



Young Horse Growth

Tina Watkins

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When I ask riders when it is that young horses are ready to be ridden, I hear a lot of different opinions. Some talk about if the lineage and development rate, some talk about the fact that there is a futurity that the baby needs to get to and the amount of training the horse will need to get there. All of these thoughts have validity, but not many talk about the bones and joints, and when a horse is truly physically mature.

Let us consider some of the factors. Dr Deb Bennett is a world-renowned expert in the field of conformation analysis, and specifically how conformation relates to performance ability. I encourage everyone to pursue further reading about the closure of growth plates from Dr Bennett by visiting www.equinestudies.org and browsing through her catalogue of articles on the subject.

According to the research Dr Bennett and her team have done over the last 40 years, all breeds of horses are on a similar timeline as far as the closure of the growth plates on their bones. Generally speaking, growth plates in a horse convert to bone (i.e. close or fuse) starting at the lowest part of their anatomy, and work their way up towards the back.

The growth plate at the coffin bone, at the bottom end of the horse's leg in the hoof, fuses at birth; this means the coffin bone will not get any taller after birth, though it does of course enlarge as the horse grows. The growth plates at the hock fuse when the horse is approximately 3 years old, which make the hocks a significantly weaker point in the horse's early development and workload. Finally, the vertebral column is the last to fuse, when the horse is nearly 5.5 years old for an average horse; the larger the horse, the longer this process will take, and male horses take longer yet. It is possible for a very large Warmblood horse's vertebral column to only finish fusing as late as 8 years of age.

Unlike the growth plates in the legs that are generally perpendicular to the ground, growth plates in the spine are not. The forces in the legs generally come up and through most growth plates in the legs, making it a little easier to take the forces incurred during work.

The plates in the spine, however, undergo a shearing force from the weight of the rider and the viscera pulling down on them in work. The spine also does a lot of direct work to support the rider's weight as well as any jumping, collection, or flexibility.

So should we wait till a horse is 6 years old to start him? Would he have a mind of his own by then that would not allow us to turn him into the performance animal that we are all hoping to have? Would we then run out of time to make it to the top of his game before he was too old to perform? These are all questions that deserve some serious thought.

In my opinion there is a happy medium between starting the young horse, working his body to aid the athleticism, teaching his core tissue how to support the back and allowing the body to move in way that helps him be his best. Importantly the bones also need some challenge to build correctly and become hard and strong. The information we have from research does make me want to keep the rides on a young horse short and consider more groundwork. But most of all, it really spurs me on to have a wellness team that is always evaluating what that horse is doing in the body, and asking myself how can I help my young horse's



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body grow correctly and in a way that is going to allow him to have a long sound life in the performance ring.