

Eagle

In April of 2012 I was called by Angela Gordon of Franklin, TN asking me to come to her home and evaluate a rescue horse, Eagle, which she had recently adopted. Angela told me that Eagle would come up to them, but he would not allow them to touch him or approach him. He was currently living in a field with one other rescue that the family had adopted, so I told them to try to isolate him from the other horse, Remus, before I would arrive in a couple of days.

DAY 1: My first meeting with Eagle was not what I expected. When I arrived, the Gordon family had Eagle separated into a round pen waiting for me. Eagle came to the fence and reached his nose out looking for treats, but when I reached in to touch his nose he spun around to stand on the opposite side of the round pen. I stepped into the round pen to see what kind of progress I could make.

I started out slow trying to simply approach Eagle and to see how close he would allow me to approach. I quickly discovered that Eagle was not going to allow me within four feet of him, so I began working him through an exercise of mine. I start by walking up to the closest point that Eagle will allow me. Then, I stand still with my eyes lowered to the ground with my side pointed towards him. I wait for him to turn his head to me and acknowledge me and then walked a few steps away from him. This is similar behavior to what a boss mare would do to encourage a younger colt to come back into the herd after being driven away for misbehaving. Many trainers will round pen the horse to encourage join up, but I have found that with severely traumatized horses they tend to panic and run instead of trying to bond. Through this technique it keeps the horse's adrenaline down and helps them to think about what you are asking of them.

I repeated this step many times, taking one more step closer as Eagle would allow me. There were many times throughout the session that I would try to take a step closer too soon and it would cause Eagle to trot away, but by stepping in front of him I would stop him and start over. A few times he felt threatened and kicked at me. By the end of the first day he was allowing me to stand one to two feet away from him without feeling the urge to bolt.

My first thoughts at the end of the hour were that Eagle would be a very long project. That even if we gained his trust about one new thing that he would still resort to fleeing and aggression whenever something new was introduced. Eagle must have been through some very traumatizing events in his life to have this much aggression and fear.

I voiced my opinions to the Gordon family and suggested that I come back the next day to see if I can make some more progress. I also, advised them to keep him in the round pen and so that he begins to depend on people for survival and social interaction.

DAY 2 – 7: I returned the next day to try and make some more progress with Eagle. I began with the same exercise as the day before, but after half an hour I hadn't made any more progress from the day before, so I decided to try round penning. Every horse is different and some respond better to certain approaches than others. The round pen was small and Eagle didn't like a lot of pressure, so I limited him to just trotting. I worked him both directions keeping eye contact and my shoulders square until he showed me signs of wanting to join up, such as licking and chewing and his ear turned in towards me. When he showed me these signs I turned my back to take the pressure off and encourage him to come in, but he continued to turn his rear end towards me every time he stopped. Someone had mistreated Eagle so badly that he refused to join up even when he was dripping in sweat. His defenses were so high that he would not give me an inch into his feelings.

I left that day giving Angela's daughter, Hannah, an assignment for the week. She was to continue to work with Eagle the same way that I had the last two days. I also, wanted her to put her hand over his feed while feeding him so that he would have to touch her hand in order to eat.

DAY 8 – 14: I returned a week later to find that Hannah had made significant progress. She could now walk right up to Eagle and be within twelve inches of him without him tensing or wanting to run. He had also, started following Hannah around the round pen. At this point Eagle had started to bond with Hannah, so I decided to try and talk Hannah through every step and let her perform them instead of me coming in once a week as a new person.

This week I wanted to take a step closer towards being able to touch Eagle. Up to this point we had been keeping our movements very small and very slow to keep from spooking Eagle. The next step was to acclimate Eagle to hand movements at a normal speed. I had Hannah begin by simply standing as close to Eagle as possible, and then to smoothly and slowly start waving one hand between her and Eagle. As long as Eagle stood quietly and relaxed, I had Hannah increase the speed of her hand to a normal speed. We performed this exercise in short segments, so that Eagle would know that standing still and relaxed was the correct answer.

Once Eagle stood quietly I decided it was time to try to actually touch him. Hannah would do this by waving her hand in the same manner as before and then in the middle of a stroke to just briefly and gently brush Eagle's shoulder with a single finger. Eagle's first reaction was aggression. Every time Hannah would brush his shoulder he would whip his head around to bite at her hand. This was another sign of serious abuse from Eagle's previous owner. Someone had beaten him so badly that even the gentlest touch he took as someone hurting him. This was Hannah's assignment for the week, to continue this exercise along with continuing with the feeding exercise.

DAY 15 – 21: When I arrived a week later I couldn't believe the progress that Hannah had made. Earlier in the week Angela had sent me a photo of Hannah reaching through the round pen brushing Eagle and now Hannah could completely groom him besides picking his feet. When I saw the progress I knew that the next step would be to halter Eagle and to start teaching him how to pick up his feet.

Eagle had really started to bond with Hannah and was starting to look for her for security, so I was going to have to talk her through the next exercise. Horses that have been severely traumatized tend to bond with one person at a time and are weary of every new person that is introduced to them. I talked Hannah through approaching Eagle with the rope halter starting by simply rubbing him down with it. Then she reached her arm over his neck to hold one tie end of the halter and quietly slipped it over his nose. Eagle stood like a quietly.

The next step was to teach him how to lead. Hannah started by pulling forward on the lead rope holding pressure until Eagle stepped forward to release the pressure on his face. Then she rewarded him by rubbing his forehead. She repeated this process until Eagle was willingly walking around the round pen behind her. I was so proud of Hannah and Eagle and amazed at how quickly Eagle was responding to the training.

Before I left I wanted to get Hannah started on picking up Eagle's feet. Since Eagle had been quiet through the haltering process I knew that we wouldn't be pushing him by working on one more exercise. Before I could start, Hannah had to introduce me to Eagle to show him that I was not going to hurt him. We did this by simply rubbing him on his neck and shoulder until he seemed to relax and then continued with the exercise.

When I don't know a horse's past I like to start by picking up their feet with a rope rather than putting myself underneath them. I used an extra nylon lead rope and looped it around the back of one of Eagle's front feet and gradually added pressure until he lifted his foot. Every time that he quietly picked up his foot Hannah would rub him between the eyes as a reward. As he became more relaxed I would hold his leg off the ground for longer periods of time as if I were cleaning his foot. He was very quiet, so it was time to move on to the back feet. Again, he was very cooperative.

I left that day leaving Hannah with a few different goals. The first was improving Eagle's willingness to be caught, second was to improve leading, and third was to start picking his feet.

DAY 22 – 28: Eagle has continued to surprise me over the past three weeks and he continued to surprise me on week four when Hannah walked right up to him and put the halter on and lead him over to me. She continued by showing me that she could groom him and pick all four feet. I was blown away, because less than four weeks ago we had a horse that would not let us within four feet of him and now he had become almost docile. Most horses that are as aggressive and shy as Eagle take much longer to trust people, and every time that you introduce something new to them, you have to re-earn their trust, but eagle was showing signs of total trust in Hannah. It was if he had decided that since Hannah said it was ok everything was ok.

This week I wanted to start teaching Eagle how to lunge and to get him started on accepting a saddle. I talked Hannah through the process of teaching Eagle how to lunge by starting with just moving his hind end and then gradually driving him forward (refer to my article on “Teaching a Horse How to Lunge”). For the first day we only asked Eagle to walk around on the lunge line, but during the week Hannah was to work on teaching him how to trot.

Next, I talked Hannah through introducing a saddle pad and saddle. We started by simply rubbing him down with the saddle pad and then tossing it on and off of his back from both sides. We then did the same with the saddle keeping our movements quiet, but similar to how we would naturally want to tack him up. *I cannot emphasize enough that when you have an abused horse, work slow. It is more productive to take your time with the basics and to build a solid relationship with your horse than to pressure them. If you spend the time working on the basics, when it comes time to ask for more difficult maneuvers your horse will work with you to figure out the answer rather than fighting you, which will result in faster progress. This is how you develop a horse that WANTS to perform.*

Hannah’s assignment for the week was to work on desensitizing Eagle to a saddle pad, saddle, and anything else that she could find to throw over his back. I did not want her to cinch him up yet, because that might be taking one step too soon, which could result in three steps backwards in our progress.

DAY 29 – 35: I arrived a week later to find that Hannah had, yet again, made great progress with Eagle. Eagle was standing quietly and patiently as Hannah placed a saddle pad and saddle on his back. Today was the day to cinch up the girth and possibly allow Hannah to start lying over Eagle’s back.

Slowly, we tightened the girth just snug enough to keep the saddle from slipping to the side. Then, Hannah asked him to walk a small circle around her to let Eagle get used to the pressure around his belly. After, he relaxed we tightened the girth another couple of holes and asked him to walk again. We continued this process until the girth was fully tightened and he was walking in a relaxed circle. The next step was to ask Eagle to trot with the saddle. He took a few suspicious steps, but quickly relaxed and continued trotting around in a circle. I was very happy to see this response, because it told me that Eagle was not a horse to panic, but rather to think things through before running away.

After, trotting Eagle for ten minutes to make sure that he was really okay with the saddle on his back, it was time to put some weight in the saddle. In order to keep Eagle quiet through this process, we were going to have to take baby steps. The first step was for Hannah to jump up and down as if she was going to bounce in one stirrup before swinging her leg over his back. She then, jumped up and down while hanging onto the saddle and pulling on it to add a little bit of weight and movement to his back. He stood quietly. Finally, I slowly lifted Hannah up so that she was lying on her stomach over his back. Setting her up on him in this way allows her an easy dismount in case Eagle becomes uncomfortable with the weight. After, a few repetitions of placing Hannah on his back and her dismounting, we then walked Eagle in a small circle while Hannah lay on his back. Eagle was so good that we decided to quit for the day.

It was a very successful day and Hannah had a lot to keep her busy for the week. She was to repeat everything that we did from cinching to lying over his back with her mother’s help.

DAY 36 – 42: This week was a lot of repetition of the week before except that Hannah would actually sit up in the saddle. I did want to try and teach Eagle something new this week to continue with our progress, so I decided to work on steering. I didn't quite trust Eagle enough to let him off of a lead rope, so Hannah would guide him around using the reins while I held the lead rope. Eagle struggled a little with this, confused about how to respond to the pressure on his mouth, but we just kept the pressure consistent until he figured out how to turn his head. This was Hannah's assignment for the week along with flexing his neck to each side from the ground.

DAY 43 – 49: This week was spent working on steering with Hannah riding and me leading Eagle. I was very cautious about letting Hannah off of the lead because Eagle had not yet convinced me that he was completely ok with someone on his back. Also, with me leading Eagle I was able to help Eagle understand how to turn when Hannah would pull on the reins. Towards the end of the ride I unhooked the lead rope and let Hannah and Eagle walk around the round pen by themselves.

During the week Hannah continued to work on steering and building confidence while being on Eagle's back.

DAY 50 – 56: Today was time to take another step forward in Eagle's training. Hannah started by briefly lunging Eagle before she mounted him. We started by simply asking Eagle to walk around the round pen and to turn left and right. He was starting to understand how to react to pressure on his mouth and was willingly turning for Hannah.

The next step was to ask Eagle to pick up the trot. This would be a big accomplishment for both Eagle and Hannah if he was to respond quietly. I told Hannah to be careful about using her legs on Eagle because if a horse is going to buck it's normally because they don't know how to respond to the pressure on their sides. I stood in the middle of the round pen to help Hannah to encourage him to trot while Hannah clucked and gently squeezed her legs. It took some effort, but Eagle did trot forward for just a few steps before walking again. *The first time that a young horse trots, it is common for them to only take a few steps at a time until they build up their confidence.* When Eagle would break to the walk we would reward him by rubbing his neck, so that he knew going forward quietly was the correct answer. We continued to encourage him to take a few more steps each time that he started trotting until finally he trotted a full circle. That was enough for one day.

Eagle had shown me today that he was not going to panic, so I told Hannah to continue working on steering and to start asking him to trot throughout the next week.

DAY 57 – 63: Since we had only gotten a few steps of trot from Eagle last week, this week was going to be more review. I wanted to improve Eagle's willingness to go forward and to try to have him keep trotting until Hannah slowed him down. The lesson was very successful.

We found that Eagle was still struggling with learning "whoa", so on top of everything else that we had been working on, I had Hannah work on teaching Eagle "whoa" from both the ground and from in the saddle. While lunging him she was to say "whoa" twice and if he hadn't stopped by the second time, she was to pull him in to stop his feet. By saying "whoa" twice it gave Eagle the chance to stop on his own before Hannah pulled on him.

DAY 64 – 70: Eagle was still struggling with some of the things that we had been working on so we repeated the previous week. The next week I was going to be busy, so Hannah had two weeks to perfect the basics. The week after that Hannah was going to be out of town, so the next time that I would see her would be when she brought Eagle to my horse camp.

DAY 85 – 91: HORSE CAMP

Horse camp for Eagle was a huge success. During the week Eagle was taken out of the round pen and was worked in a large arena. This alone was a big step for both Eagle and Hannah. The first day in the arena was a review day to ensure that Eagle was not going to feel the freedom of the open space and ignore Hannah. I started by leading them while Hannah worked on steering until Eagle relaxed which is when I would unclip the lead rope. Since Hannah didn't have a round pen to keep Eagle turning, I had her keep Eagle on figure eights to keep him focused.

Throughout the week Hannah and Eagle built up their confidence and, by the end, were trotting around the arena and weaving barrels and stopping without Hannah having to pull. It was amazing to see the accomplishments that the two of them made together.

November 2012

Hannah has now taken Eagle to an overnight horse camp at the Williamson County Ag Center where they participated in a couple of clinics with Judson Smith from Lascassas, Tennessee. She has taken him to a 4-H show at the Triune Community Center where they placed in all of their classes. Also, she took him to a 4-H Halloween event held at Jeff King Stables in Arrington, Tennessee.

The goals for 2013 are to continue developing control outside of an arena, cantering, and going to 4-H shows and participating in the Triune Saddle Club.