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The Right Start for a Young Horse

New Jersey trainer Doug Payne has a low-key system for getting youngsters going confidently and calmly.

By Susan Powell Marcus



Doug Payne is well known around his home town of Oldwick, N.J., as the trainer to contact if you have a problem horse. Although only 25, he's already had successes with many horses that other professionals rejected. His methods apply just as readily to horses without a troubled history, as the story of Kurzan makes clear.

Among the horses that come for training to 14-acre Misty Hollow Farm, the facility Doug rents for his business, DPEquestrian, are some like Dana Romano's Kurzan. The five-year-old Westphalian/Thoroughbred cross was not a problem horse but he needed "restarting" because he'd essentially been unhandled--free to go from stall to paddock at will--since Dana bought him as a barely-started rising three-year-old.

After two months of training, Kurzan shows the beginning of collection at the canter.

Photo courtesy of Doug Payne

For the first training session, Doug walked the 16.3 hand gelding into the barn on a dark cool night. Calmly, he asked Dana, "How is he in cross ties?"

"Fussy," she replied.

But Doug didn't act as if he anticipated problems. He asked numerous questions about Kurzan's previous experiences--"Has he had tack on him?"--while brushing him. The horse stood quietly during the easy-going interchange; Doug tacked him up as though he were a bomb-proof pony and Kurzan responded in kind.

Doug put a halter and lead with a chain over the bridle to use as an emergency brake if he needed it while walking Kurzan through the dark to the indoor arena. He walked him around in the arena and asked Dana to fetch some horse treats. After introducing Kurzan to the entire indoor arena, Doug fastened the longe line through the halter and over his head, picked up a longe whip, and using a short lead, gave commands in a soft, low voice, "Whoa. Whoa. Walk." Kurzan trotted. Doug stopped him and repeated the commands three times before the horse obeyed. Then, Doug included the command to trot. "Good boy," Doug praised when Kurzan responded, adding, "Whoa. Walk."

When Kurzan was responding consistently and correctly to these commands, Doug kept him working in a circle, but moved him up and down the indoor arena. When Kurzan didn't make the requested downward transition to a walk from a trot, Doug shortened the lead, and said, "Whoa. Whoa," to make him stop.

After changing direction on the circle, Kurzan obeyed the commands more reliably. Doug said,

"Whoa, Whoa." The gelding stopped. "Walk," Doug commanded, and the horse walked. "Good boy," Doug praised him. After a few more minutes of success, Doug led the horse to the mounting block. He asked Dana to give her horse a treat after he has leaned on the saddle and patted Kurzan on his neck on the opposite side. Then, he asked Dana to lead Kurzan away from the mounting block in a circle and back again, so he could repeat the leaning procedure and reward. That concluded the first session.

Two weeks later, Dana reported that her horse "has made amazing progress. Kurzan listens and obeys commands on the longe line. He walks on the lead line 100 percent better. My horse seems more confident. I think Doug has a quiet confidence that he brings out in the horses."

At a subsequent session, Doug tacked up and then longed Kurzan. The horse responded immediately to the walk and trot commands. At the first command to canter, though, he didn't respond. Doug repeated it, had Kurzan canter once around the circle, made him stop, then walk, then praised him. When Doug had him change directions, the horse responded promptly to all commands. After longeing Kurzan five minutes in each direction, Doug slipped the halter over the bridle and clipped the longe line to the halter's ring. Doug rode the horse in each direction at a walk and trot, interspersed with halts, while Dana held the end of the longe line. At the end of the session, Dana removed the longe line so Doug could walk Kurzan on his own.

"He seems to have a good memory," Doug said of Kurzan's prior training as a two-year-old. "He has an easy-going attitude, which allows me to accelerate the training. I'm pleased with his transitions."

Dana was pleased, too. She planned to keep her horse at Doug's barn until his training was complete.

Doug Payne's Training Basics

- Be clear and consistent about what's acceptable behavior. Horses respond best to repetition and consistency. Riders create their own problems with horses by demanding proper behavior *sometimes*. For instance, students may be chatting with one another and taking a break in the arena while their horses are falling asleep. Moments later, the same students are frustrated when their horses are unwilling to move forward.
- Be clear about what you actually want from your horse. Don't create confusing "noise," such as an unsteady leg. If the leg doesn't get a response, use the whip as reinforcement. Then, go back to the leg and see if it works next time.
 - Most problems with horses result when they feel confined, which results in the instinctual "fight or flight" responses. Many students tighten the reins to create a connection and add leg only when the horse slows down, but the connection should be made through the leg first at all times. Reducing the sense of confinement reduces the degree of the problem.
 - Generally when a horse bucks after a jump or when he begins to canter in an open field, he is doing it because he feels good, not because he is being naughty. Your best response to this action is to push your horse forward with your legs, not to punish him with the whip. Let him enjoy his job, it will make yours much easier.
 - When your horse performs an action correctly, *reward* him by softening the reins. Let him walk. Give him a pat. Let him know he did a good job.

Read more about Doug, the problem horses he has turned around, and his family background in horse sports in "The Go-To Guy for Problem Horses" in the May 2007 issue of *Practical*

Horseman magazine.

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