

Starting Ivory Under Saddle – Ivory Part 3

By Marie Hoffman

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Ivory is a coming three year old, black Appendix AQHA mare that is owned by Denise. Ivory has learned to lunge and ground drive. Denise has been ground driving her around her farm and neighborhood during the past summer and fall. Ivory has been driving in a side pull while wearing an English saddle at first, then a western saddle. Denise feels she is ready to start Ivory's under saddle training.

Denise wants to start Ivory under saddle herself. We decided she would come to my farm for lessons and then go home to practice. The first lesson was to review that Ivory really understood the signals to stop and turn. We started in my round pen. Denise lunged Ivory a few minutes controlling her speed and direction. At no time was Ivory allowed to play on the lunge line. The next step was to ask Ivory to canter on the lunge. She had never cantered while wearing a saddle. As Denise asked Ivory to canter, I instructed her not to let Ivory buck or play. If she did, Denise was to stop her quickly using a loud voice to say no! As Denise asked her to canter she did take a good buck step. Denise stopped her. Then Denise calmly sent Ivory back out on the lunge and while trotting asked for a canter again. This time she cantered off without the buck. After a couple of rounds, Denise asked Ivory to stop and praised her. Denise then repeated the exercise the other direction.

When training a young horse they can buck for many reasons. The main reasons are: fear of the saddle, feeling fresh and/or bucking to relieve a kink in their back. I stop a horse from bucking if the horse becomes afraid, I don't want his reaction to be bucking to get away. I don't panic if the horse hops a step or two; I just stop him, calm him and try again.

I may try again that day or on another day when I see the horse demonstrate more fully that he is over his fear of the saddle. If the horse is bucking because he feels fresh, let him understand that under no circumstances is this safe or acceptable behavior. Horses can learn to control their energy if shown how. Then the rider can use that energy as impulsion to do what ever task is involved. The last reason is to relieve a kink in their back is also not acceptable. Through proper warm up and discipline the horse can warm up those muscles. If the horse is still stiff the rider can massage or do TTouches on the horse to loosen him up before riding.

The two reasons I am so strict on this point is, that if a horse bucks for fun he (especially if green) can scare himself and then panic buck his rider off. The horse may have then created a fear that may cause him to buck again. Then horse may have learned an unwanted behavior.(Bucking could become his solution to life when things are not going his way and/or he doesn't understand) The second main reason is that if a horse feels it is okay to buck for fun or get the kinks out the rider can also fall and become injured. The horses that are trained that bucking is not an option will not usually think of it when they are frightened or fresh from not being worked in a while.

Denise was happy that I had her train Ivory this way. Ivory was big and she did not want to get bucked with or bucked off!

Now that Ivory had learned to canter with the saddle on and not to be upset about the sight or movement of the saddle, it was time to go on to a few minutes of ground driving.

We put on a half breed side pull (an O ring smooth snaffle and side pull combined) instead of the regular side pull. Ivory had been carrying (not using) a bit in her mouth most of the summer, so wearing the bit was no problem. The lines were hooked to the bit and run through the stirrups. The half breed side pull is designed so that it has the same pressure on the bridge of the horse's nose while simultaneously giving a light signal in the horse's mouth. Going through the familiar routine of ground driving, it only took a few lessons for Ivory to have a good understanding of what she should do when she felt the signals of the bit. Denise ground drove her in the walk and trot.

Now it was time for the first mounting. Denise arrived at the lesson with Ivory. Concerned, Denise led Ivory to me to show me the bite mark at Ivory's girth area. Ivory's herd mate, Tara, had had enough of Ivory wanting to play and let her have a nip. Neither Denise nor I wanted Ivory to have any bad or pain experiences with a saddle or her first rider so we decided to work her without a saddle. We lunged and drove her as usual. When she was focused we took her back the barn.

This was where Ivory first learned about carrying a person. Her first experience would be bareback. I like to use a stall where the horse is used to being tacked and groomed. Ivory like most horses was very relaxed and comfortable in this stall.

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With Ivory tied with her halter that was left on under her bridle, we proceeded with the steps to make sure Ivory understood she was safe while a person mounted her.

Each step was done carefully watching Ivory's body language for chewing and sighing telling us she was accepting what we were doing. If Ivory raised her head, opened her eyes wide, was unable to chew the grain offered or demonstrated any other body language that indicated she was frightened we would stop and backed up a step. I asked Denise first to hop up and down at Ivory's side like she was getting ready to mount. We made sure Ivory was looking at her out of the eye on the same side Denise was on. Ivory was fine, looking more interested in figuring out why her owner had jumping beans in her boots.

The next step was a challenge because of Ivory's size it was not possible for Denise to jump from the ground on Ivory's back. We decided to use a bucket to step on. I was there to take it away once she mounted. Ivory was so calm about all of it I knew she would be fine about the bucket should it fall or move. She was very familiar with the white five gallon bucket.

To her it usually meant food was in it. Denise stepped on the bucket and leaned over Ivory's back. We made sure Ivory saw her out of each eye. A young horse can be surprised to find your head and arms on the other side while he watched you get up on the first side. I had Denise give Ivory a small amount of oats while she was up there to encourage Ivory to chew. Ivory chewed right away indicating that what we were doing was not frightening to her. We repeated the same step on the other side.

Because Ivory was accepting of all we were doing, we went on the next step of actually mounting. After lying on her stomach Denise calmly slid her leg over Ivory's back while keeping her head low by Ivory's neck. Slowly she sat up. (In case you are wondering the stall has a 12 foot ceiling.) Denise gave Ivory a few kernels of oats first on one side then on the other so Ivory would be able to see her with both eyes. Again Ivory was fine. She only showed a slight amount of concern by stopping chewing for a few seconds when Denise sat up. Then she went right back to chewing. Then when it was time for Denise to dismount, she firmly let Ivory feel her leg slide over her croup and dismounted.

Denise and I both made sure the whole time we took deep breaths and talked to her in toning voices to help encourage her stay calm.

The next lesson was similar. We went on from just mounting on one side to mounting and dismounting on both sides. Ivory's bite injury was not healed enough for a saddle yet. Ivory no longer needed grain and was looking for it so much that we decided to stop giving it to her. She was thinking more about the grain concentrating on that rather than learning what we were teaching her.

I use the grain to encourage the horse to chew. When a horse chews he goes into his para-sympathetic or thinking state and is not in his instinctive state where he might react with flight or fight. A horse retains what is learned best when he is in his thinking state. A horse that focuses only on the grain is not able to learn well either.

The next step was to take a few steps inside the stall. Denise used her voice, while turning Ivory's head. We took a few steps around the stall. Though mildly concerned Ivory, adjusted very quickly. In the stall, we wanted to have Ivory move forward from a leg and voice signal, turn in the stall and stop when asked.

The next session we were able to put a saddle back on. All of the steps we had done without a saddle were repeated with the saddle. During the first mountings a horse can become tense and hold his breath thus feeling the restriction girth. This may scare him causing him to buck. Ivory did as well with a saddle as she did without.

The next session after the usual lunging and ground driving, it was time for Denise to mount and ride Ivory in the round pen. I stood at Ivory's head and she stepped up on both side then slid her leg over. I lead her on Ivory three times around the arena each direction. Ivory was very calm. Denise was thrilled! She had never trained a horse to be ridden and here she was riding her "baby"!

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The next session all the steps were repeated again. After Denise mounted I stood in the middle holding the lunge line while Denise started, stopped and turned Ivory (toward me only). I turned them loose after a few minutes. Ivory demonstrated she was calmly accepting the signals from her rider.

She responded correctly to the cues while her head stayed in the normal position. She chewed often and her eyes and ears were soft, looking at Denise and her surroundings in a quiet manner. They walked learning to stop, move forward with a signal from Denise's lower leg, and turn both in and away from the fence while reversing.

After 7 minutes it was time to dismount. Denise asked Ivory to back using signals on the bit after squeezing with her legs lightly. After Ivory took one step back she was praised. Each of the following four riding session we asked Ivory to back a couple of steps. Then Ivory started offering to back instead of standing still when it was time to quit. So I had Denise stop backing her at all during her riding sessions. Ivory had learned to back and would remember to back when asked again. So there was no need to keep practicing.

This also told us that Ivory needed to have her lesson varied enough so she did not anticipate and volunteer what she thought we wanted instead of waiting for a signal.

Before dismounting Denise stood in the saddle and shifted it back and forth, letting Ivory feel the shift of the saddle before she dismounted, so it would not startle her. Denise made sure Ivory was looking at her with the eye on the same side she was dismounting on. When Denise could see Ivory's eye and her ear was turned toward her, she dismounted on the off side she let her leg drag over Ivory's croup. When the rider accustoms the horse to being touched on the croup the horse will not startle later when the rider accidentally touches the horses croup with his leg. The rider should mount and dismount off both sides of the horse training both sides of the horse's brain to accept this.

It was time for Ivory to start practicing at home, Denise had been sitting on her at home but not riding her. Denise did not have a round pen at home, but had a small paddock that Ivory was familiar with. That would be their riding arena. Rides were limited to a walk and only under 10 minutes. Ivory was learning to bend to the rider's leg, go forward from a leg signal, turn and stop.

In her training to turn, Denise was using her outside leg back a little (to hold her haunches in) and her inside leg at the girth (to help bend in the direction of the turn) in addition to the signals on the reins to turn Ivory. Ivory was good at following the direct signal on the bit but would sometimes bend but not turn. Then Denise used the steady outside rein as a wall to stop the shoulder from popping out, also to stop Ivory from bending her neck too much the direction of the vibrating direct rein. Using the outside rein and as long as Denise looked where she wanted to go, Ivory did great at turning.

During this whole process Ivory did very well, demonstrating that Denise had thoroughly covered all the steps to prepare Ivory for this new phase in her education. Ivory learned to accept a rider and to follow the directions that the rider gave. The two continued walking two to three times per week for about 10 minutes. I instructed Denise to gradually increasing the time so that at the end of a month she would be riding 20 minutes. This gave Ivory time to increase the bone density of her bones and strengthen her tendons and muscles without much danger of injury. I walk my own horses for one month because by the time you trot they are so well schooled at turning, stopping and moving forward from your leg, trotting is no big deal.