

Tom and Margo Ball share their method of halter breaking, based on good, old-fashioned horsemanship. Part one of two.

**Article and photos
by Christine Hamilton**

Baby's *First* Steps

Tom Ball waits for a foal to develop a trust for humans before he begins halter breaking. "We're all about having fun," he said.

IT'S TIME FOR "BUNNY" TO BE HALTER-BROKEN.

Bunny's registered name is Shes A Lot 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 more than 35 years, and Margo has had her AQHA judge's card for 20 of those years.

The Balls invited the *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 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 No. 1: Wait Until They're Ready.

Tom Ball: 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 Ball: 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.



The Balls' goal is for Bunny to trust that the halter will not hurt her, seeing it as something to be curious about, not something to fear.

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 No. 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 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 2 feet. That's where you get hurt.

And there's no yelling allowed.

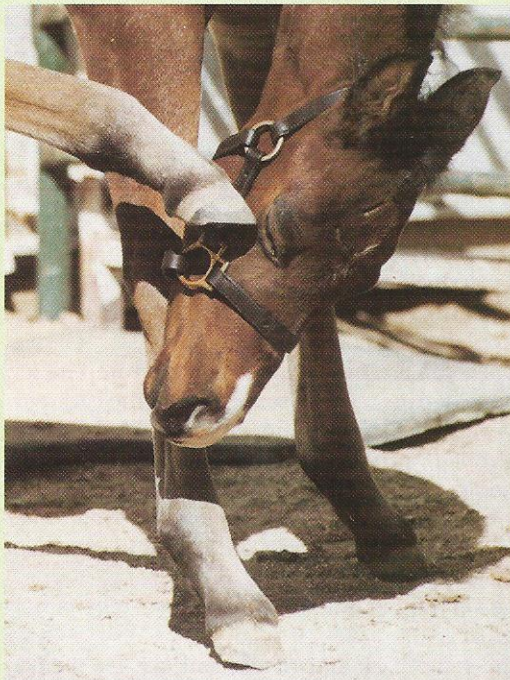
Tom: Then you stand back and watch, and just let the foal wear the halter a while. Every one is an individual; they're all going to have a little different temperament. Disposition is the key factor in that.

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

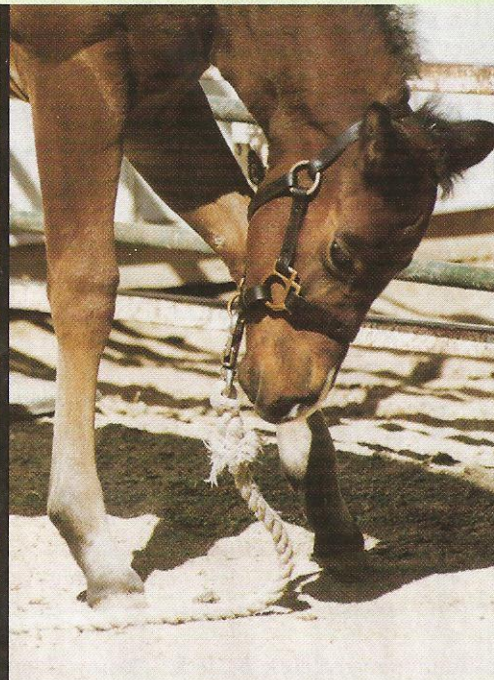
Margo: It should be a leather halter. If the foal does get into a bind and gets really caught on something, the leather will break.



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.



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.



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.

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 No. 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

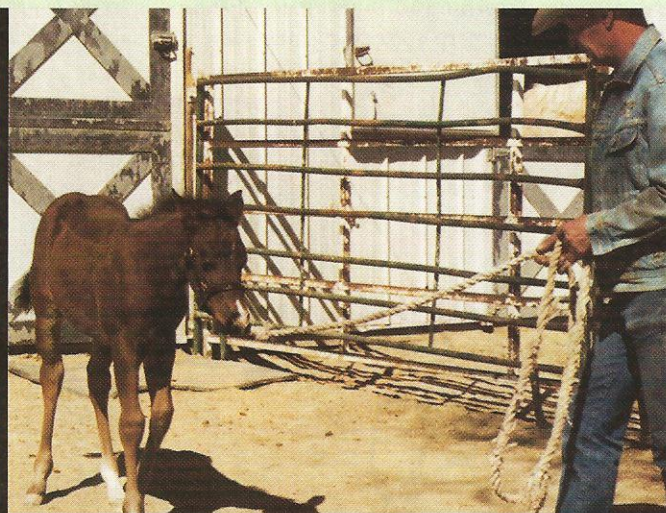
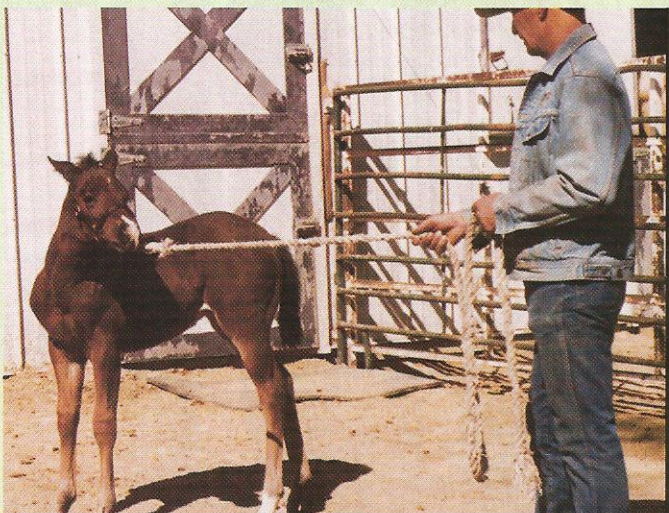
move her feet.

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.



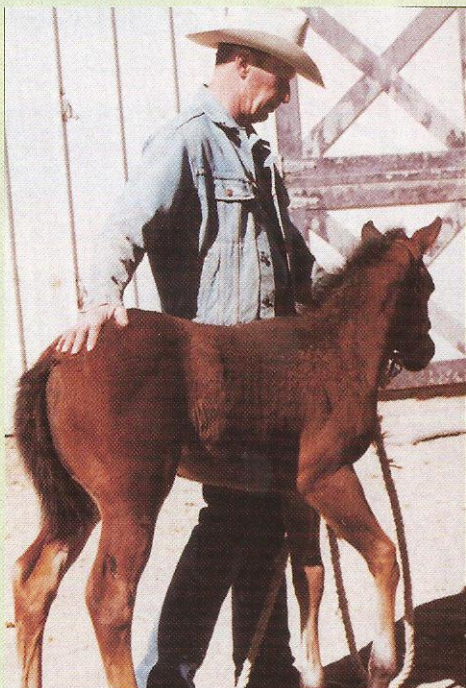
With a steady and gentle pressure, Tom pulls Bunny to the side, pulling her off-balance so she has to step to the side. As soon as she gives to the pressure, taking one step, he releases her head and doesn't ask for anything more.

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 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.

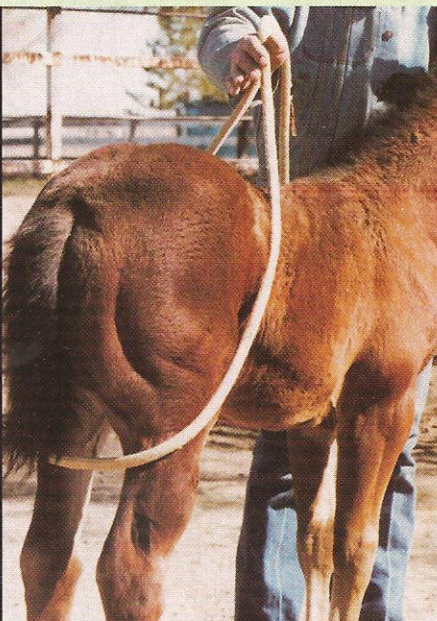
Use a rope that's short enough to only reach to the back feet. If the mare's around, she's likely to step on it.

Step No. 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



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



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.

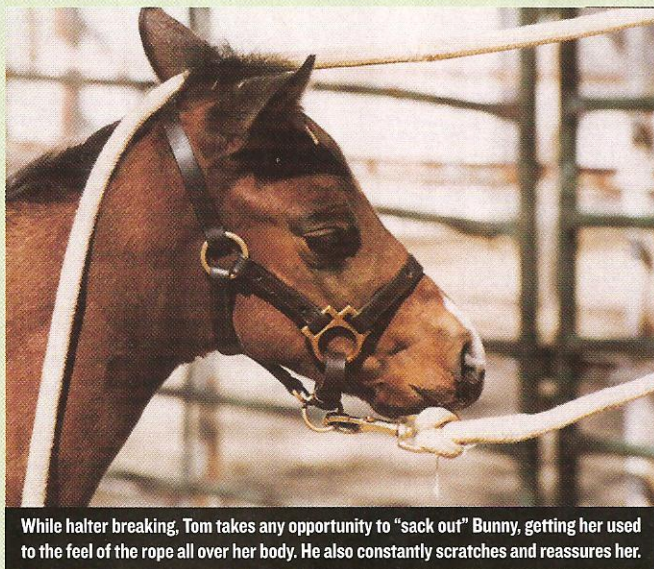
Step No. 5: Moving Alongside You

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 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



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.

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.

Parting Words

Tom: 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 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."

Margo: We probably did more like a week of lessons with Bunny today.

For most babies, that would have been a week's worth.

But when we let her go, she didn't want to get away from us. She wasn't thinking, "I've got to get out of Dodge now!"

Tom: We're all about having fun. Halter breaking is a short process. It doesn't take months or weeks. It just takes a few hours: 15 minutes today, 15 minutes tomorrow and the next day and so on.

Now the older ones that you have to break after weaning time, that's a whole new ballgame. It pays to get it done when they're small. ■



THE BALLS' place lies on the north side of Fort Collins, Colorado, where the front range of the Rocky Mountains slopes away toward Laramie, Wyoming, to the northwest. You can just see the tip of 14,000-foot Long's Peak away to the southwest.

They've been there for more than 35 years, successfully training, showing and breeding American Quarter Horses.

"We've got something like 70 years experience between the two of us," Tom says of himself and his sister, Margo. "And our daddy was standing stallions back when I was in high school."

A former trainer and college professor, these days Tom runs the farm's breeding operation. The Balls usually stand about four stallions, including their pride and joy, TNT Fluid Fred, sire of the filly halter-broken for this article. Tom and Margo like to boast that she has what they call the "Fred factor," the easy-going temperament and ability that makes a good all-around horse.

A trainer of multiple world champions, Margo travels often as an AQHA judge. She has judged several major shows across North America (many more than once), including the AQHA World Championship Show, the All American Quarter Horse Congress, the Quarterama and the Dixie National. She also holds judge's cards with the National Snaffle Bit Association and National Reining Horse Association, among others.

"Through the years, we have not been static," Tom says.

And what is it that keeps them going?

"It's the working with the horses on a daily basis," Margo says.