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Halter
Breaking
Your Foal

It's time for "Bunny" to be halter-broken.

Bunny's registered name is Shez Alot Like Fred. She's owned by Ball's Quarter Horses, a training and breeding facility in Colorado, owned and operated by siblings Tom, Wayne and Margo Ball. They've been in business at the same location for decades, and Margo has had her AQHA judge's card for most of that time.

The Balls invited The American Quarter Horse Journal to get an inside look at how they help their foals learn to take their first steps wearing a halter. Today, it's Bunny's turn.

"We started her because she came to us and asked to be started," Tom says.

The Balls use old-fashioned horsemanship in their halter breaking, approaching it with patience, an earned trust and the belief that every foal is an individual. The steps Tom and Margo go through might take one day or three weeks, and they might spend longer on different steps with different foals. The Balls might start a foal at 30 days old, like Bunny, or they might wait longer. It all depends on the personality



Tom slowly eases the halter on Bunny, being careful not to spook her. Margo stays at the filly's hind end, on the same side as Tom, keeping her hand flat, supporting and bracing the foal, not grabbing the hind end.

and needs of each foal.

"We wait until our babies are ready to break," Tom adds. "We don't want to fight with them."

Starting in a roomy run, with Bunny's mama close by, let's watch Tom and Margo take Bunny through her first lessons.

Step 1: Wait Until They're Ready

TOM: Most foals, at first, are a little hesitant to come to you. As they get used to you being around, then they will start coming up, and they'll get curious. And as you pet or scratch them, they become more "humanized."

MARGO: We're around the foals a lot, too; we work around them, cleaning their stalls. So they have that contact on a daily basis.

TOM: If you start when they're a week old and still not humanized, you end up fighting with them, or they fight with you. Sometimes you can actually make it harder by not waiting on a foal. If you wait until they're ready, they have more trust, and it just makes the process much easier.

The key word is trust. When the foals come up and start nosing around you, that means they trust that you're not going to do something to them that will hurt. So when you do introduce them to something new, like the halter, they trust that it's not going to be anything bad.

If you take one and put a halter on her and start pulling her around, you're going to spook her. Then she'll lose trust in the halter, lose trust in you, and you end up with a horse that's going to fight you, and maybe one that will get hurt.

Step 2: Putting On and Wearing the Halter

TOM: Practice patience before you start. It takes a lot of patience and slow movements. Try to use little resistance with them, so you don't spook them in any way.

When it comes time to put the halter on, it's often better to



The Balls let Bunny simply wear the halter for a while to get used to it. "Let them shake their heads," Tom says. "They're going to rub it against the fence and try to get the halter off." But that's OK.

have two people, or a box corner to do it in.

The trick, when you use two people, is for the rump person to just stand there, letting the foal brace against the back person. You don't want to apply pressure on or grab the rump. You want just enough pressure that the foal stands still. The back person just gives support.

If you're up against her, she's not going to kick you, other than with her hock. You're better off touching her than standing back two feet. That's where you get hurt.

And there's no yelling allowed.

TOM: Then you stand back and watch, and just let the foal wear the halter a while. Every one is an individual; they're all going to have a little different temperament. Disposition is the key factor in that.

Depending on the individual, the foal might just wear the halter for a few days, and you do nothing else with it.

MARGO: It should be a leather halter. If the foal does get into a bind and gets really caught on something, the leather will break.

And the halter should fit. If you have one too big, and she reaches up there to scratch, she could get into a real wreck. You do need to be careful about that.

Don't leave it on her at night. You don't have to stand there and watch her. On the other hand, you do need to be around in close proximity so that if she does get into some kind of bind, you're there.

Step 3: Introducing the Lead Rope

Tom: Next, you clip a lead rope onto the halter and let her drag it. Play it by ear and see what she does with it. Let it hang around and let her get used to it. Put a little pressure on it: Slide your hand on the rope so she feels the tension on it, but it's not a pull.

She's going to walk off with that rope dragging on the ground, and she's going to step on it, and it will jerk her head down. That is her first "whoa," as far as a "whoa" command on a halter. After a few times of that, as soon as she steps on



Bunny checks out the lead rope dragging from her halter. Depending on the individual, the Balls might let a foal drag a rope several times before they move on to the next step.



With a steady and gentle pressure, Tom pulls Bunny to the side, pulling her off balance so she has to step to the side. As soon as she gives to the pressure, taking one step, he releases her head and doesn't ask for anything more.

the rope and feels that pull, she will just stop and put her head down. She'll carry her head to one side or the other. The foals learn not to step on the rope.

Use a rope that's short enough to only reach to the back feet. If the mare's around, she's likely to step on it.

Step 4: Taking the First Steps

TOM: You start with a give and release on her head. Standing to the side, pull on her head and release it, not trying to move her feet.

Then you pull a little harder. The logic of going sideways is that you're pulling her off-balance, and she's almost forced to cross a leg over. That's the "first step." When she does that, you release.

Then you switch to the other side and pull in the other direction.

You don't stand out in front where she can brace against you. A baby will pull back and can flip over backwards. Of course, when she starts to pull back, you don't let her go, but you let the rope slip through your hand just enough so there's enough resistance that she doesn't pull real hard, and you let go and she drops to the ground.

When you take the pressure off, and put it back on, slowly and gently, she's more likely to give to you. If you put on a lot of pressure, you make a foal fight you.

Step 5: Moving Alongside You

TOM: Once she is going sideways, then you can ask her to go forward, alongside you. You could use a rump rope, or, if it's a small foal, just put one hand on the rump, and ask her to move along beside you. Either way, stay at the side and keep the baby's neck out in front.

By the time you get a horse leading well from one side, chances are she'll lead from the other side just as good, just because she's used to going with you.

This is her first education in body language. You move forward, the horse moves forward at your side, not dragging



The Balls use a rump rope or just their hand to teach a foal to walk beside them and not drag along behind.

along behind you. That body language works throughout life, in halter classes, showmanship classes and so on.

Anything you do at this point is going to affect what you do with that horse three years from now or five years from now. You need to avoid any wrecks or any disobedience on either your part or the foal's part; it will all come back to haunt you down the road. Do it right the first time.

Of course, the best time to "sack out" a horse is when you're halter breaking her. I usually do that with a lead rope: Drag it all over her body, between the ears, over the rump, on her legs. Again, all slow motions, no quickness. When you're just standing there with the foal, not doing anything with her, mess with your lead rope.

Also, treat them like they're 13 years old; don't treat them



When using a rump rope, Tom simply closes and opens his hand to apply and release pressure on the foal. He closes his hand to ask the foal to move forward and then opens it once the foal responds. He makes sure there's plenty of room to work.

as if they're babies. Don't say things like, "Cute little pony, you did so good today!" Say, "That's a good kid; let's keep moving now."

Bunny was in elementary school. Now it's time to move on up to junior high. The Balls take us through "baby's second steps" with long weanling Fred Dun It, aka "Fred."

Step 6: Leading Beside You

MARGO: When we ask them to take their "first steps," we don't pull on them to go forward. We work on pulling them to the side to offset their feet, and they step sideways.

TOM: It depends on how well they respond to that as to whether or not we use a rump rope. Some will respond quickly and learn to give to pressure. So when you pull on them a little bit forward, there's a little pressure, and they give to it and walk forward.

Others say, "I am not going to do that!" That's generally when we use the rump rope.

You want to get foals to lead with their heads out in front of you, while you're at their shoulders. So you hold the rump rope and the lead rope in the same hand, the right hand. When you go forward, you can move your hand forward without pulling so much on the halter, instead using pressure on the rump rope. Once you get him moving, you bring your hand back and release the pressure on the rump rope. Then you can take up the slack in the halter if you need it.

MARGO: You get a little bit of pressure from the halter and the rump rope, but you're not pulling on that halter, which you don't want to do.

TOM: You don't even pull on the rump rope. You just give a little nudge or a little tug on it. Most foals are goosey enough that they'll respond to that.

You get more response from a slight tug and release. That give-and-take has a better response than constantly pulling.



While halter breaking, Tom takes any opportunity to “sack out” Bunny, getting her used to the feel of the rope all over her body. He also constantly scratches and reassures her.

MARGO: If you're not using a rump rope and he doesn't want to go forward, a lot of people use the end of the lead rope and swing it back to touch him on his side. I don't like that because it tends to hit him in his middle and make him swing away from you sideways, not going forward.

I like to use a long whip and reach back and just touch him on the hip. It seems to work better for encouraging most foals to go forward.

TOM: There's one word that's critical for him to learn: Whoa. When you start leading him around the place and you want to stop, say “Whoa,” short and to the point and with authority.

I do it when his attention wanders. If his attention is way down there, watching the red fox go across the lower field, then he doesn't know I'm here. If I say “Whoa,” and stop, that draws his attention back.

Step 7: Standing Tied

MARGO: I like to start working with foals in a stall. I lace the lead rope through the stall bars and then brush on them.

I like the “lacing” because it's a one-man deal. You can do that and control the tension the lead has on him. You're right there if he does get upset, but you're brushing him, and most foals like that.

You can hang onto that rope, and you've got control. A lot of times, if he pulls back, you can just say something to him and push him back up, and he thinks, “Oh, OK. It's no big deal.” And he learns to stand.

At the same time, you're handling him, getting him used to brushing down his legs and his feet.

TOM: After you've worked with him like that a while, it's important that at some point you walk off and leave him. That's when we use a bungee tie or an inner tube to tie him

SAFETY FIRST!

Tying is something that every horse must learn, and the earlier, the better. But you don't want anyone, you or your horse to get hurt. Here are the Balls' pointers.

- The right halter: Use an all-leather or breakaway halter (with a leather crownpiece) that will break easier than a nylon halter.
- The right ties: Safety snaps are a must, especially when teaching a youngster to tie. Ties should be high enough so a foal can't get a leg over them.
- The right place: Make sure corrals and stalls have no sharp edges or things that a halter or lead will snag on. Deep sand or shavings provide good footing.
- The right timing: Use your common sense! Go slowly if your foal needs it but be consistent.

with. We tie him and then go do other things in the barn, checking back in on him.

We use a bungee tie with a safety snap in the stall.

The inner tube is out in the indoor arena. We use haystring to tie the inner tube to the wall, the heavier kind that comes

off big 4-foot by 4-foot bales. We wrap the string around the tube three times. The haystring is easier to cut through. If you attach it with a heavy rope and the colt gets into a bind, it can take too long to cut it loose with your pocketknife.

The bungee and the inner tube are fastened high on the wall. So if he comes up off the ground, he can't get a leg over. And he can't get a good pull, if he sits back. If it's up high, he doesn't have much leverage.

MARGO: If it's low and he pulls back, he could really hurt his neck.

TOM: If he decides he really wants to pull, we let him pull. With the bungee and the inner tube, there's not a solid tie to him, so the impact at the end is reasonably comfortable. It's not going to yank his head off like a tight rope. When he comes to the end, he's going to respond, and, at the same time, the elasticity is going to pull him back.

Which is the same thing you're going to do if he tries to take off, you're going to try to pull him back. It's the same idea. It just takes the sudden shock out of it.

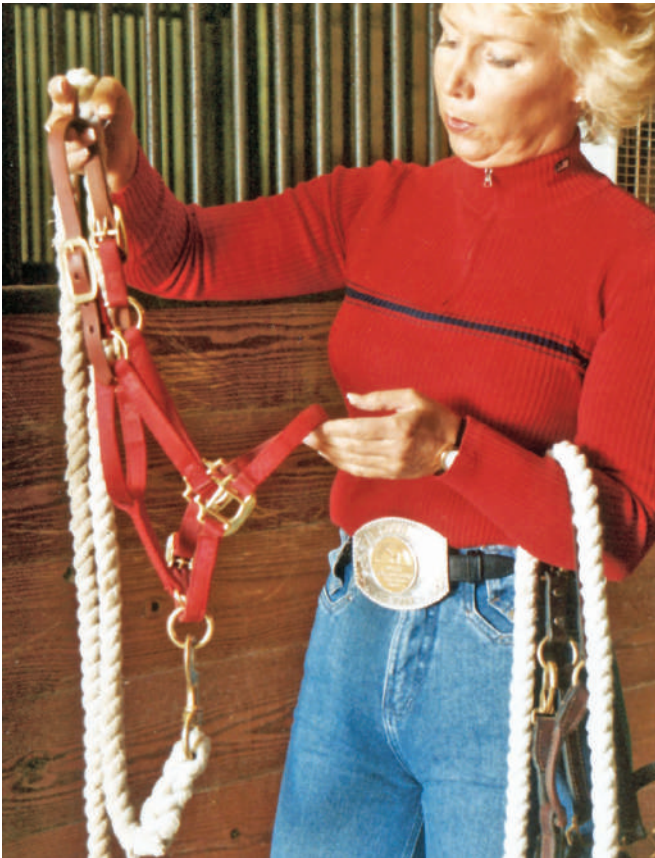
You've got to judge where they are mentally. Use your common sense, and go from there. You may work with one for weeks just in the stall before he's ready to be left alone tied.



Bunny's big brother, Fred Dun It, aka "Fred," shows us the second part of Tom and Margo Ball's halter-breaking process.

“You teach the colt to move with your body,” Margo says. If the colt wants to bolt, as he does here, Tom can better control him from the shoulder, walking into him with a firm grip on the halter.





For halter breaking, the Balls use all-leather halters or “breakaway halters,” nylon halters with leather crown pieces like the one Margo shows here. “Sometimes it doesn’t matter how closely you check things out,” Margo says, “There might be some little thing they get hung up on. If that happens, you want the halter to break. It’s a safety precaution.”

He first learns to stand and not resist the inner tube. He learns, “I’m tied and I’m not going anywhere.”

Then he can learn to stand and be patient. With a young horse, as soon as he stands there two minutes with a certain amount of acceptance, I take him off.

Then the next time, I might leave him 10 minutes. And this time I might go up and brush on him while he’s standing there.

MARGO: It’s something positive. So he learns, “All I have to do is stand here. And I’m rewarded by getting to go do something else, or I’m brushed and given attention.” It’s positive reinforcement.

TOM: We very seldom ever have a colt throw himself to the ground.

But if he does get himself into a bind, we don’t quit because he got into a bind. We get him out of that bind, whatever that might be, and put him right back into the situation he was in before the bind.

As soon as he responds to what you want done, like stand-



When you’re leading your colt and he doesn’t go forward, Margo suggests this solution: “A lot of people use the end of the lead rope and swing it back to touch him on his side. I don’t like that because it tends to hit him in his middle and makes him swing away from you sideways, not going forward. I like to use a long whip and reach back and just touch him on the hip. It seems to work better for encouraging most foals to go forward.”



To begin teaching a colt to stand tied, Margo simply laces the lead rope through the stall bars and does not tie it. She stands at his shoulder holding the lead rope and brushing him. If he pulls back, she can control the tension on the rope, reassure him and step him back up.

ing quietly, then turn him loose. You don't do that after he does something like throwing himself on the ground. You don't dare quit then. A lot of them will learn that trick: If I throw myself on the ground, I get my way – turned loose.

You've seen it with kids. A kid will throw himself on the ground and start screaming and finds out he gets an ice cream cone because his parents give him one to make him stop screaming.

MARGO: You want to leave the lesson on a positive note, but where you want to leave it, not where the colt wants to leave it.



To teach a colt to stand tied, the Balls use a bungee tie with a safety snap in a stall, or an inner tube in their indoor arena. They attach the ties high so the colt can't get a leg over them or get a strong backward pull. They attach the tube with haystring.

ABOUT THE EXPERTS

AQHA Professional Horsewoman MARGO LEA BALL, together with her brothers TOM BALL and WAYNE BALL, own and operate Balls' Quarter Horses and Stallion Station in their native Fort Collins, Colorado.

Margo has been training and showing American Quarter Horses for more than 40 years, with several halter world champions and performance Superiors to her credit. She has produced training DVDs on showmanship and grooming. An AQHA judge for more than 30 years, Margo holds cards with several organizations.

Tom, too, has been showing, training, judging and winning for more than 40 years in a variety of disciplines. Tom is the breeding manager, full-time trainer and barn manager at Balls' Quarter Horses.