



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Bringing the University to You

Fact Sheet 98-30

Horse Handling and Riding Guidelines Part II Ground Handling

Al Cirelli, Jr. Extension Horse Specialist School of Veterinary Medicine
Brenda Cloud Vocational Instructor Southern Extension Area

Introduction:

Safe ground handling of the horse is based upon an understanding of the response of the horse to its environment. Keep in mind that the survival of the horse in its natural environment is dependent upon several survival traits. Those that play a role in the safe ground handling of a horse are: vision, hearing, memory, speed, quick reflexes, and herding instinct. The fact that the horse is a routinist and a creature of habit should also be considered.

Approaching and Catching Your Horse:

- Always be safe when working with a horse. Accidents happen when you least expect them. Always wear an approved safety helmet with a chin strap when ground handling or riding horses. Approaching and catching a horse maybe as routine as pulling you boots on. However, when approaching and catching a horse one should always be aware of conditions that could result in an accident.
- Prepare the halter before you approach the horse. The crown piece should be unbuckled and held in your left hand. The lead rope should be coiled or folded and also held in the left hand.
- Always speak to the horse as you approach. A startled horse may kick, run-off or react in a way that could cause injury.
- Approach the horse at an angle so the horse can see you. Remember a horse has two blind spots in its vision, one directly in front and one directly behind.

- Try to approach the left shoulder of the horse. This will place you in a safe position.
- Walk in a calm, positive, natural, upright position towards the horse. Be sure to speak in a soft calming tone of voice.
- Do not focus on the eyes of the horse. To do so is a challenge and a threat. This will put the horse in a defensive mode and it will move away from you.
- Once you get close to the horse, you should stop. Then, enter the horse's personal zone or zone of defense slowly. Watch the horse closely for any body language that would indicate the horse is going to move away from. Should the horse demonstrate signs of moving, stop and wait a few seconds. Then, try to move closer in a non-threatening manner. Hold out your free hand and try to touch the horse on the neck or shoulder. Then in a firm but gentle manner, use the palm of your hand to rub the horse in a soothing circular motion. Don't dab at the horse's nose or muzzle.
- After the horse has accepted you, calmly place the lead rope around the neck of the horse and hold with your left hand. Move your right hand forward and over the neck, reach down and grab the crown piece of the halter. Now, hold the lead rope and halter buckle in your left hand. Smoothly slip the halter over the nose and position halter on horse's head and buckle the crown piece. Adjust so it is neither too loose or too tight.

Leading Your Horse:

- The horse must walk beside you when you lead it. Don't let the horse get ahead or lag behind you. The safest position for the handler is a point midway between the horse's head and shoulder.
- When turning the horse you should always try to turn the horse to the right or away from you and walk around it. This will prevent the horse from stepping on you when turning.
- When leading, allow the horse to hold its head in a natural position without tension on the lead rope.
- Use a lead rope or strap that is about 8-10 feet in length. The excess should be folded in a figure 8 or coiled in your left hand. Never wrap the lead rope, halter shank, or reins around your hand, wrist, or body.
- It is customary to lead from the left (near) side with your hand approximately 8-12" from the halter on the lead shank. (Note: horses should be trained to be workable from both sides)
- When leading stay close enough to the horse so as to have adequate control and keep your eyes focused in the direction you are going.
- When leading, extend your right elbow slightly towards the horse. If the horse comes in contact with you, its shoulder will first hit your elbow and move you away. The elbow can also be used to keep the horse from crowding you.
- A horse is stronger than you. Don't try to out-pull it. Horses will usually respond by reducing any tension on the lead rope, then you can ask the horse to move forward.

- If the horse rears or pulls away, release the hand nearest the halter. As the horse moves away from you, calmly take a few steps towards it and speak in a soothing voice. In most situations the horse will usually stop. Pulling the lead rope tighter will cause the horse to increase its resistance.
- When leading, tying, or un-tying use care to prevent catching a finger in loops, rings, bits, snaps, other bridle or halter hardware.
- Be careful when leading a horse through any narrow opening. The handler should always have control, step through first, and then allow the horse to pass through.
- When turning a horse loose, it is safest to lead the horse completely into the paddock or stall, turn the horse around facing the direction-it came from, and then release the horse. Don't let the horse bolt away from you. Make the horse stand quietly while you rub on the neck just before you remove the halter.
- Avoid accidentally becoming entangled. Don't use long lead ropes. Always watch the coils when using leads, lariats, or lunge lines.

Tying Your Horse:

- Use the proper knots and thick cotton rope for tying and restraining of a horse.
- Tie the horse far enough away from others to avoid crowding, injury, and fighting.
- Tie only in a location that is safe for you and your horse. Don't tie to brush or tree-limbs.
- Always tie a horse short (just enough length so it can bend its neck slightly) and at a point at least shoulder high (to keep a horse from getting tangled in the rope).
- Always tie with a lead rope - never the bridle reins.
- Always untie the horse before removing the halter.
- Always tie to a secure object. Never tie to a fence rail or gates. Tie only to fence posts, hitching posts, or tie rails.

General Ground Handling Considerations

- Be calm, collective and confident around horses. Nervous handlers cause nervous and unsafe horses.
- Wear a correctly fitted safety helmet with chin strap.
- Wear clothing that is safe. Clothes that fit too tight or too loose can be a danger.
- Wear proper foot gear that will protect your feet. Boots or hard-toed shoes with at least 1 1/2" heels are preferred. Never wear tennis shoes, sandals, or go barefooted. (note: some tennis shoes are now made specifically for riding).
- Your ability and confidence in handling horses is depicted by your actions.

- Understand your horse, its reactions and temperament. Control your temper at all times. Be a firm yet a kind master to your horse.
- Punish a horse only at the instant of disobedience; waiting will result in the horse not understanding the reason for punishment. Punish without anger. A harsh voice or jerk of the halter may be adequate.
- Never strike a horse around the head, pull or twist its ears.
- Do not drop grooming or other equipment on the ground where they may be stepped on or tripped over.
- When working with horses, stay as close as possible to the horse so that if it kicks, you will not receive the full impact.
- Whenever possible stay out of kicking range.
- When moving to the opposite side of the horse, place your near hand on the croup or hip of the horse and walk around the horse, staying as close as possible, or, move away and go around out of kicking range.
- Always let a horse know what you plan to do. I.e. when picking up a foot - place near hand on shoulder or hip, run off-hand down the leg. When off-hand is at fetlock push slightly with hand on shoulder or hip and lift the foot up.

References:

Cirelli, A. A. 1982. *Safety Rules in Handling Horses*, FA L-17-82. University of Nevada, Reno.

Evans, Warren T. 1989. *Horses*, 2nd Ed. W.H. Freeman & Co., New York.

Miller, R.W. 1974. *Western Horse Behavior & Training*. Doubleday & Co., New York.

**UNIVERSITY
OF
NEVADA**

The University of Nevada, Reno is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action employer and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, age, creed, national origin, veteran status, physical or mental disability, or sexual orientation, in any program or activity it operates. The University of Nevada employs only United States Citizens and aliens lawfully authorized to work in the United States.