambi simply attaches the verbal command, "whoa." She says, "What's so nice about this is that they're learning themselves, so when I restrain them, they're already used to that action."

As the horse begins to understand the concept of "whoa," Bambi slowly teaches the horse how to square up. She begins simply by picking up the feet and placing them where they should be positioned, cueing the horse with "whoa" to ask him to stand still. This step takes much patience, practice and repetition. "When you first start, keep working with one foot, because you pick it up, tell him 'whoa,' and he's going to move it. So pick it back up, put it down where you want, and tell him 'whoa.' It's a lot of repetition and you may be working with just the one foot for the whole session."

It's not uncommon for the horse to keep the foot just worked with in place, but then move two others out of position. Again, Bambi patiently replaces each foot with a "whoa." Or, the horse may stand with his weight shifted unequally. "They may want to teeter-totter," Bambi says, "where they don't want to put the weight on, for example, the one rear foot. I walk back, pull the hip over a little bit, tell them 'whoa,' and step back up front. I'll be there 2 seconds, and there goes the weight off the foot! I might walk back 20 times during that session and just pull that hip over. That may be the only thing we do during that session." Don't rush the process. Putting in the extra effort now to establish a firm foundation will pay off later in the ring.

As the horse matures and begins understanding his cues, Bambi starts refining those cues and working toward more perfection in the square. As she squares the horse up, Bambi asks the horse to step up to her, rather than backing into position. "If you back a horse that's a little cow-hocked, they're going to be toeing out and bringing those hocks in close together," she explains. She also teaches him hand signals by association: Moving her wrist toward her body means to come forward a little bit, pushing her wrist toward the horse means to back up a little bit.

In squaring the horse, Bambi prefers to use the right rear foot as the stationary foot, so when she steps the horse forward and the stationary foot is where it should be, she tells the horse whoa. "Then, using my hand and my wrist, if I want the horse to come forward, I bring my hand forward. You can actually move that left hind foot — back, front, back, front — until he finally gets it to a spot that's close to where you'll tell him whoa, and he'll stop and put it down.

"Then, I'll reach up with my right thumb and touch the horse's withers; take my toe of either foot, touch the horse a little bit on the left front coronary band, push a little bit with my left hand, and the horse will move that front left foot back. When I get the movement I want, I quit, release and say 'whoa.'"

To bring the right foot back, Bambi keeps her position, reaches her fingers over to touch the opposite side of the withers and touches the horse's right foot with her left toe.

As a final element, Bambi defines a special cue to release the horse. "I rattle or flick my wrist at him, and then back him up two or three steps to release him from his pose," she says. "I never just turn him and walk right out of the pose or, if I have to step from one side to the other side during a show, the horse thinks I'm stepping off him, and might pull out of position."

Bambi sprinkles halter training sessions of 2 to 5 minutes each into daily routines two or three times a day, rather than drilling in one extended session. As she pulls a horse out of the stall prior to grooming, she may ask him to square up. Ditto as she walks the horse from the grooming area out to the roundpen, and again before she puts the horse away. "It doesn't matter if you're in the wash rack, in the barn, or out in the middle of the field or roundpen," she says. "It gets to be second nature for them."

Showing Off

Once the horse is ready for show, the handler must properly present the horse. As the exhibitor, you should walk your horse straight out to the judge, with the horse's nose aimed toward the judge's chest. This allows the judge to see how the horse tracks from the front. When walking to the judge, and later when trotting your horse by, you should take care to walk or trot a straight line. "If you're not walking a straight line, the horse isn't going to look like he's very straight," Bambi warns. "The horse's legs will look like they are going every which way."

When your horse is in the line up and being presented to the judge, both horse and handler should look like they're awake. "Get your horse squared up and ready to be presented when the judge comes around," suggests Bambi. "Stand at the front of the horse, off to the side and have the horse's head up. While I don't like to see someone at the end of the lead rope swinging it around or blowing into the horse's nose, an exhibitor can make quiet clucky sounds or snap their fingers a little bit to get the horse's head and ears up. But as the judge goes back to look at other exhibitors, don't ask the horse to keep his ears up the whole time; save that for when the judge comes back for his final look."

Of course, your horse should be nicely groomed — mane neatly pulled over and banded, tail long and flowing, and wearing a clean halter that fits correctly, with the nosepiece positioned at the bottom of the cheekbones — not hanging down on the face. Silver trim should be polished. "If just one horse wears the halter, try to purchase a color of leather that complements the horse," Bambi says. "If you use the halter for several horses, go with a medium color leather, because that goes with a multitude of horse colors."

Don't neglect yourself as the handler, either. You, too, should be well-groomed, wearing a properly shaped hat, cleaned and pressed shirt, clean starched jeans or slacks that don't hang inches above your boots or drag in the dirt, and cleaned and polished boots. Stand straight and quiet — you're presenting the horse, not yourself — face the judge and pay attention to your horse.

By following in Bambi's footsteps, you, too, can bring out the best of your horse.