



From the Ground, Up

KZ Equestrian is taking the “race” out of the racehorse by focusing on going back to basics.

by Kaitlyn Zaleski

As I mentioned in my introductory column last month, I have a particular ‘soft spot’ for Thoroughbreds. As such, I’m sure it’s not surprising to hear that my Makeover horse, Hula, isn’t the only one that I own! I also have a 9-year-old bay gelding named Harley (Jockey Club Name: Compratore). He was retired from the racetrack as a 7-year-old, and, to my good fortune, found a second career in the jumper arena and a new home at KZ Equestrian last year. The most common question that I get when someone finds out that I am competing in the Thoroughbred Makeover is: “Why are you competing with Hula instead of Harley?!”...



April 2019 - Thoroughbred Makeover

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The answer is simple: Harley is not eligible to compete in the RRP Thoroughbred Makeover because he is too far along in his training.

The official rules of the Makeover state that horses must meet four requirements for eligibility:

- Must be registered with the Jockey Club and have a lip tattoo and/or Jockey Club microchip.
- Must have raced or had a published work on or after July 1, 2017.
- Must not have started training for a second career before December 1, 2018; other than a maximum of 15 allowable rides or training sessions to introduce skills specific to non-racing careers.
- Horses that competed in sports other than racing before December 1, 2018 are ineligible.

The eligibility criteria allow for the opportunity to compete with horses recently retired from the racetrack, or with horses that have undergone a bit of downtime since their racing careers. Hula last raced on February 1, 2018 and spent the 10 months preceding December 1 turned-out to pasture with a small group of other horses.

In my opinion, those days at pasture were critical in preparing her for a second career. Not only was that time good for her mind and body, but the lessons that she learned from spending time in a group of other horses and being forced to fit into a pecking order have directly transferred into the respectful way she responds to new things during our training sessions.

Trainers and teams accepted into the 2019 RRP Thoroughbred Makeover have until July 30, 2019 to find, acquire, and register an eligible horse for competition. Although we had no plans or intentions of competing in the Makeover when we acquired Hula last December, we absolutely feel lucky for the full eight-month time period we have for preparation.



Back to Basics

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Like horse training for any discipline, or with any breed, the process is long, slow, and repetitive. Although we will ultimately have to choose a specific event(s) for Hula to compete in at the Makeover, our training approach at this point is largely independent and unrelated to the end-game. To the eager spectator, our daily training sessions with Hula at this stage probably appear boring, tedious, and elementary; about as exciting as watching the grass grow! But, from my perspective, we are laying the foundation not only for hopeful success at the Makeover in October, but also for years of enjoyment beyond! Much of our focus right now is on groundwork, manners, and patience. “Chomping at the bit” was probably coined by someone working with an OTTB! When Hula shows us that she has mastered the basics, then our training attentions will get more discipline-specific.

A major challenge at this point—and what we anticipate having to battle as we continue forward—is mental preparation. Although there are some Thoroughbreds out there with super quiet personalities, many Thoroughbreds are naturally more excitable and temperamental than most other breeds. Hula is definitely classified as a more excitable type. It will undoubtedly be mentally stressful for her when we make the cross-country trip from California to Kentucky. On top of that, she will be performing in one of the largest venues she has ever experienced, in front of a loud and enthusiastic audience, and surrounded by hundreds of other young, spirited Thoroughbreds. Our goal is to take every step of this training process slowly, quietly, and with a relaxed mindset. Some specific exercises and techniques we’ve used over the last 30 days include:

Yielding hindquarters and shoulders from the ground; respecting and responding to body language in the round pen, on the lunge line, and on the lead rope.

Lunging with a rider aboard; reinforcing ground work lessons without rider contributing additional stressful or anxious behavior.

Introduction of trail course obstacles to keep her mind engaged and focused; wooden bridge crossings, bodies of water, miscellaneous ground and standing poles, flower boxes, etc.

Roping, dallying, and dragging various objects while standing alongside and while mounted.

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