



## Yearlings might benefit from supplemental weight in early training

By Bettina Cohen

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# Making Strides

**W**hether the Thoroughbred is less sound today than in decades past has become a perennial topic of debate. For those on the “yes” side of the debate, a livelier discussion follows: if the breed today is less able to withstand the rigors of racing, then what is the cause?

In taking the debate a step further, some have asked what can be done, from a managerial perspective, to address the soundness issue.

Some horsemen believe to improve your chances for a sound racehorse, Thoroughbred yearlings need to be exercised carrying supplemental weight before it is time to put a rider on their back. Supplemental weight, beginning at less than what a rider weighs and increasing incrementally as the yearling can handle it, helps develop the bone density and muscle strength a horse needs to sustain itself throughout a long and productive racing career.

It's a philosophy that, at first glance, goes against conventional wisdom. Weight, remember, is the nemesis of trainers who have horses of any caliber in the handicap ranks. Nobody wants to run as the top-weight, especially when their horse would be conceding more than a couple of pounds to opponents over a distance of a mile or more. Generally, there are folks who protest the industry already asks too much, too soon, of horses and that it is those demands, before the horse is physically ready to handle the work, that ultimately result in the abbreviated careers.

Proponents of weight-training, on the other hand, say the method was in practice long ago and is once again becoming an accepted method for getting yearlings fit.

As it stands, early conditioning of yearlings *without* added weight is done by many top outfits. It is meant to put a foundation on future athletes, giving them muscle tone and stamina to handle the stress of a yearling sale and the introduction to a rider that typically takes place in the fall. Early conditioning without added weight usually consists of exercising horses in a free-range exerciser

or a round pen, two widely-used tools in the United States today. This article considers early conditioning *with* added weight.

### WEIGHTED BELT

Until a couple of years ago, equipment used in equine weight-training showed a range of improvisational solutions. Stables strapped on feed bags, bags filled with sand and, more creatively, jeans filled with sand have been fastened aboard horses.

Eponaire, in St. Charles, Ill., is owned by Krista Towns, who developed a weighted surcingle when a horse she owned needed therapeutic exercise to combat the neurological disease equine protozoal myeloencephalitis, or EPM. (Weight-training also can be useful in rehabilitation for older horses.) Coming up with a safe design that stays where it is placed while distributing weight in a balanced way, Towns named the weighted surcingle the “Astride.” The Astride first became available to the market when Eponaire got a patent on the product in June 2003.

The Astride itself weighs six pounds, and is sold with accompanying weight bags—13 bags weighing eight pounds each that are filled with small lead balls. Altogether, a total of 110 pounds can be added. The surcingle features large pockets for inserting the weight bags. The small lead balls shift like sand inside the bags, and the product features vertical distribution of the weights to simulate a rider aboard the horse. Wool flocking on the Astride adds stability, and eliminates pressure points along the spine.

The padding is three inches thick and is designed to allow no more than 40 pounds on the top of the horse's back, while each side pocket is meant to carry up to 32 pounds. This distribution encourages the horse to lift the spine, not dip it, and strengthens the horse's abdominal muscles, Towns said.

A study done at Michigan State University in 2001 concluded that adding weight

during exercise is one way to stimulate bone and muscle growth in horses ranging in age from 18-30 months. Towns refers to that study to urge conservative use of the Astride in conditioning yearlings.

“People need to be conservative with his type of training and monitor their horses carefully,” Towns said. “I want my product associated with sound, validated studies, such as the one conducted at M.S.U., which was conducted on horses 18 months and older.”

Having sold a couple of hundred weighted surcingles already, Towns stated that the Astride is “meant to help horses.” The Astride is available in two models; one retails for \$595, the other for \$395.

### POWER OF PRAYER

Regardless of the official Jan. 1 birthday they share for our convenience, horses are yearlings when they are between 12 and 24 months of age. Actual births usually occur between February and June. Those are also the months designated as the 2-year-olds in training sales season.

The yearling sales, of course, begin in July with the Fasig-Tipton Kentucky select yearling sale in Lexington that takes place this year July 18-19, and continue into the fall, with the massive Keeneland September yearling sale presenting the single largest market in the U.S. Various regional and national yearling sales run through October. Yearlings offered at public auction in the U.S. usually are anywhere from 15-20 months of age.

Introduction to a rider usually begins from about September through November of a horse's yearling year, whether the horse has gone through a sale or not. When picking out yearlings from a sale, many buyers gravitate toward those that have had some early conditioning, something that is readily apparent in the horse's physical appearance. Conditioned yearlings look chiseled and athletic, and ready to begin the first phase of their race training.

Many buyers of sales yearlings will race their purchases. Still others buy to resell for a profit—pinhooking—with the 2-year-old sales in mind.

B.C.3 Thoroughbreds, the training partnership of John Brocklebank and Shane Chipman, is a consignator to the 2-year-old sales and agent for, among others, the Timberline pinhooking group which sold recent Cinderella Stakes winner River's Prayer. B.C.3 Thoroughbreds had River's Prayer for five months. Brocklebank paid \$150,000



for the filly at the 2004 Barretts October yearling sale. Prior to her first start, she posted the quickest eighth-mile breeze of the March 15 Barretts select 2-year-olds in training sale—a scintillating :09.80. When bidding fell short of her reserve at the sale, River's Prayer was sold privately for \$150,000 to the partnership of Bearing Point Ventures and trainer Paula Capestro.

Besides River's Prayer, B.C.3 Thoroughbreds has started their share of stakes

winners and uses the Astride on the yearlings they condition. Yearlings arrive at their South Jordan, Utah-based operation in various months. B.C.3 Thoroughbreds begins ground-driving any yearlings they already have as of July 1, and from there yearlings advance to work under weight in a free-range exercise machine.

"Some horses take one month from when the initial work begins," Brocklebank said. "Some horses will take three months."

When she arrived last October, River's Prayer only needed a brief course with the weighted surcingle, "because she came along so quickly," Brocklebank said. "But most of the younger horses we have (at present) are wearing the weighted belt. We've been doing that for years."

### COOKIE BAKING

"Everybody's complaining their horses aren't sound enough, so we keep backing off and being kinder and kinder to them. That's a myth," Brocklebank said of the view that Thoroughbreds are worked too hard.

The problem, he said, is people who want to treat horses gingerly are missing a brief window in which the developing horse can be honed for strength.

"There's only a certain amount of time when a horse can really grow proper bone density, and that's when he is a young horse," Brocklebank said. "A horse grows bone through stress, not through age, and if they wait too long, they actually lose an important (time period) where the horse can develop to its full potential. If they wait till he matures, well, they're going to miss the opportunity to grow bone as a young horse that he'll never (have) again."

In Paris, Ky., Claude Felts is owner and manager of the yearling prep operation Elizabeth Station, and counts Lane's End Farm and Eaton Sales among his clients. Another proponent of adding weight to young horses before they are asked to carry a rider, he also uses the Astride.

"People get to horses too late in life, trying to develop them," Felts said. "If they start breaking yearlings in September or October, then they're rushing them all their life. If you add the weight gradually, you can really build a horse up."

Horses need to have a strong top line and muscles in the upper limbs in order to stay sound in the vulnerable pasterns and fetlocks, according to Felts. Too many racetrack injuries that result in lost days of training involve the fetlock joint, he added. The May 14 issue of *The Blood-Horse* (page 2986) noted that when the

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*The Astride by Eponaire helps a yearling get used to having weight on its back*

flexor muscles at the back of the forearm tire, they allow the ankle and knee to overextend. Chip fractures, sprains, and swelling often occur as a result of overextension due to fatigued limbs. The ankle can overextend so greatly in a racehorse that the pastern will actually sink to the ground.

"I put sidelines on first without any weight," said Felts, who usually begins prepping yearlings about 90 days ahead of the sale when most yearlings are about 12-17 months of age. Once he starts adding weight, he tries to increase it 10-20 pounds every 10 days.

"As I start putting the weight on, that not only strengthens the back, it strengthens the forearms, the shoulders, the butt muscles, and the stifles," he said. "When you develop the forearm and shoulder, that's what keeps the fetlock from crashing to the ground."

"He'll build muscle to handle what you do to him," Brocklebank said.

Brocklebank and Felts both believe under-conditioning plays a much larger part in soundness issues than most horsemen realize. They recognize conformation plays a major role in soundness, and Brocklebank called attention to shoeing and maintaining the hoof as a misunderstood component of racehorse manage-

ment that impacts soundness. But these horsemen believe that well-intentioned people simply underestimate the level of conditioning a horse needs to get tough.

Letting cookie-baking serve as a metaphor for training horses, Brocklebank said, "What's so crazy about this thing is, usually the people who are so dead set against this have had soundness problems in their horses and they continue to make the cookies the same way, and they keep turning out the same way. If they would just look to it with an open mind, and maybe try something different, maybe their cookies, so to speak, will come out differently. I just think people are insane if they keep doing the same recipe time after time expecting different results.

"People need to open their mind," Brocklebank said. "The more we can do with them as a young horse, the more bone density they'll grow, the more sound they'll stay, and the longer they'll be around."

**OMELET MAKING**

Swelling in the ankles and pasterns often does occur as the exercise steps up. Horsemanship must be called upon, and to an extent, followers of this method

must be able to trust that future athletes will ultimately benefit from the stresses and challenges that create momentary but minor sprains.

"You're constantly monitoring, taking a look at that every day," Brocklebank said. "Most young horses will fill their ankles a little bit, and that's a sign that maybe you're doing too much; let's back off."

"When you see something and a red flag goes up, you don't increase the exercise, of course," Felts said. "You try to address the underlying problem, not the symptom. The symptom is the ankle. You went too fast. You could have a muscle pull or a muscle spasm. You always back off, but you don't give up. In sports medicine, you train through injury. You find a happy medium."

Felts also offered a different view on how to use free-range exercise machines as a yearling prep tool. The machines allow exercise at a walk, jog, or canter, with the trainer deciding the speed and duration of exercise.

"I don't put weight on a yearling and jog them around," Felts said.

"I think what people are finding on these machines now is they end up with splints and



tendons when they do a lot. They get (horses) on there and jog 'em and jog 'em. What I found, and I think people are going to find is, you can go slower and sidestep the splints and the tendons by carrying weight, and get a better look to your horses, better strength, and development. It's safer, I think, to use the weighted surcingle. I get them up to a brisk walk with the weight on their back. And that again, you have to do slowly."

A little stress benefits bone, which is living tissue that must physically remodel itself to gain density. There is usually a point when the cannon bone of a young horse reacts to minor inflammation due to the stress of training.

"Shins will occur," Brocklebank said of the condition commonly known as bucked shins that often affects Thoroughbreds beginning speed training in the spring of their 2-year-old year. "We have shins like everybody else. But I'll bet you we only have them on about 20% of the horses, while a lot of people might have them in 60%."

Felts calls his Astride, "Jackson."

"Jackson never gets bucked off and doesn't move this way or that way or backwards or forwards," he said. "He's in a very secure, steady, fast position so it never throws a horse off stride like a rider can. It's very well-balanced and safe. I think this product Krista makes is a great product. It has a good tree; it

fits the horse well. I think the reason people haven't been doing (weight-training with yearlings) is they haven't had the product. If it had been around 10 years ago, people would be using it more."


## HAY IS FOR HORSES

Feeding is as important as conditioning when it comes to developing future athletes. Yearlings in the B.C.3 Thoroughbreds program are fed a diet that is 25% concentrate and 75% hay.

"They need to be chewing all the time, and eating all the time. That's how they're designed. They're designed to migrate and graze," Brocklebank said. The concentrate he prefers is Race Ready, made by Purina, which contains a lot of beet pulp. The program includes electrolytes in the interest of eliminating the painful muscle cramping condition known as tying up.

Unless a horse needs to put on a few pounds, the program stays away from feeding fat. "I don't feed fat, because they don't use fat," Brocklebank said of the recent trend toward feeding fat rather than carbohydrates (grain or concentrate) to supply energy. "People are into (feeding) fats, but what my horses do, they don't burn fat. If you were going to run 15 miles, you'd start burning fat. Basically, you're feeding them energy that they don't need. I try to concen-



trate on what they need, and what they're going to use. Most of the stuff that we do is all glucose fuel. They don't tap into their oxygen burning capabilities when they're working a quarter of a mile." 



*A close-up look at the Eponaire Astride*