

QUALITY

Communication





Brandon Myers changed how he looked at halter breaking foals and now seeks a deeper connection that translates into a stronger foundation for the horse.

Story and Photographs by KATE BRADLEY BYARS

Special Barrel Racing Prospects Section



FOALS FILL THE STALLS OF THE METAL BARN ATTACHED TO A LARGE ROUND PEN, and inside the round pen, a palomino colt is trotting quickly around the rail, looking for a way out. In stark contrast to the foal, 32-year-old Brandon Myers stands in the middle of the pen, smiling and waiting for his moment to turn that foal's attention his way.

"There is a connection to this animal that is so pure. It is so easy," Brandon said. "Dealing with a human being is much more complicated. A horse will do what

a horse does, and they are telling, honest and open with a person. Each foal is an individual, and each one has to be dealt with in different ways."

Decked out in a bandana around his head and a t-shirt, this Myers doesn't strike the same picture as his father, Bill, who, along with his wife, Deb, built a thriving and successful horse program in St. Onge, South Dakota, around stallion Frenchmans Guy. Brandon has grown up involved in all aspects of the operation, but halter breaking foals and starting 2-year-old prospects best fits his personality.

"I have the luxury to find out how to do things the best way I can for the horses and for me. That is a luxury, to not be rushed into doing something so vital like halter breaking in a specific way," Brandon said. "[With me], trying these new ideas and it going along with [what my dad does], it's these two amazing things we can accomplish together. It's been great so far, and I really enjoy it."

The history behind his family's horse program isn't lost on Brandon. But after he suffered a traumatic brain injury causing memory loss, he began to search for

new ways to connect with a horse. No one is sure what happened that day to cause Brandon to fall, but his 2-year-old mount was still with him, grazing, when he was found.

"I grew up in such a cowboy lifestyle where we did make [horses] do what we needed, but I don't want to make a horse do anything," Brandon said. "I admire my dad's ability to get colts to do stuff that I can't do. His feel is so on-point and on-cue with those horses—it doesn't cause stress, because his timing is impeccable. I have to give credit to [my parents] for building this up like they have."

Instead of following a cookie-cutter, step-by-step process to ensure each foal wears a halter before being turned back out, Brandon instead looks to connect with the horse by gauging their responses to his questions. He is heavily influenced in this methodology by his friend, Buck Brannaman student and protégé, Isaac Johnson.

"It's a lot of acceptance and peace. I learn so much about myself working with these horses," Brandon said. "The way humans interact with each other; I can



Working with foals for 10 days instead of only five, as he did in previous years, allows Brandon to take the lessons further, creating more trust in all aspects of care.

practice with these little guys. If only the world was all dealing with horses.”

Here, Brandon outlines how he works with a foal to not only accomplish his goal of halter breaking but to instill a strong foundation of positive interaction with humans that will carry into that horse’s years under saddle.

“Do you understand that to flee and escape isn’t the way?”

The Myers foal out most mares in the pasture. According to Brandon, the only time foals see humans is when their moms are brought in for veterinary work. When the foal is 4 or 5 months old, it is weaned and taught to accept a halter.

From their first step into the large indoor round pen, most foals are seeking a way out. For Brandon, this is when he’ll find out their answer to his first question—“Do you understand that to flee and escape isn’t the way?”

A foal could run around that pen for awhile before noticing Brandon, so he ropes them to gain control of the situation.

“First, I rope them to gain some control over direction. It is only when they turn away from me, when roped, that they feel some pressure. When [the foal] turns back to me, they get the release and some peace. That committed word is an important piece of what I am doing,” Brandon explained.

One of the most important parts of the process is allowing the horse to find its way to a decision rather than controlling its movements.

“Working with horses, there is a lot of shifting [weight] forward and away. When one steps to me, makes that commitment, then I am able to allow the horse to make a choice from their full extent. They are fully making the choice,” Brandon said. “The message with them is understood [more so] than if I stepped in and made them move the way I wanted.”

Brandon ropes with a big, slow loop so as to not make noise that alarms the foal. He doesn’t want this first interaction to be a scary experience.



After roping a foal and stopping its flight, Brandon works to gain trust with patient, repetitive movements.

“It is all going to mean something. It is going to shape their future dealings,” Brandon said. “I even rope differently now [than before the accident]. I swing softly so it is on them before they know what has happened. Then, you let the rope just trail. If you rope a colt and just pull them right away, things go south quickly. I rope them and let the rope just be on them [as they move around] until they kind of relax. As they move around there crazily, they aren’t paying attention to me, but the rope is just sitting [on them]. As they are running, the horse is pressuring itself by choosing to try and escape.”

Brandon has seen and felt a lot of sensitivity in his family-bred horses over the years. They yield and turn back away from pressure quickly. His timing has got

to be on-point to ensure the colt understands that fleeing isn’t the answer to his question.

“I let them continue it over and over again, until I see that moment in the turn where they kind of stop,” Brandon explained. “If I can see that, release the rope quickly, a lot of them will understand there was a moment of peace. There is a moment of nothing going on. That is contingent on consistency and me paying close attention to that release. I am only swinging when they turn away, so as soon as I approach and the colt lets me without running away, that shows me the foal chose to be my buddy.”

Brandon will quit his first lesson when the foal chooses not to flee. His hope would be the foal seeks him for comfort, but that is often lesson No. 2.

“Do you understand I can give you comfort and peace in your presence?”

Brandon doesn’t want to pull a foal to him, but rather wants it to choose to come to him and seek comfort from him. These first lessons help build a level of trust that carries through to when the horse starts under saddle as a 2-year-old, he says.

“It is important for me to establish myself as a safe being to be comforted with,” Brandon said. “Observing horses in the wild, it is through touch from their mother or companions in the herd and just being with the herd they find comfort. As soon as they stop trying to escape, I start comforting them with my touch. If I can establish that they are comforted around me right after I’ve shown them not to escape, they’ll see a human is a pretty good thing. I want the colt to think about how it can please me to stay with me.”

Once a foal stops trying to flee and instead focuses on Brandon, he works to establish that trust. The foals have had little handling, so he often uses the rope to rub their body, then he follows up with pets and rubs.

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Above: There is a give and take to working with foals that directly relates to feel, timing and pressure, Brandon says.



Above right: When trust is established, Brandon works on showing the foal that it can find comfort working with him and not want to flee.

“It is consistency in touching them and showing comfort that lets them know I am a safe being,” Brandon said. “Horses are the ultimate prey animal. Not only are they involved around the world with people’s lives, but they are the reason human civilization has reached where we are. They are the backbone, so they deserve a lot of respect.”

When a foal chooses to trust Brandon, you can see the softness. The palomino foal in the round pen moves toward Brandon, eager for a pet and to be near him while the rope stays loose around its neck.

Though he may have accomplished a low level of trust by Day Two, Brandon doesn’t stop working with the foal.

“In the past, I would keep a colt in for about five days. Recently, I’ve lengthened that to 10 days,” Brandon said. “It means more interaction and dealings with humans. If I can cement these messages in their minds and I can show up again and again with patience, it is going to directly

make my life easier, and indirectly their lives easier, whenever we have to get them in again. It is easier for me when I start them as 2-year-olds. Their experience is good and it is understood that they can find comfort. Keeping them in longer makes it better for both of us.”

“Do you understand you can trade movement for still and peace?”

The third question Brandon poses to a foal is if it understands that trading movement for stillness and peace means it feels less pressure. This is a new concept to him and to the foal.

“In the past, I know I am guilty of adding more and more pressure to get things accomplished,” Brandon said. “It was a strong impulse in me to push. But when I was having trouble reaching my little buddies [the foals], the biggest detriment is not being patient. Building a foundation means I need to go slow and have patience, that is what will mean the most to them.”

It becomes a give and take, using the rope and then eventually the halter. Brandon is cognizant that this lesson—helping the foal understand that being still is a good thing—is vital for its success in training.

“The initial asking of movement and give, that impacts how the horse will act

in the future,” Brandon explained. “It used to be that I would wait a second, add pressure if they didn’t give, then wait another second, then add more pressure. Now, I will wait and wait and wait for that moment when a colt chooses to be with me, chooses comfort over escape. It is about the foal searching for it, for me, and I want them to search for peace.”

When the foal will stand and only move when pressured, Brandon can start truly working on obtaining give and release. He will then have the horse follow its nose, making circles, and other movements, using the rope.

“I can do everything with a rope that I can do with a halter on, so I don’t rush into [the halter]. Once a horse understands comfort and pressure, that is the key,” Brandon said. “Getting the halter on is never a problem because of the rope work. They understand what I want from them.”

It may take a couple of lessons to obtain the trust level Brandon needs to put on the halter and maintain communication. However, he has the patience of a saint when working with the foals.

“All human beings need to work with foals; be patient. Just waiting and not expecting, but witnessing, is harder,” Brandon said. “They’re tiny so we can make them do it, but can you help them choose to do it? That is what translates

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Left: Once the foal wants to stay with Brandon, he can then work on directing its movements in a controlled manner. He works on directing the nose by turning it one way then the other.



Photos below, left to right: Slipping a halter on the foal is not an emotional event after Brandon works with it with the rope. He repeats the same lessons with the halter—moving its feet off pressure and directing its movements.



into the soft foundation for the future. It is all going to be based off this.”

Keeping the foals in longer also allows Brandon more time to work with them on simple tasks, such as picking up their feet. He will use the halter’s lead rope to desensitize them to having it looped around their body.

Each foal presents a unique challenge that Brandon appreciates.

“It is all pretty similar with these young horses, but it manifests differently,” Brandon said. “When one challenges you,

it is a great feeling to get through to it. If I get to work with all our colts first, that is the purest form of interaction. I can learn something new every single day. I never stop learning doing this and am always looking for a way to reach [the foal]. It’s so fulfilling. It’s fulfilling for the human soul. It’s the greatest thing in the world.” **BHN**

Kate Bradley Byars is an award-winning journalist and freelance contributor for *Barrel Horse News* based in Texas.