

# Equine Pre-School

Placing **young horses** on the path to success

By Natalie Voss

**I**t's a new year and the next generation of spindly-legged foals is arriving. Young horses are very impressionable and the first few months of their lives present both challenges and opportunities. For this reason, it's critical to get their training off to the right start as soon as they enter the world.

Buck Wheeler, a longtime Minnesota horse trainer and breeder, has developed a systematic approach to working with young horses that has been honed and developed over the course of his lifetime, which began on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota. "The only time I haven't been around a horse in my lifetime are the six years I spent in the U.S. Army paratroopers," says Buck. His system has proven effective with a wide variety of breeds, including draft horses, Quarter Horses, Thoroughbreds, and even wild mustangs.

## Starting early is key

"When it comes to training, the first four months of your foals' life are crucial," Buck tells us. On the day your foal is born, Buck advises being present for "imprinting," a behavior modification technique when a foal experiences human handling for the first time. This technique establishes a bond between you and your foal and makes training easier as the foal matures.

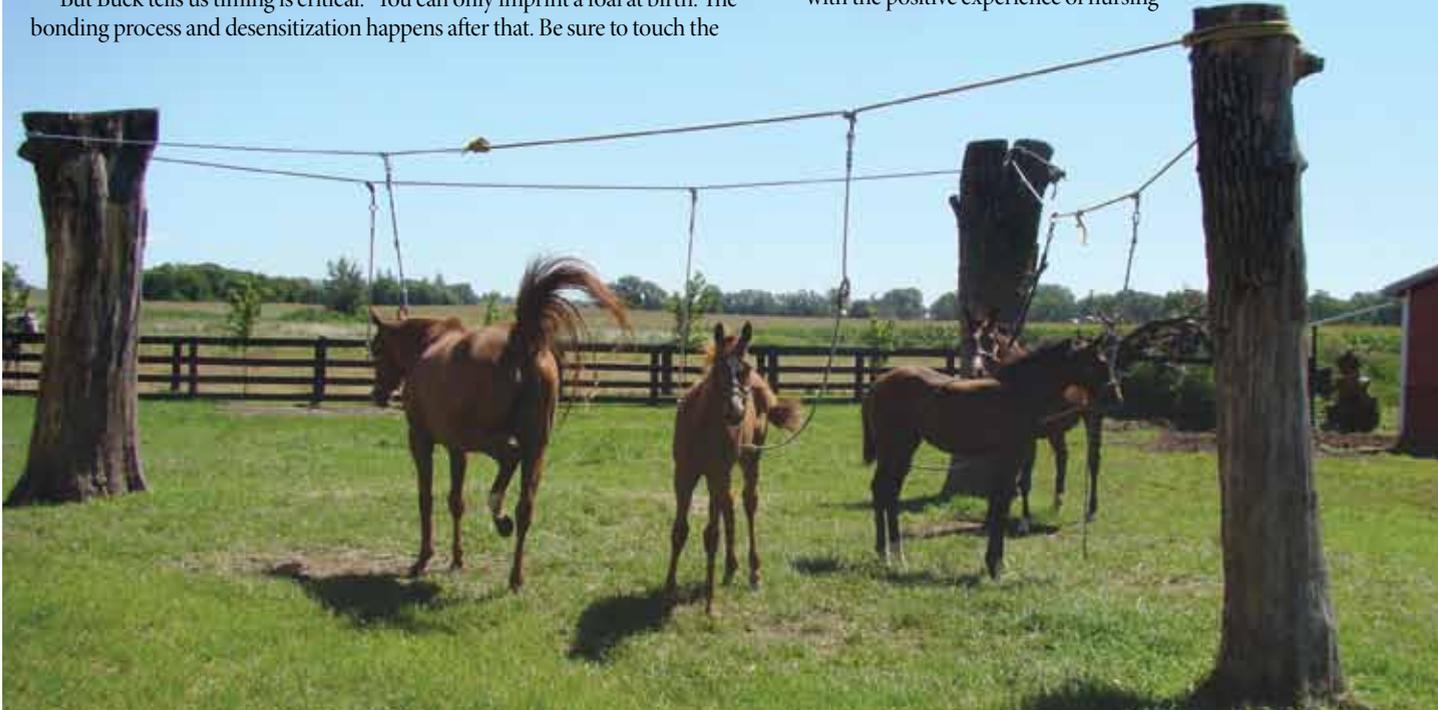
But Buck tells us timing is critical: "You can only imprint a foal at birth. The bonding process and desensitization happens after that. Be sure to touch the



Buck Wheeler demonstrating the Buck-A-Long.

foal all over, playing with the legs, feet, and ears—areas that can become sensitive for some horses as they age."

Each day, Buck visits his foals while they are nursing. He picks up their feet, one at a time, in preparation for the daily routine of hoof picking. Eventually, the foals begin to associate this process with the positive experience of nursing.



## Take the lead

Teaching your foal to lead is the next step. Buck has found the old method of throwing a rope over the foal's rear while trying to lead can result in bad habits such as neck curling, feet planting, and refusing to follow the handler.

To solve some of the problems associated with the old method, Buck invented an adjustable rope apparatus called the "Buck-A-Long," a tool that wraps a loop around the foal's rump and lightly hangs down around the back legs. This effect "tickles" the horse, causing them to move forward. The end of the rope runs through the foal's halter with an adjustable snap hooked to the halter. This keeps the head and hindquarters moving in the same direction.

Once your foal learns to lead—around two weeks of age—Buck suggests using the Buck-A-Long to encourage them to load onto your trailer. Buck shares some of his wisdom: "Horses are naturally inclined to flee objects or situations they find unfamiliar. So the more experiences you can give them as foals, the better."

## Weaning your foal

Just before weaning, Buck ties mares and foals to an overhead line for a few hours a day over three to four days. This technique allows foals to remain close to their mothers, but prevents them from trying to nurse. He has discovered this method makes weaning much less stressful for youngsters. "With these young foals, believe me, you can't start too early," Buck tells us. "These are just the first steps in the progression of preparing them for the yearling sales."

## The Buck Stops Here

Buck Wheeler is a life-long horse trainer and breeder. With his wife, Karen, he owns Oak Tree Farm, a record-holding Thoroughbred sales consignment in Lexington, Kentucky. Buck travels the world, teaching his unique methods and offering clinics in Europe and the United States.



Check out Buck's website: [www.udderlyez.com](http://www.udderlyez.com) 



## About the author:

Natalie Voss is a freelance writer and editor based in Lexington, Kentucky, where she writes about horses and spends time riding and training her mare, Jitterbug.

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