

The Friesian Foal- Bringing Up Baby

Meghan Hamilton is a USDF Bronze Medalist, author, demo rider, professional rider and coach who operates her Riding Inspired dressage program out of Sleepy Hollow Farm in Dartmouth, MA. She is a current member of FHANA (Friesian Horse Association of North American), USDF (United States Dressage Federation), NEDA (New England Dressage Association). As a clinician Meghan also offers many clinics and workshops that often highlight working with the riders biomechanics with a holistic approach. Meghan also breeds and has a special affinity for training the Friesian. With over 25 years in the saddle she is constantly re-investing in her education. She is a current student of international rider, Olympic Team reserve and Pan Am Gold Medalist Heather Blitz, FL, and has ridden in clinics and recently completed a RWYM Teacher Training course with RWYM (Ride With Your Mind) international coach Mary Wanless, UK.



Connor Phillips©

by Meghan Hamilton

Congratulations! You're the proud new owner of a Friesian foal. Now what to do with it? Clients always ask me "when do you begin working with the babies". The answer is always, "from the minute they are born". Touching and handling them begins from day one. With foals we cannot afford to not spend time with them. Every activity we do with the foals translates later into what will be expected of them when they are older. We want them to still have the enthusiasm to play and work with humans as an adult, but it really all starts before they reach 6 months old.

I have four phases of training that our foals go through before they turn 3 years old and begin there in the saddle work. There are certain markers and behaviors we are seeking to produce in our young horse-training program. We will discuss these markers and behaviors in the following 4 phases.

Suckling Phase: (1-6 months of age)

I consider this phase of a young horse's life the most important, and the most rewarding. Remember the old quote "you never get a second chance to make a first impression?" This is the phase where foals learn their impressions of humans good or bad, and where their first training sessions are imprinted in their brains. This is the time when the amount of time spent with a foal often means the difference of a brave confident foal or a

scared turtle crawling back into the shell. Our hope is to always incite bravery and confidence.

On average, we are handling foals 1-2 times daily 4-6 times per week. In the beginning, often the time they are handled is short and 10-12 minutes, gradually building up to 20-30 minutes altogether.

HALTERING - All foals get a halter installed on day one, so they can get used to wearing it, the feel and sensation. During the haltering training we teach the babies how to lower their heads to put the halters on. This is a relaxing mechanism for them and they learn to always lower their heads no matter the size of the human handling them. This becomes a very helpful tool later on when they are full sized Giraffes!

LEADING AND TYING - All foals should learn how to lead beside their mommas within the first few days. Also, most foals have learned how to be tied or cross-tied by the time they are weaned.

HANDLING - All foals should be handled everywhere on their bodies, from ears to tail, under their bellies, sheaths, udders, picking up their feet, clippers, being rubbed with cloths, being sprayed, checking teeth. By the time they are 6 months old, there should be no holes in any of these areas.



Jacqui Davis leading 3 day-old Merlin. The earlier they learn, the better they are. Meghan Hamilton©

EXTRA CURRICULAR - During this time we take advantage of the foals by their dams' sides and take them for many walks, play with both dam and foal at liberty in fenced in arenas, and get them used to loading on a trailer with momma beside them (as it offers comfort and support and begins letting them be exposed to outside stimulus). We are fortunate to have the ocean near by and often trailer the foals by their dams' sides to



Jacqui Davis playing at liberty during a training session with 4 month-old Merlin. Meghan Hamilton©

the beaches at low tides and let the foals off the lead to frolic at liberty and get comfortable with water at an early age. Only do this where totally safe to do so.

Weanling Phase: (6-12 months of age)

By now you have hopefully survived the weaning process and your young foal is beginning his next stage of life a little more independently. I find this is the time when foals start really having individual personalities and show us glimpses of what they will look and act like as adults. But they still have a long way to go and will often try to convince you they are adults now. This is also the phase that is the most emotional for

Gaining confidence while splashing around. Five month-old Merlin with Dam Madison, ridden by Meghan Hamilton. Meghan Hamilton©



them. If they are recently weaned they will really be looking for emotional support. Foals will often start "testing" boundaries a bit more, by biting, kicking, and pushing you around more.

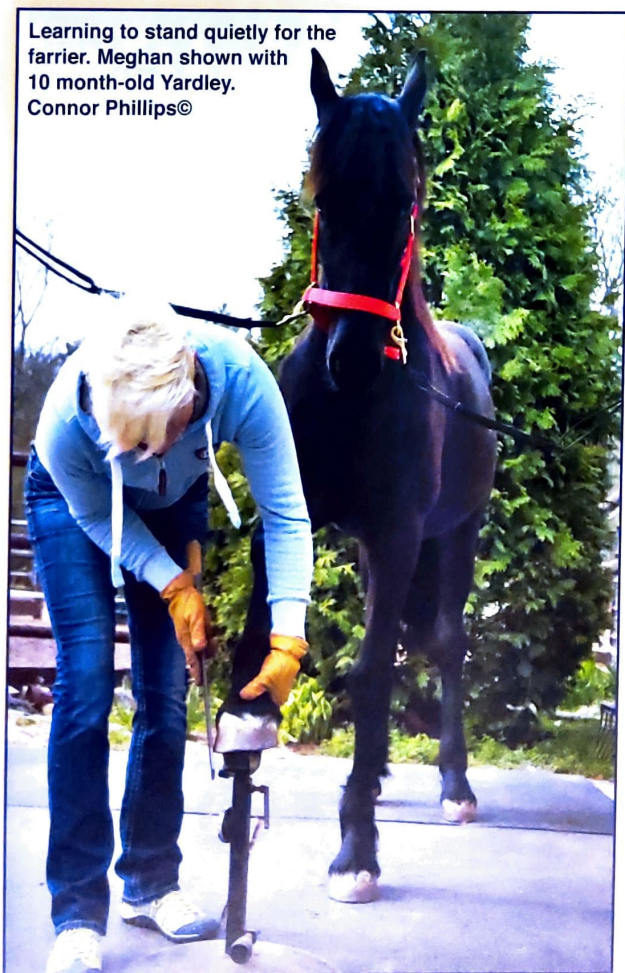
BE PATIENT - This phase of growth can be a bit trying, as the foals are emotional, and testing new behaviors and limits. Step back and take a deep breath and remember they are just babies. With patience they will learn patience.

HANDLING CONTINUES - This part never, ever ends. We are always handling the foals, leading etc. However, we do start adding in things such as vacuuming, bathing, preparing the foals for other aspects in life, such as when the farrier comes. They must be OK with lifting and holding their hooves up, but also with them resting on the hoof stand and with rasping. We begin showing them how to balance one hoof at a time on the hoof stand and standing patiently. Then we introduce the sensation of the rasp so they are completely prepared for their first farrier visit with success! There is no better compliment for myself then our veterinarians or farriers telling us, "What a pleasure it was to work on your foals!" This can be true for anyone willing to put the time and effort in as well.

Yearling Phase: (12-24 months of age)

Congratulations you survived the first year! The worst part is over and now you can start enjoying more parts of foal training

Learning to stand quietly for the farrier. Meghan shown with 10 month-old Yardley.
Connor Phillips©



and Friesian ownership. The next 12 months include continuing education on what we have covered so far, but we keep adding on things to complement the training repertoire.

PERSONAL SPACE – Really, we begin teaching this in the first few months, but start enforcing stricter policies as the foals are getting older, because they are also getting bigger. There is a lot more mass that can push you around if you're not paying attention. This is where I start adding in more requests to "back up" by placing pressure on the lead rope towards the horse's chest/tail. Additionally, adding my fingers on the foals left or right shoulder until they release to the pressure and move backwards. I also begin to use my elbow while walking more frequently to defend my space. When the foals look to the right and barge into you on the left because they are not paying attention to the handler, they will quickly meet a pointy elbow defending its own space. They begin to learn to stay in their little parking space, because we stay in ours. We are just beginning to scratch the surface on this subject, but a good start!

TRAILERING - By now, the foals have hopefully had a few field trips out in the trailer, either with mom, or with other horses and maybe even solo. I like to really highlight this area also. After having several horses in my life, thus far, that were horrendous trailer loaders, I learned a very valuable lesson. It is worth the time early on to make this a huge success for all foals! No Excuses. As foals, they will often trust us so much

Make trailer loading comfortable at a very young age.
Connor Phillips©



more than they will as they get older, so it is worth repeating over and over, practicing getting on, putting the bars up, closing dividers, stepping away and coming back to reward. It is also something that will make your Friesian a super selling point later on. We have a 4 horse head to head trailer, so I like our horses to learn how to load on a normal walk-on, forward-facing ramp, but also one they walk up and have to pivot and back into a space. The more comfortable the experience, the better!

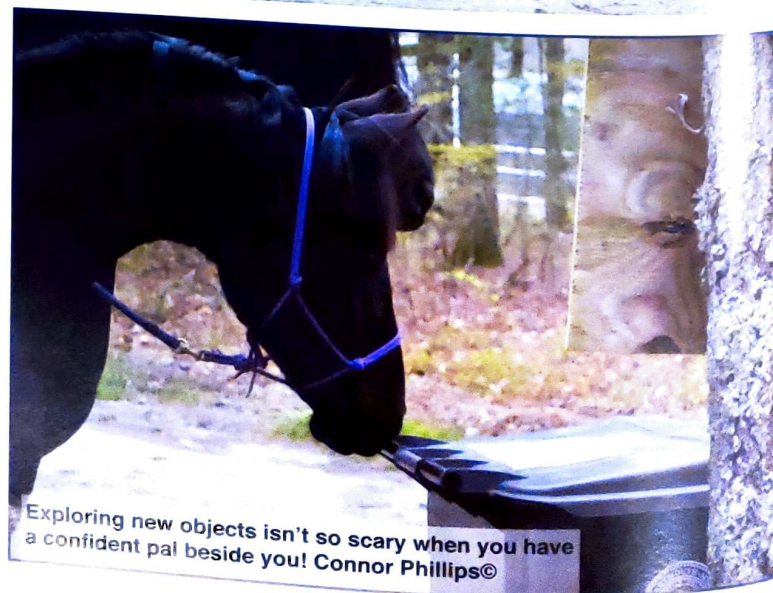
PRAISE! - We are always praising the foals from an early age, but we have to also keep reminding ourselves to continue doing so. Give the babies something fun to work for and enjoy your job as the trainer, as well. Babies work for kudos!

Show the young horses that standing quietly in a non-moving trailer is OK. Make sure you're prepared with hay snacks or a treat. Connor Phillips©



PONYING - We use ponying with another confident adult to help boost confidence and expose youngsters to trails, pedestrians, cyclists, dogs, cars, foreign objects like rubbish barrels, signs, balloons, water crossings, stepping over objects like fallen trees etc. Some foals can tolerate this earlier, but most don't have the stamina to keep up for very long until this phase. I choose our most veteran, seasoned, confident horses and start by taking short field trips out, and gradually lengthen

the time to 1-2 hour trail rides and often with other groups of horses as well. Your horses will be so much more prepared for the world after these experiences.



Exploring new objects isn't so scary when you have a confident pal beside you! Connor Phillips©

Ponying is one of the best ways to keep exposing the young horse to different things and develop confidence. Connor Phillips©



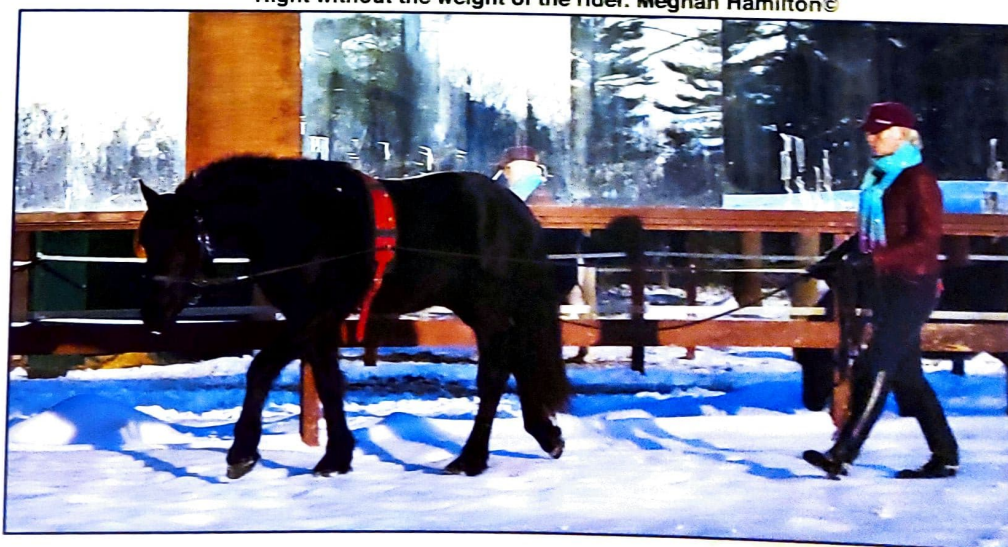
BITTING PROCESS - This is another coveted stage for our junior horse clients. A foal that has accepted the bit well and is completely comfortable with this phase will go on to have a successful riding or driving career. I have seen the opposite of having horses comfortable with the bridle and being soft in the mouth. They are very difficult horses that do not accept things the same way a horse that has really come through this whole process and confidently completed the 4 phases in training. We begin by fitting a light 3-piece French link snaffle bit, that fits correctly to just the headstall, and begin by giving the baby a mint, or sugar to melt in their mouth and then show them gently how to take the bit. Once they have accepted the bit, they wear their new headstall under their halters while we pony them on the trail, or take them for a walk. We praise often and still must remain patient. Once the foals are comfortable with the bit, and can mouth and play with the bit comfortably, we teach them how to mobilize their jaw. We add on reins and add a tiny bit of left or right rein pressure, until their head turns in the direction we indicated. The same is repeated with lowering the head and neck. Praising them often through this process, we are looking for them to lick and chew, to have very 'blinky' eyes, perhaps let out a relation snort letting us know they are comfortable with their newly learned skill.

LUNGING AND LONG LINING - I will reserve lunging often until the foals are closer to their third year to alleviate the strain and angle of working on a smaller circle. However, once the foals have become comfortable with the biting phase, we begin with surcingle's and getting them used to lines touching on their sides, perhaps a saddle on their back with girth tightened, while hand-walked. Then we begin long lining them around the arena. My four basics that a young horse has to learn on the ground, as well as in the saddle, are Whoa, Go, Left, and Right. Long lining lets us begin this process, preparing them for steering in the saddle or in the harness. This process has to get to the point where these things are no big deal, as if they have been doing it all their lives.

Long Lining is a great way to introduce Whoa, Go, Left, and Right without the weight of the rider. Meghan Hamilton©

2 Year Old Phase (24-36 months of age)

Boy how time flies! Your foal is now starting to mature a little more, and probably going through some very awkward growth spurts. By 2 years old you should have a pretty well rounded foal that is ready to start accepting the next phase of training. Still continuing every day with bits and pieces of the first 3 phases, we are getting into the last of the manners polishing, and prepping them for their under saddle or under harness careers.



Training The Friesian

MOUNTING BLOCK - This is one of the last things our foals must learn. They need to learn that when they are brought to the mounting block, they stand, and stand quietly, while we fuss over them, hook up equipment, etc., and that they are not to walk off until given the GO signal. This is also the time we start gradually adding weight into a stirrup, hanging over their backs in the saddles, flopping around on them, draping ropes, reins, etc., all over them, safely, to get them used to it all. Every step, every phase you complete, adds to your horse's learning experience, their confidence gets boosted, and you have just increased the value of your horse again. By the time we are done, they are fully prepared to accept a rider. The day we take the virgin voyage away from the mounting block they have been set up for success and they have little if no reaction, but happiness and confidence in what they are doing.

Remember this is a journey for both handler and foal. It's the little things that make the difference. Getting your foal handy in the halter makes everything easier, including catching, leading, trailering, vetting, shoeing, saddling, or driving. Remember to breath and to be patient. Enjoy your foals!



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