At Hilldale Farm our foals are raised outdoors from birth until they begin training at age two. We believe that growing up outside, and in company with other youngsters, is best for developing trainable athletes. We know this system is more economical than attempting to raise horses indoors. We also realize that a certain amount of handling will make these youngsters easier to train, and safer to work with when they require doctoring.

Although I believe imprinting foals at birth can be very beneficial, we seldom have time to imprint a foal. Our foals do learn to be restrained for having their navel dipped on day one. Later, they are held for deworming, immunizations and doctoring. These procedures are almost always done in a "foal cage" positioned beside their mother in the breeding stocks. Even though they become friendly, this will be all the handling they will have had prior to weaning.

Most of our foals are six months old or older at weaning time. Since we creep feed the foals, and supplement the mare's pasture with a 16% protein concentrate throughout lactation, there is no hurry to wean. This is purely intentional since we feel that foals develop better in the social environment of the mare and foal herd.

At weaning time most of our foals will weigh 600 pounds or more. They are strong and pretty independent. On weaning day they will go to the breeding room, enter the foal cage beside their mother, and we will slip on a halter with a drag rope. The foal then follows its dam to a 12' x 24' stall. It will be soon be joined by one or two other foals, so they will have company while they lament the disappearance of mama.

Actual halter breaking is Day One of our three-day program. At Hilldale Farm, we "donkey break" all our foals. This has been our method of choice for years and so far, we haven't experienced a single injury. We like the results and love the savings of time and human labor.

Our necking donkey, Jack, is a gelded male donkey that weighs about 800 pounds. We bring Jack to the indoor arena, attach the neck rope and then go for the foal. We basically drive the foal down the barn aisle, but I have a hold on the lead rope. Two people can usually make the connection, but a third comes in handy to get the foal close enough to Jack to snap the lead rope already attached to Jack's neck rope to the foals halter. Once attached to the 18 inch lead, the pair are simply herded to the nearest paddock.

Scientific neglect is now the order of the day. We go back to riding horses, but are able to observe the lesson. Occasionally a foal will get a foreleg over the lead rope and will need assistance. Usually, we just observe with amusement how an impatient and sometimes angry foal learns to accept "donkey tenacity."

Jack understands his job. He will stand patiently during his students first tantrums, and then soften up the foal by turning in both directions. When Jack is ready to travel to the hay rack or water tank, he will go there regardless. He will show more patience than the most famous and expensive human round pen clinician, but there are limits. If the student gets too rambunctious, Jack will provide discipline with a little kick. Because they are tied so close, he will only hit him with his hocks, but he will make his point. Watching this process is not only entertaining, but kind of an I.Q. test for the foals. I've learned not to be too
concerned about how much they fight at first, but rather to evaluate the foal by how soon I see slack in the rope. The best ones seem to figure it out within ten minutes.

We actually leave the foal and the donkey together for about half a day. When I approach the pair, I can tell real quickly if it's time to lead the foal back to the barn. When I release the snap from the neck rope, the foal is usually reluctant to leave the donkey. I've learned not to pull, but rather get the foal beside me from the start. I give a verbal "cluck" and then tap the foal with the lead rope with my left hand, beside my body, to get it started forward. Using the fence as needed, most lead back to the barn with little or no resistance. The "First Day" always ends on a happy note. The foal is glad to be back in the barn, and happy to be patted and handled by the person who brought him back to his new home. If space is available the foal will be placed in an individual stall at this time, ending the "buddy system."

On Day Two, the weanling learns to stand tied. Near our arena stand a couple of trees. Over a limb of each tree a big truck inner tube has been tied with a strong lead rope attached. Each foal is led to the tying tree and left to figure things out. These trees are close to our round pen and the hot walker, so there are other horses close. We are able to observe the weanling frequently, but try not to get involved until he is standing quietly. We try not to interfere with a tantrum. Since the lead rope is equipped with a swivel snap, he can't get tangled up. Now and then, in a bad tantrum, the weanling will pull back so vigorously that he will sit down and then roll over on his side unable to get up. In this case we assist the foal in getting back on its feet and then ignore him. I always have a sharp knife handy in case I need to cut the rope. After the foal has stood quietly for an hour or two, I will approach the foal and begin petting its head and neck. When it relaxes I will often give a handful of alfalfa as a reward.

The tree lesson usually lasts for about four hours. When the foal has been approached several times it will allow us to touch more of its body and will be standing quietly most of the time. Almost all will lead very readily when they are finally returned to their stall.

In the fall of 2001 we decided to add a third day to the program. Day Three consists of a round pen lesson, almost identical to the first lesson we give our two year olds in preparation for their first ride. I was a little apprehensive about this undertaking, wondering how much could be accomplished in the round pen with the short attention span I expected of a newly weaned, six month old foal.

I expected the first filly chosen for this lesson to be difficult. Rondalena Chex had taken the weaning process hard. She was so mad when her mother was removed that she tried to climb the walls. Next, she took her temper out on her companion foal, biting and kicking with such anger that she had to be kept in solitary.

In her Day One lesson, Rondalena battled hard for a few minutes and then gave in to Jack. She was much the same on Day Two, fighting being tied for a while and then accepting the tree. I expected Day Three to be a challenge.

I decided to approach the Day Three lesson with Rondalena exactly as if she were and older horse. I led her to the center of the round pen, petted her until she relaxed, and then removed the halter. As soon as she moved away, I began pressuring her to keep moving in the round pen by body language alone. With this young filly, I found that I had to use a longe whip to keep her moving and to keep her focused on me. Whenever she looked over
the fence or whinnied for other horses, I increased the pressure to keep moving. If she tried
to reverse in the round pen I made her return to the original direction.

Much sooner than I expected, Rondalena began asking permission to approach me. She
asked by turning her head toward me, lowering her neck, and then by licking her lips. These
signals almost always tell me that a horse is ready to face-up. When I released the go
forward pressure by turning my shoulders sideways and taking a step backwards Rondalena
stopped and walked toward me. I rubbed her between the eyes and she stood quietly.
Within minutes she allowed me to rub her all over, to walk around her with my hands on her
croup, and even to rub the insides of her ears.

When I picked up a forefoot, the filly allowed me to hold her foot for a moment but moved
away when I sat it down. Immediately, I picked up the whip and aggressively asked her to
"go away". Within just a few trips she was almost begging to approach me. This time, she
allowed me to handle all four feet without resistance. Rondalena had accepted the entire
lesson within 30 minutes, and had responded as well as I could have hoped - even
comparing her to two year olds. I was convinced that Day Three should be a part of the
weaning time education for all our foals.

In the next few days I took seven more weanlings to the round pen and all seven passed
the test. Most of the colts had a stronger tendency to call for horses outside the round pen,
and had to be chased a little harder. All were facing up and standing quietly for handling
within 30 minutes.

We were so pleased with the Day Three results that we wished all of our 2001 foals had
been give the same opportunity. I even brought a couple of the previously weaned foals
back in that had not been given the same opportunity. On the next two occasions that all 20
head were caught for deworming and immunizations, the three-day group were definitely
easier to handle. The "three-day" plan will be a part of our weaning routine for all foals next
fall.

Charlie Hutton
Hilldale Farm