

Do I Know You?

by Kathy G. O'Neal

Q. *What is the best way to get acquainted with my new horse and ease him into the routine of a new barn?*

A. It is usually your responsibility to bring your new horse home and your first chance to get to know each other in a neutral environment. Ideally, the seller will deliver your new horse to the facility that you have chosen. If you are not experienced pulling a horse trailer, I recommend that you find someone to haul for you. If you don't have a friend with a trailer, there are horse transportation companies that can be hired to transport your horse to his new home. I do recommend that you be there and accompany your horse on his journey. You can observe how the horse loads and travels and it will make it easier for the person hauling to find the property, thus putting less stress on your horse. If the horse does not load easily, you can observe the loading technique and possibly remedy that problem in future training sessions.

The overall objective is for your horse to have an easy, stress-free travel experience from his old residence to his new home.

Horses are creatures of habit, and moving from one place to another can be very traumatic. Your objective during the transition is to minimize the horse's stress level whenever possible. It usually takes about a week for a horse to settle into a new place and return to his normal personality. Horses experience change in environment much like humans do. When we go on vacation and stay in various hotels, we don't sleep as well as we normally would in our own bed.

Often when a horse comes to a new stable, he can be nervous and uncertain. Keeping your horse company for the first day helps soothe his worries, especially if he is by himself. Take time to show your horse the boundaries of his new home—fence lines, water trough, etc. to minimize stress. Also, keeping him company will allow you to see how well he is adjusting to his new environment. Here are some things that will make your horse feel welcome in his new home.

Have a small snack of hay waiting for your horse when he arrives. If possible have a bale of hay that the horse is used to, so his digestive system can acclimate. This way you can alternate between your new hay and the hay he is used to. Also, have plenty of clean



fresh water available.

The transition usually takes about four days, and you can't be too careful in this process. Hold off on offering grain or new supplements until about a week later, which gives you time to evaluate your horse's nutritional needs (based on activity level, history, etc.). A horse's natural, historical habitat is grassy plains, and in the wild they spend most of their time grazing. If you plan to have your horse in a pasture where he will eat primarily grass, be sure that you make the change gradually, taking three to four weeks to get him totally used to grass. Begin by keeping your horse in a paddock and feed him the feed that he was fed previously. Allow him to graze for short periods of time; one-half hour the first couple of days, one-hour on the third day adding time in half-hour increments until his digestive system acclimates to the new diet. Consult your veterinarian if you have any questions.

What's the Schedule

The adjustment of owning a new horse leads one naturally to want to ride him right away. I recommend that you don't ride your new horse immediately. Rather, give him time to get used to you and his new surroundings. Think of the change from the horse's perspective. You have taken him to a new place away from what is familiar to him—his former routine, home, and the humans he had partnered with. One important thing to remember is to try to keep your horse on the same schedule. Gradually adjust the feeding time to your timetable. This leads to a happy, stress-free horse, and allows him to regulate to his new life easier.

Horses are social animals, and it is important to introduce your newcomer to his neighbors so he can establish a relationship properly. Most horses understand how

to behave in a herd. They know how to be a horse, how to yield to the dominant horse, read posture, and get out of the way when necessary. A proper introduction could be as easy as putting the new horse in a paddock or stall and let him meet his neighbor over the fence or stall partition. This separation technique also gives them a chance to get away and be by themselves. Much can be gained when allowing the new horse to see other horses and visit from a distance without causing harm or being hurt.

Are You My New Master?

Paying attention to your new horse in the beginning will speed the bonding process. Turn up at the stable at a specific time of day so he will become used to your presence. Hang out together. Sit in the stall or paddock and talk to your horse. Allow your horse to investigate you, smell you, and nuzzle you. Spend time grooming him and gently rubbing his face. If possible, take his food to him in the beginning. All the attention you lavish on your horse in the beginning will help you bond faster. It generally takes about three or four days for you to get a sense of whether the horse is settling in well. At that time you can begin riding him.

Oh, I Remember You!

Since you had a vet inspection before you bought the horse, it is not necessary to rush your vet out immediately to see the horse again for the routine shots and worming. Again, giving him time to establish a routine will minimize the stress.

Kathy O'Neal is a trainer and lifelong horsewoman who lives in Corrales, NM. She specializes in Pinto and Paint horses and can be reached at 505-898-5324 or thelivery@compronetworks.com.