

Groundwork for Young Horses

Stacy Westfall shares her techniques for starting a young horse from the ground up.

By Kitson Jazyuka



Freestyle reining champion [Stacy Westfall](#) makes everything look easy when it comes to performing thrilling bareback and bridleless rides, but her success comes from her ability to develop deep relationships with her horses and then train them with a great deal of patience. How does she do it? It starts with a commitment to her horses' earliest lessons on the ground, with a slow, meticulous program that involves weeks of preparation before she even thinks about getting on their back.

“For a young horse in my program, the first three months of training mean slowly working through basic groundwork and eventually going under saddle,” says Westfall. “It is one of the most important times, when I have a huge opportunity to influence his thoughts, opinions and even his physical reactions—things that will impact his entire life.”

In this article, we get a glimpse into Westfall's first three training months with a Quarter Horse filly named Hang Ten Baby, known as Mia around the barn. Mia's dam was Westfall's long-time partner, [Whizards Baby Doll](#), also known as Roxy.

Groundwork First

“When I was growing up, I didn't see the point of groundwork,” says Westfall. “What I've learned over the years is the value of getting to know my horse from the ground and letting the horse get to know me. It's great for safety and training. And even as Mia gets more broke, I will go back to groundwork because it tells me where she is mentally and physically, and helps me advance. It's just another way to keep both of us mentally fresh.”

Groundwork provides Westfall with important information about Mia as she watches the filly's body language from the ground. “For instance, if a horse tends to pin his ears and swish his tail, he will most likely do that as you move through the training,” says Westfall. “If he's going to cow kick or buck on the longeline, I'm better off seeing it from the ground.”

Mia, who tends to have mild reactions, is what Westfall calls a “next-day learner.” If she makes a little progress, Westfall puts her away and lets her think about the lessons overnight. “Mia almost always comes out the next day and has the skill down,” says Westfall.

Spending plenty of time on groundwork also gives Westfall an opportunity to teach Mia emotional control, enabling the filly to develop the confidence she'll need in order to stay calm in any situation throughout her life.

“Tiring a horse out doesn't give him emotional control,” says Westfall. What will help a horse learn emotional control is teaching him the best way to deal with pressure. “I introduce something scary

a little bit at a time,” explains Westfall. “Mia is allowed to get tense, but then I reward her by removing the scary thing if she stays still.” This way, Westfall can start to shape Mia’s reactions as the filly learns that when something scary happens, the best thing to do is stay calm.

During the first 15 to 20 hours of groundwork over two or three weeks (one-hour sessions), Westfall focuses entirely on simple but important body control exercises with Mia, such as:

- Tolerating handling of her head and ears
- Learning to lower her head
- Ground tying
- Moving forward
- Backing up
- Turns on the haunches
- Turns on the forehand
- Standing still while Westfall walks around her
- Standing still while Westfall walks around her with scary objects, like a plastic bag on the end of a stick
- Walking over a tarp

By the time Westfall and Mia completed these first weeks of training, Westfall knew the horse pretty well and could predict her reactions. This was particularly important the day that Mia showed up for work a little sullen.

“Another reason groundwork is important is that you notice small changes,” says Westfall. “Mia hadn’t been grumpy at all, so the day she was not in a good mood was a red flag that maybe she was getting a little body sore.

“You’ll get to know your horse so well that you’ll have an understanding of what’s normal,” adds Westfall. “When Mia was telling me she needed a break, I got the message. You don’t want to overdo it with a young horse.”

Bridling and Saddling for the First Time

Once Westfall and Mia have a solid foundation built on basic groundwork, it is time to introduce the bridle, saddle pad and saddle. Westfall introduces Mia to the concept of the bit and bridle in 15-minute sessions using a loop made with a 15-foot lead rope. This gives Westfall an opportunity to get Mia used to having a headstall slide over her ears and prepares her for a bit without the risk of banging her teeth on metal if she tosses her head. “That unpleasant experience can set any young horse up for being difficult to bridle for his entire life,” says Westfall.

Days later, when Mia is completely comfortable and bored with the rope “bit” and bridle, Westfall completes the exercise with a real bit and bridle. The first few times she pulls the bridle on, she lets the bit rest on Mia’s nose so the horse can get used to the jingling of the bit without having it in her mouth. When Westfall finally puts the bit in Mia’s mouth, she deliberately asks Mia to open her mouth and release the bit (by wiggling her finger at the bar of Mia’s mouth) when removing it so it won’t knock her teeth. After a few times of doing this, the headstall slipping over Mia’s ears signals her to release the bit.

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Meet Stacy Westfall

One of the most well-known western clinicians in the United States and a freestyle reining champion who often

Next, Westfall and the filly go back to the groundwork they previously established—crossing over poles and walking over tarps and turns on the forehand—while the filly wears the headstall and bit (without the reins). “This builds a little bridge, where Mia gets used to wearing the bridle while she’s in the comfort zone of doing the things she knows how to do already,” Westfall says. “The point is to make it a gradual change so she won’t have a big reaction.”

competes bareback and bridleless, Stacy Westfall has thrilled fans for years with demonstrations of just how hard her horses will work for her under pressure. These days, Westfall is focused primarily on her young stallion, Vaquero, who won his first bridleless freestyle in January 2010. Vaquero was the first foal of Westfall’s star mare, Hailey (Can Can Lena). Westfall and her husband, Jesse, a National Reining Horse Association judge, own and operate Westfall Horsemanship in Mt. Gilead, Ohio.

Moving on to Saddling

By now, Westfall and Mia have spent weeks on groundwork. Mia has completed about 10 sessions of groundwork wearing her bit and bridle. Next, Westfall takes Mia through a series of slow, methodical groundwork exercises to desensitize her to the new feelings she’ll experience when carrying a saddle for the first time. The idea is to get Mia broke to the feel of the girth and the stirrups before she even has the saddle on. Westfall introduces Mia to these by:

- Simulating the squeeze of the girth with a rope around her barrel while working on the longeline.
- Letting Mia get a feel for the sensation of the stirrups by bouncing a large exercise ball off her sides.

To introduce the saddle pad, Westfall slowly walks around the filly while gently waving the saddle pad and eventually lets Mia sniff it. She rubs it on the horse and, when there continues to be no reaction, puts it on her back.

Later, Westfall longes Mia with the saddle pad on her back, letting the filly get used to the sensation of having it fall off her back and learn to show no reaction. When Mia works through all of this calmly, Westfall repeats the process with the saddle, including longeing Mia with no girth so the saddle will fall off. This desensitizes the horse and hopefully prevents her from kicking out at a fallen rider in the future.

“There’s a lot of on and off with the saddle during this phase,” says Westfall. They also go back to their groundwork routine, Mia now completing her exercises wearing the headstall, the bit and the saddle.

When Westfall mounts up for the first time, she keeps Mia’s head bent around to her shoulder so she can’t buck or run away. If the horse moves, she can only move in a circle.

Making sure her horses have a solid foundation in groundwork means more enjoyment and confidence for both Westfall and her horses. It also creates a foundation for her work in the competitive reining that has made Westfall and her horses famous. Focusing on small goals during this critical window of training will help you establish good habits in your horse that will stay with him for his entire life. “If you take your time, none of this will be a big deal for your horse,” says Westfall.

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