

The end product: a confident colt working under the rope to drag a log.

Properly introduce your ranch-started youngster to dragging a log.

By Christine Hamilton, Photos by Jim Jennings

LAST MONTH ROYAL GIN FLETCH, AKA “FELIX,” MET HIS FIRST bridge, the kind he’d have to cross in a versatility ranch class. Now it’s time for the 3-year-old to learn a new obstacle: dragging a log.

Using the same techniques they teach in guest lectures at Colorado State University’s colt-starting classes, Thomas Saunders V of the Saunders Ranch, Weatherford, Texas, and Terry Crofoot of Crofoot Ranches LLP, Lubbock, Texas, took Felix through his first dragging lesson.

Both men pointed out that your colt must have some things in place before you introduce new obstacles. He has to have a good handle on him. He must be into the bridle; he has to have confidence with what he has learned and in you as a rider; and he has to be quiet in his mind when you show him something new.

If all that is in place, “the more willing he’ll be to accept what you present to him,” Terry said.

The Rope

“A COMMON MISTAKE IN PREPARATION FOR DRAGGING A LOG IS not having the horse well enough broke to the rope,” Terry said, “being around them, all over them, between their legs, underneath them, whatever.”

Most ranch-started 2- and 3-year-olds that you’d find at a production sale are acquainted with a rope. That absolutely must be in place before you begin this obstacle.

“I introduce a horse to the rope on the ground first, in a round pen,” Thomas said. “I take it in steps and let him build his confidence up. I don’t want to put him or me in jeopardy, so I’ll start on the ground with the rope.

“I’ll rub the rope up and down his neck, letting him know that it’s not going to hurt him. Then I’m going to stand back, and I’m going to start swinging it, pitching it around. I’ll do that to the point at which he’s OK with it.

“Then I’m going to get aboard him, and I’m going to go through those steps again,” he continued, “walking, rubbing it up and down his neck, dragging the rope, letting him step in it, swinging it, all that sort of thing.”

Felix is already well-acquainted with a rope and not worried about it at all. But the rope connected to that thing called a log is something else.

Approaching the Log

“FIRST, I’M GOING TO JUST LET HIM SEE WHAT THAT LOG IS,” Thomas said. “Let him smell it. If he’ll touch it with his nose, it usually means that you’ve got him.

“Once he finds out that it’s not going to bite him and that he can conquer it, then it’s all about just building up his confidence to go ahead and pull it and maneuver it.”

How long that takes is different with each horse. Thomas works to build the colt’s confidence and not make anything about the log a negative.

“I let him tell me when he’s ready to move to the next step,” Thomas said. “I don’t want to scold him or get him worked up. When he gives me a positive, like sniffing or stepping over the log, I’ll release a little pressure, pause and pet him or walk him around again.

“I’ll walk him over it two or three times, with the rope just loose. And then I’ll put a little bit of tightness on the rope, and let him feel that.”

Dragging

WHEN THOMAS ASKS FELIX TO DRAG THE LOG, HE BEGINS BY backing the horse and dragging the log along so Felix can see it, just a little at a time, nice and slow.

“You always want to keep the rope tight, and you don’t want it laying flat on the ground,” Thomas said. “If the horse gets a little nervous about it, I just slip my rope at the horn.

If your horse starts fidgeting or gets nervous and walks over the rope and gets straddled, you just have to throw the rope down.”

The next step is to start going in a circle, dragging the log so that the rope comes off Felix’s hip.

“As you get some confidence built up, you can start working him under the rope,” Thomas said, and that’s what you want. Working “under the rope” means Felix is at the point where he is doing the pulling by using the strength over his hips rather than off to the side.

Terry emphasized the importance of letting Felix determine when he’s ready for something more.

“Trying to do too much too quick is the biggest, most common mistake,” Terry said. “You have to make sure that you don’t ask a horse to pull too much weight, too soon.”

He pointed out that Felix was confident enough for Thomas to first try a log this size, but not every horse is.

“If you ask too much, you’ll get him to the point where he doesn’t really want to pull,” Terry continued. “Once a horse refuses, it’s harder to get him to pull after that.”

“What you do then is slip some rope as he pulls, so he feels like he gained something,” Thomas said. “In other words, he feels that release of pressure.”

“I like to drag the log from both sides,” Terry added. “Most of us are right-handed so we drag from that side, but the horse needs to be able to pull off the other side also.”

Options

“WITH A GREENER OR LESS CONFIDENT HORSE THAT NEEDS TO GO slower, start with something a lot lighter than a log,” Terry said. “In fact, what I might do is drag a plastic sack of Coke cans. It’s accomplishing two things at the same time: the scary part of something rattling and the dragging.

Terry often does that from the ground in a round pen.

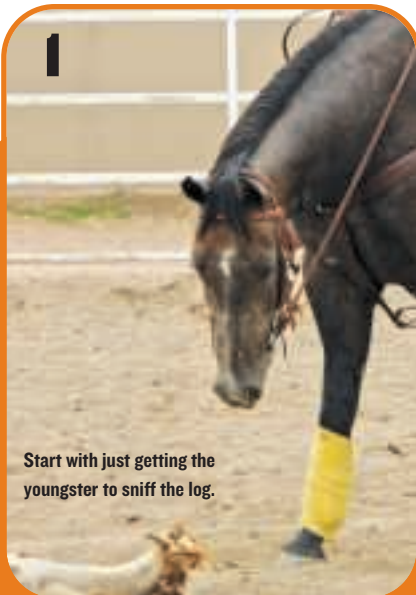
“You can often get a horse to drag it over the hip a lot quicker doing it that way,” he said. “The pressure isn’t all on the weight of the log.”

Next month, Terry and Thomas will show Felix how to help his rider open a stock panel gate.

Christine Hamilton is editor of The American Quarter Horse Journal. To comment, write to chamilton@aqha.org.

BIO

Terry Crofoot’s Crofoot Cattle Co. is in its fourth generation of family ownership, running cattle on leased and deeded lands. The diversified agribusiness at one time owned and operated commercial feedyards with a capacity of 180,000 head. Thomas B. Saunders V is a sixth-generation cowboy raised on his family’s ranches in Parker County, Texas. For more than 30 years, he has raised and started cutting and ranch horses, and is boss wrangler for the “Road to the Horse” colt-starting competition. Both men are on Colorado State University’s equine sciences advisory committee.



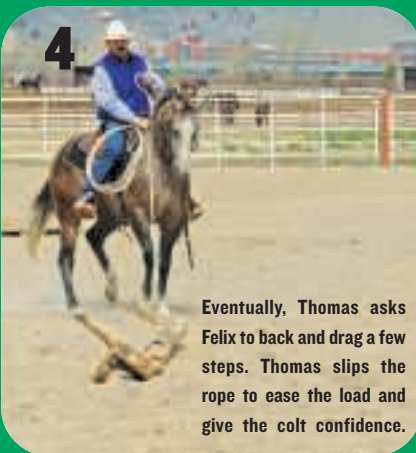
1 Start with just getting the youngster to sniff the log.



2 Thomas reinforces Felix’s familiarity with the rope.



3 Felix masters stepping over the log.



4 Eventually, Thomas asks Felix to back and drag a few steps. Thomas slips the rope to ease the load and give the colt confidence.



5 As the colt gains confidence, Thomas moves to circle the log, asking the colt to drag more of the log’s weight.



6 Fully confident, Felix works under the rope, pulling the log.