

Ivory Learns to Trot Under Saddle – Ivory Part 4

By Marie Hoffman

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Ivory is a three year old black Appendix AQHA mare that is owned by Denise. They have been coming over to my farm for lessons. During these lessons I have been teaching Denise how to train Ivory to eventually be shown as a Hunter.

In previous lessons Denise has taught Ivory to accept and respond to a rider at the walk. They have been walking for about a month working on turning and stopping. Now Ivory is ready to have Denise teach her to trot while ridden.

In the round pen at my farm, Denise lunged and then rode Ivory at the walk. She established that Ivory was listening to her signals to stop and turn. I attached a lunge line to Ivory's bridle as a safety precaution. When a young horse first trots, sometimes they can become scared of the rider moving as they trot causing them to try to flee from the rider on their back. This was not likely but I am always prepared to be safe.

I stood in the middle holding the lunge line, while Denise encouraged Ivory to trot. She was not able to communicate to Ivory in a way Ivory understood that she should trot. Ivory did not think she could move faster than a walk with a rider on her back. Rather than frustrate or dull the horse by the rider's repeated urgings, I decided to lead Ivory. Denise had taught Ivory to lead at the trot from the leadering position and the verbal words "and trot." This worked. I lead Ivory a few steps watching her head position. If she raised it and looked alarmed by Denise's movements in the saddle I was ready to stop her. Ivory did look back at Denise but was not at all alarmed. Her head did not rise above the normal position to use it for balance and her eyes kept their calm look. Ivory was able to chew when we walked again.

I went back to the middle of the round pen after leading Ivory at the trot a couple of more times. This time when Denise asked Ivory to trot she did. I asked Denise to hold the saddle with her inside hand and use her other hand for cueing Ivory to stop. I used the lunge line like the inside rein. Ivory was still very unbalanced and would surge faster and slower as she was learning to find her balance. I had Denise go in a half standing position, where her seat is just out of the saddle and treadle. Treadle is where she alternates the weight from one stirrup to the other in the rhythm of the trot. By steadying herself in the saddle and treadling, it made it easier for Ivory to learn to balance a rider at the trot. We trotted around a few rounds then walked. Denise reversed Ivory toward the center then continued the other way. Denise signaled Ivory to trot the other way and she trotted off when signaled.

Then next lesson she prepared Ivory as before by lunging and when Ivory was focused Denise mounted her. Denise could tell Ivory was focused when her inside ear was facing Denise and her outside ear was pointing forward. This told us that Ivory was watching Denise. When Ivory was focused, she responded quickly to the signals both verbal and on the line to slow her speed.

After they walked a few minutes I attached the lunge line and Denise asked Ivory to trot. Ivory trotted calmly forward, though she did take some urging to get going. Denise gave a signal with ankles vibrating on Ivory's side in the normal position. If Ivory did not trot, then she used the wand (four foot stiff whip) to signal her on her rump to go forward. Ivory wanted to kick at the signal from the wand on her rump, so we signaled her on her belly by where Denise's leg was or on her shoulder. Denise did not have enough control to make an issue of not kicking at the whip. So rather than show Ivory she could kick at it we found another effective place to signal her forward with the whip. In the middle, I also moved toward Ivory's rump using my hand and arm to encourage her to start trotting. We did all we could to set the situation up to be successful and have the horse cooperate without a struggle or fear.

Ivory learned later to move forward from a signal with the wand on the hip. Without a rider she was taught to go forward from that signal. If she kicked at it she had the whip firmly used on her rump in a repeated fashion until she moved forward. At no time did the handler lose patience or get up set. Ivory was only doing the natural thing that is to kick at something irritating her. She needed to and did learn that the irritating thing (the whip) was not going to go away until she moved forward. Only once she moved forward from the whip it would stop irritating her.

After going a few rounds they walked. I took off the lunge line. It was obvious by Ivory's lack of ambition telling us that she was not frightened because she was not going into her flight reflex. Ivory's ears were soft moving quietly from the rider to looking where she was going. Ivory was also chewing on the bit from time to time. This is the calm body language signals telling us that she was accepting of the rider trotting. Ivory was also very willing to stop when she felt even the slightest signal to do so.

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Denise trotted Ivory the other way. Again she did fine. Denise started to post in using a very small rises out of the saddle. This helped Denise balance while riding Ivory's long strides at the trot. She continued to treadle while she posted. Stepping on one stirrup when she was in the rising position and the other in the sitting position, then back to the first when rising again, etc. The treadling helps a horse find a steady rhythm. Denise continued to hold on to the saddle with one hand and signal Ivory with the other. Though both of us were pleased to find Ivory had lots of suspension in her trot. Denise quickly discovered that suspension can be difficult to ride on a young horse that is surging faster and slower. Denise used her body's movements and gave Ivory a steady influence to go at a steady pace. It only took a few more sessions before Ivory achieved her balance and was able to go at a fairly steady pace. Then Denise was able to hold her hands on the reins in the normal position. Ivory is still in her half breed side pull that is a side pull with a smooth O ring snaffle attached to the nose piece of the side pull. I told Denise she could trot Ivory at home in her small pen where she rode her.

All went well as Denise described how Ivory was as calm at home as she was here. This next lesson we worked on faster and slower trot. Denise asked Ivory to trot, which Denise was able to do on her own without my help in the middle. I had Denise increase her motion of posting and quicken her treadle while she verbally cued Ivory along with vibrating her ankles on Ivory's sides. When Ivory sped up a little, Denise kept up her active posting and treadling but quieted her legs and voice. Once Ivory made a round around the round pen Denise asked her to slow. At the same time, Denise slowed her posting and posted closer to the saddle. She signaled with a sliding of the bit back and forth, while she said easy. Ivory wanted to quit, as she always did, so she walked instead of just slowing her trot. Denise signaled her to trot again but this time slowed her right away. Once Ivory took a few slower steps, Denise sped her up again, then praised Ivory for her effort. It is very important to praise the horse at every try he or she makes an attempt to do what ever the rider signals for.

During the next lessons this was the pattern, lunging until focused, walking and trotting fast and then slower. The pair worked on keeping a steady pace, trotting at the speed Denise asked. Turns at the trot were also introduced. Ivory did well because she had so much practice at the walk.

After 6 lessons in the round pen, Ivory was ready to trot in the big arena. The first lesson we only walked her letting her become used to the new area. Denise walked Ivory while I gave her daughter a riding lesson.

The next lesson we asked Ivory to trot. Denise was prepared to circle Ivory if she should become excited or frightened and go into her flight reflex. Denise was instructed to turn Ivory in a very small circle as soon as she felt that she was not in total control. The first trot Ivory moved quickly, raised her head and became stiff with her ears erect and facing her rider. I had Denise tell her to walk right away. Ivory was going into her flight reflex telling us she was not ready to continue to keep trotting. Ivory listened well but not as quickly as in her small pen or in the round pen at home. So I had Denise repeat a short trot and then walk for this first session of trotting in the big arena. This way we were able to keep her under total control and encourage her to be calm.

By the next lesson Ivory was very quiet and she was able to trot all the way around the arena. Because she was used to the short trot and then walk exercise she was looking for the walk every ten steps or so. This way she did not start trotting faster and faster because of the bigger space. Denise was able to do regular speed trot and slow trot at this lesson. Ivory was back to herself of not being too ambitious and not in the flight reflex.

Over the next month Denise had Ivory trot over poles on the ground. Denise had been leading Ivory over trot poles to strengthen her belly and back since she was a yearling. So Ivory found this easy to do with a rider. The pair went to different arenas for more experience. This gave Ivory great experience at going new places. Denise usually traveled with Tara her daughter's calm Appaloosa mare. At first Tara gave Ivory the extra confidence she needed in the new places. Later Ivory traveled alone and continued to work calm. Ivory was to be a show horse eventually and this early experience was great to build her confidence before the stress of the actual shows would make building a young horse's confidence much harder.

The plan was to continue to trot Ivory for most of the next year working on her balance, responsiveness to the aids and strengthen her body. One reason I have kept the two at a trot only is that; Denise had never started a horse before Ivory, because Ivory has not cantered she will not think of it should she become startled and go forward. Also by improving Ivory's balance at the trot, teaching her leg aids, lengthening and shorting of her trot strides, continue working on turning on the

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outside rein, how to go on the bit, and lots of trail rides to also work on balance and strength she will be physically and mentally ready to canter and will do so easily. So Denise will have the next months filled with plenty of things to work on during their rides together.