

Selling the Game:

Becoming an Owner—Understanding the Training Stages, Types of Races and Entry Process

It's important to know the basics of a horse's journey to the racetrack

By Fred Taylor Jr.

This is part four of Selling the Game, a series of articles about the excitement of Thoroughbred racehorse ownership and how to attract new owners, by Fred Taylor Jr. He is the founder and managing partner of Mojo Thoroughbred Holdings LLC, which operates Mojo Racing Partners offering affordable opportunities for newcomers and veterans to become involved in Thoroughbred ownership. Taylor serves as a liaison to the Department of Transportation for a major airline and is a former recipient of the Texas Thoroughbred Association's Allen Bogan Memorial Award for member of the year. If you missed a previous installment, you can find past issues of American Racehorse at americanracehorse.com.

Hello, American Racehorse readers! We are in the heart of the racing season, and there's no better time to introduce the ways racehorses are trained, to provide a general overview of the types of races offered and to touch on the basics of how horses are entered into a race. Please understand, I am not professing to be an expert on the training process, nor am I endorsing a particular way in which horses should be trained. My goal in this article is to provide readers with insights on the standard stages of training so a person who has no knowledge of the process will have a good understanding of what to expect. Also, it should be noted that trainers, like coaches on baseball, football and basketball teams, have different ways to prepare the horses under their care and personal methods by which they select races to enter. In this regard, my comments are not intended to be an opinion about anyone's racing strategy—the information is meant only to inform readers about the different types of races and fundamental steps for entering horses into a race.



Stages of Training

Depending on a young Thoroughbred's health, maturity and overall physique, it could need six to eight months before it is ready to race as a 2-year-old, and some horses are not ready to race until they are 3 or older. Most young horses, particularly if they go through public auction as weanlings or yearlings, receive training in basic ground manners, such as how to stand and walk properly on a lead. The next step for these potential racehorses is learning how to be ridden. As such, they have a lot to learn before they are ready to race, and the next stage in their development starts with their schooling at a farm or training center.

Farm and Training Center Schooling

The first step of transitioning a young Thoroughbred into a racehorse begins at a facility that specializes in teaching horses the fundamental concepts that aren't typically mentioned in the news stories about horse racing. Farms and training centers acclimate horses to the standard racing equipment, provide soundness evaluations and health certifications, as well as offer trainers and owners early talent assessments. It is important to point out that, before agreeing to hire a trainer or use a training center, each owner or designated managing partner of a racing group is encouraged to learn (and share information with the rest of the group) about a trainer's particular training

program and practices. Most racing fans who have never owned a horse probably don't realize that every horse in a race had to be taught how to accept a saddle, bit and reins, plus a rider. This equipment is so commonplace that people might think horses simply allow it to be put on as if placing a collar and a leash on a dog's neck. But, that's not the case. Young horses will buck, kick and try to toss off anything that's put on their backs—this is just a natural defense reaction. With proper instruction, a horse will eventually accept being tacked up once it realizes there is no risk to its safety.

As soon as the horse accepts a rider, it needs to learn basic steering instructions: going forward and back, turning left and right, speeding up, slowing down and stopping. With the rider up and steering knowledge in place, the horse is ready to be led out to a training track to become familiar with galloping in the correct direction under the control of the rider.

After about 45 days of initial training—usually, the second month of its 2-year-old year (all Thoroughbreds are technically considered to be a year older on January 1 regardless of the month they were born), the horse is given about 30 days off to give its muscles time to rest and ensure proper bone modeling resulting from the standard stresses of the training program. This also gives the training facility an opportunity to have a veterinarian evaluate the horse's soundness.

Once the 30-day rest period ends and the soundness of the horse

is verified, the training center will start the process of introducing the horse to a series of weekly breezes (or “works”)—sprints at short distances (starting at a half-furlong) that increase in distance a couple of weeks apart. These timed works test the horse’s natural speed, strength and stamina at that point in its training, and can serve as indicators of the horse’s talent and competitive ability.

Some training centers also have starting gates to help the horses become comfortable with going into the confined space of the gate’s stall (which is only a few inches wider and longer than the horse’s actual width and length). Horses don’t like feeling trapped, so they have to learn that the starting gate is a safe place to be. Once comfortable standing in the stall, the horse will be given the opportunity to run out of the gate to simulate the start of a race. Before being sent to a licensed trainer at the racetrack, the horse will typically have a timed breeze from the starting gate.

Racetrack Schooling and First Race Readiness

Unless a horse is acquired through the claiming process, most trainers receive racehorses that are new (or “green”) to the racetrack environment. At this point, these horses have been breezing distances shorter than the typical race. Some have not received starting gate schooling. So, it is up to the trainer to provide the necessary lessons and conditioning to get the horse race-ready.

Trainers have their own programs, routines and regimens that they have perfected over the years to help each horse reach its peak competitive ability. Through daily gallops (typically, once around the racetrack) and weekly timed breezes (three furlongs or more), a trainer will evaluate a horse and begin to form an opinion about the types of races in which it will likely be successful.

The trainer’s program may include matching a horse against other horses in the barn that are equally talented and have all of them work together. This increases the horse’s happiness and competitive spirit, helps the horses stay engaged in their training and keeps them from being pushed beyond their physical limits. It also provides the trainer with opportunities to form an opinion about the horse’s talent.

In order for a horse to qualify for racing at a particular racetrack, it must meet certain regulated requirements (based on the rules of

racing in each state). The horse’s Jockey Club paperwork and health certificates must be filed with the racing office; the horse must be certified by the track’s starting gate superintendent that it is capable of safely entering, standing in and leaving the starting gate; and the horse must have a couple of published works within 90 days.

Types of Races

There are essentially two types of races, and within each race type, there are several categories. The first type includes races in which horses compete freely against one another, such as maiden special

weights, allowances, handicaps, stakes and graded stakes. The horses that are entered into these races are considered to be top quality for the category at that race meet. We’ll explore each category in more detail below.

The second type includes races in which horses can be purchased, or “claimed,” for a set price stated in the conditions of the race and range from maiden claiming races to optional and set claiming races. Claiming races are the most common races at any track and are typically populated by horses that aren’t talented enough to compete against the top quality horses. Purchase prices for each horse are at-

tached in these races to put owners on notice that they risk having their horses purchased from them if they drop a horse below his true value. This tends to keep horses of similar talent at the same claiming level, which makes these races attractive for wagering.

Maiden (Special and Claiming) Races

The word “maiden” means the horse has never won a race. Maiden special weight races are created for owners and trainers who believe their horses are top tier. Maiden claiming races are offered for horses of lesser talent.

Allowance Races

In allowance races, horses typically start at a set weight, and then are given allowances or weight off for certain criteria such as the number of races won since a particular date. Allowance races typically carry a purse that is higher than a claiming race.



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Stakes Races

Racetracks offer stakes races to feature and reward the best horses that race in a particular racing condition during the meet. These races offer both higher purse value and lasting prestige for the horse, owner and trainer. Entering a horse in a stakes race generally requires higher qualifying standards, as well as nomination and entry fees—which can supplement the larger purse being offered. (There aren't entry fees for non-stakes races.)

Graded stakes races are the highest level of races. These races are classified and ranked according to grade levels (1, 2 or 3) annually by the Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association's American Graded Stakes Committee. These races are offered for the best of the best, with the Grade 1 featuring the highest-quality horses.

The Purpose of Claiming Races

While all owners seek the prestige of running their horses in stakes races, the majority of Thoroughbreds are not able to compete at the highest levels. In fact, most horses aren't able to race at the allowance level. In this regard, U.S. racetracks mostly feature claiming races in order to serve the greatest population of runners.

One of the rewarding aspects about racing is that no matter the type of race, when the field of horses is matched up based on equivalent ability, it ensures the outcome is both unpredictable and thrilling. This fundamental concept is just as true for claiming races as it is for allowance and stakes races.

Claiming races are offered at different purse values and claiming prices that are based on the quality of the horses. Owners that enter their horses in a claiming race do so knowing that another owner or trainer can submit a claim slip prior to the start of the race.

Owners and trainers claim horses because they believe they will be acquiring race-ready bloodstock that can produce immediate racing success, perhaps even at a higher level. While every runner is checked by a veterinarian prior to a race, there is no guarantee the horse does not have a minor ailment or nagging injury. That is perhaps the biggest risk in claiming a horse.

Before making a claim, it's wise to consult with your trainer and seek his or her opinion about the horse you would like to claim and whether it would be a good fit into the trainer's program.

Race Meets and the Condition Book

Most racetracks do not offer racing year-round. Some race meets are short (less than 30 days) and others are stretched out over several months. Some racetracks host several meets during a year.

Based on the types of horses that are expected to race during an upcoming meet, the racing secretary will put together an advance schedule (known as the condition book) of primary races offered each day, generally for a two-week period, accompanied by several substitute races in the

event the primary races are not used. Sometimes extra races are also added to the potential schedule by the racing secretary.

Each race in the condition book lists the purse, race distance, racing surface, age and gender of the horses allowed to be entered and any other restrictions.

Before a horse can be entered into a race, the horse's registration certificate and ownership paperwork must be on file with the racing office for the particular race meet. Once the paperwork is in place, the applicable entry form must be submitted by a person who is authorized to submit the entry form, usually the trainer.

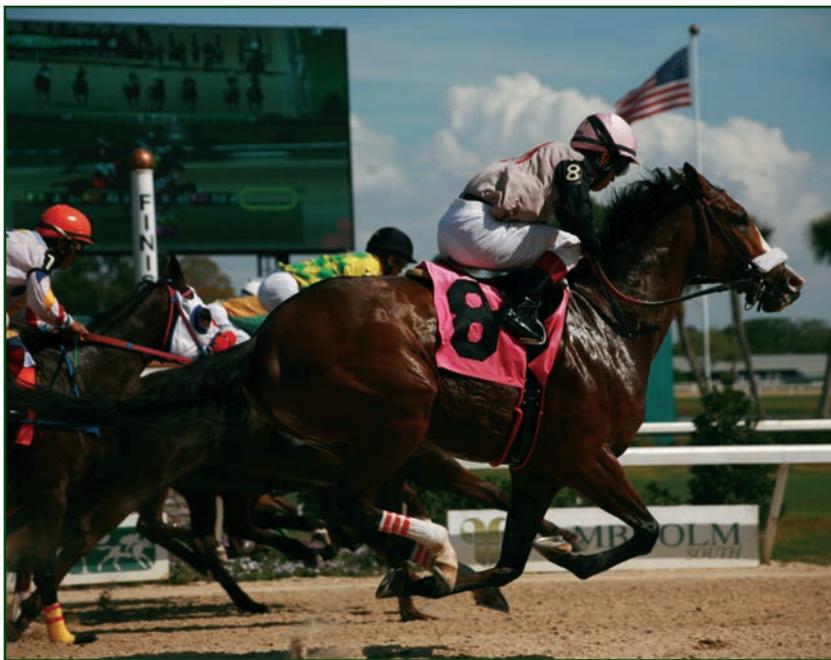
The Draw and Overnight List

After the entries are closed, the racing secretary then designates two people to draw the entry forms and post position numbers for the races that will be used for that race card. The draw is held in public, and the horse that is drawn receives the starting gate position corresponding to the number drawn. At the time of the draw, the owner or trainer is expected to designate a jockey.

If the number of entries exceeds the number of horses that are allowed to start in a race (due to racetrack and starting gate limitations), the racing secretary may "split" the race or offer an extra race for another day.

If there are insufficient entries, the racing secretary will drop the race and use a listed substitute or other race that was carried over as an extra. Once the list of races for the specific day is finalized, an "overnight" list is published for the public to see the horses that have been entered for that particular day.

In the next issue, we will shift gears and start to examine the first part of developing a racing strategy by discussing ownership standards and goals and setting a budget. ★



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