



## Training the Young Horse/Eye Sore

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***Q. In order to compete our horses in performance futurities at 3 and 4-years-old, we are having to saddle train them at 2 and 3 years old. I have always been told not to ride an Arabian until they are 4 because they mature later than other breeds. When are Arabians mature enough to be ridden, and is it harmful to ride them before then?***

*A: Thank you for an excellent thought-provoking and controversial question. The Arabian breed is known for its longevity, and the price we pay for having our horses around to enjoy longer is that they tend to be slower to mature. This issue of maturity is twofold, however, and should be separated into physical maturity and mental maturity.*

*A horse that is considered physically mature enough to enter training is an individual that can be force exercised, accepts a bosal or bit, and carries the weight of tack and rider for a period of time without suffering damage to its musculoskeletal system. All 2-year-old Arabian horses, most 3-year-olds and some 4-year-olds have actively developing growth plates in the long bones of their legs, the vertebrae of their spinal column and are undergoing the shedding of deciduous teeth and the formation and eruption of permanent teeth. The degree of closure of your horse's growth plates can be assessed by examining the long bone above the knees and hocks. These are some of the last growth plates to fill in with mineral, or close as it is sometimes called, and are used as an indicator of physical maturity. Your veterinarian can visually and radiographically assess these anatomical areas of the bone and help determine an individual's suitability for training. These evaluations are highly subjective, and you should enlist the help of a veterinarian with good knowledge of sports medicine and the stresses induced by training. In addition to evaluating the skeletal maturity, it is important to look at overall condition, musculature and coordination. A 2-year-old that carries good body condition, has adequate musculature and is near its adult height would be considered to be maturing quickly, while a horse the same age that is long-legged, narrow-chested and carrying slight musculature with the appearance of a Great Dane puppy should be viewed as immature. Frequently, horses that fall into the latter category are also uncoordinated and clumsy, since they are growing so fast they have trouble accommodating their ever-changing personal dimensions. Obviously, this is not a horse that you should ride, or want to ride.*

*Since an important way of communicating training to a horse is with a bit or bosal, a comfortable mouth and jaw is paramount. A competent veterinary dentist should evaluate your horse's mouth, pulling caps, floating sharp enamel points and paying close attention to any oral condition that would make wearing a bosal or bit uncomfortable.*

*The second criterion is mental maturity and is more difficult to evaluate. Mental maturity is best evaluated by attention span. Young horses, just like young people, tend to have short attention spans. Attempting to train past that attention span has ruined many good horses. Good trainers inherently know when a horse has been exhausted mentally and will repeat a good maneuver and end the session. As horses mature, their ability to focus on a task and retain correction and direction improves while unwanted behavior, such as temper or avoidance caused by boredom or distraction, diminishes. Mental maturity is highly variable and is best discussed with your professional trainer.*

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*You are fortunate that you show in the Arabian industry where performance futurity horse classes include 3, 4, and 5-year-olds. I applaud this rule implementation and would discourage any undue emphasis on 3-year-old age events for the Arabian horse. The problem is always investment realization. If you review current trends in other breeds you find money being added to 2-year-old futurities. If you are certain that the age events are important to your competing goals, look for Arabian lines known for early maturity. Speak with a reputable trainer or look at the 3 and 4-year-old winners at major events.*

***Q. I have an Arabian gelding whose eye started watering and developing a blue/grey coloration. My vet had me treat him with Bute and an antibiotic and advised me to keep him out of the sun which helped. Since then the blue/grey coloration reappears and goes away. Now his eye is sore, swelling up and draining yellow mucus. What could be causing this?***

*A: You have described the classic symptoms of equine recurrent uveitis (ERU) sometimes referred to as periodic ophthalmia or moonblindness. ERU is an incurable inflammatory condition of the interior structures of the eye and the leading cause of blindness in horses worldwide. The exact cause is unknown but appears to be an immune-mediated process that causes inflammation of the eye at various intervals.*

*At the first indication of a flare-up, usually seen as tearing, squinting, painful rubbing of the eye or a cloudy blue coloration, an ophthalmic evaluation should be performed by a veterinarian. It is important to treat the inflammation and pain and to dilate the pupil of the eye. Frequently, horses will rub their uncomfortable eyes and may develop corneal ulcers and/or infections of their eyes as a secondary complication to ERU. These secondary problems can be difficult to treat and require prompt intervention. While ERU is a problem that your horse will have for life, aggressive conscientious treatment can protect his eyesight for long periods of time. Additionally, new treatments and therapies such as intra-ocular implants and strong anti-inflammatory medications are constantly being evaluated. Horses that experience severe frequent bouts with ERU should be evaluated by a board certified veterinary ophthalmologist, most frequently available at a college of veterinary medicine, so that the most current options can be discussed.*

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