

How to Tie and Not to Tie Horses

Our topics for this week are:

- **Hitches and knots for tying horses**
- **Lead ropes**
- **How to tie horses with bridles, split reins, romal reins, or mecate reins**

After catching, putting a halter on, and leading a horse, the most common handling procedure is tying a horse. Learning to be tied is one of the first lessons taught to horses. In addition to teaching a horse how to be parked, tying teaches horses patience it applies to many situations. Knowing how to correctly tie your horse can be life saving for the handler or the horse; whereas, not knowing how to correctly tie your horse can endanger you and/or your horse.

Whenever tying a horse, there must be reasonable assurance that if the horse challenges being tied that escape is not possible on their terms. Otherwise, the consequence will be teaching a horse to always challenge being tied and seek another escape as reward. This is the main reason we are not fans of cross-ties. To cross-tie a horse safely the lines should be tied with strings at the halter, so that if the horse challenges the tie, it can break away. In addition, the availability of cross-tie locations are far more limited than where you can tie horses with a single lead rope.

Before tying a horse the first considerations must be how the lead rope is attached to the horse and what will the other end of the lead be attached to? The lead to be used to tie the horse must be attached to a horse's halter and never attached directly to the horse's mouth. This means never using split or romal (RO-mel) reins or a chain lead shank to tie a horse. If a horse pulls back after being tied, the pressure should be to the upper neck from the crown piece of the halter, or in rare situations the horse's girth. When trail riding with a bridle and bit, a rider should always be prepared to tie a horse safely to respond to emergencies. Putting a bridle over a rope halter is one method albeit uncomfortable for the horse. The method we prefer is to put the bridle over a simple working cavesson then use a 12 to 15 foot rope around the horse's neck, tied with a bowline knot. The other end of the rope is then run through the bottom of the cavesson, is coiled, and attached to the left side of the saddle until there is a need to tie the horse.

If using mecate reins on a bridle or bosal, the lead (or "get-down") line should not be used for tying the horse unless the looped reins are first looped around the horse's neck so if the horse pulls back after being tied the pressure is transferred to the back of the neck, not the horse's mouth or the bosal and the hackmore's hanger strap. This is done by pulling the looped reins to the left of the horse, crossing the loop to form a figure 8 and then putting the new loop over the

horse's neck. The lead line is then wrapped around the lower aspect of the double neck loops at least twice forming a half-hitch with each wrap. The double loops around the neck cannot be loose enough to allow the loops to fall off if the horse lowers its head. If needed, add more wraps with half hitches around the double neck loops should be created until the diameter of the double loops are reduced sufficiently to keep the loops from falling over the horse's head.

Objects that a horse is tied to must be stationary and stout. It should be able to withstand the weight of the horse plus its pulling power or roughly 3000 lb of pressure from an average horse. The level at which it is tied needs to be higher than the horse's withers to reduce its pulling power and potential injury to its neck as well as its ability to lift what it's tied to out of the ground. For example, horses should never be tied to a metal T post or a horse trailer that is not attached to a parked towing vehicle. Since tied horses may suddenly and forcefully challenge being tied at any time, handlers must never try to slip underneath a tied horse's lead rope. If they do, they risk causing a horse to pull back and then lunge forward on top of the handler.

The halter and lead rope must also be able to withstand a horse's attempt to escape from being tied. Halters with metal connections usually break at a metal connection. Lead ropes with metal clamps or snaps usually break at the metal clamp or snap. Nylon rope halters and lead ropes connected by a sheet bend hitch are the strongest means of resisting a horse's challenge to being tied.

Halter-broke horses should be tied in trailers to limit dangerous shifting of the trailer while traveling work and intrusion on a horse's travel mates' personal space. However, the horse should be tied a distance that allows it to lower its head below its withers but not below its knees. This prevents the horse's head from getting dangerously low in a moving trailer but low enough to clear its airways. We like Blocker tie rings in trailers because these can be quickly fastened and easily released. They will also permit more slack if pulled on with force allowing a horse in a trailer accident more room to move its head after a wreck. Blocker tie rings can also be an excellent means of safely and humanely teaching horses not to pull back when tied.

Horses are claustrophobic and need to be able to move their head up and down, but they should not be able to accidentally put a front leg over the tied lead rope. Therefore, the lead rope should be tied about 2 to 3 feet from the horse's nose.

The surface of the lead rope affects the security of the tie. Smooth surfaced lead ropes are comfortable for the handler's hands, but they allow hitches to pull loose more easily than a laid (twisted) rope. Cotton twisted ropes are also easy on the hands but will hold hitches securely. When a horse pulls back on a tie with all its weight, the hitch can bind. This is one of the situations that necessitate good handlers to always carry a sharp knife to release a horse from a dangerous emergency.

There are four hitches that are particularly useful in tying horses. Blocker tie rings can be used for routine tie rings. These do not require a hitch to be tied. They work on one or more bends around a tongue in the tie ring. They are quick to use and forgiving to horses that pull back while teaching them that pulling back does not lead to escape. The quick release hitch is the most commonly used tied hitch. A bight is created in the hitch that allows quick release, but many horses learn to untie the hitch. To reduce that risk, the end of the lead rope should be dropped through the bight if the horse will be left alone for time. The highwayman's hitch is a useful hitch if a quick release of the hitch and the tie ring is desired. This helps if two horses will be led on foot by providing a total release from being tied using one hand while holding the first horse, or releasing a horse to be ponied while being horseback. The bowline is a secure knot that can be used as a tie hitch. Even if pulled tight, the bowline is reasonably easy to untie. The bowline is best for tying overnight if on overnight trail rides.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular subjects contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Tie horses to stout immovable objects 2 to 3 feet away at a level above their withers .**
- 2. Know the uses of quick release hitch, highwayman's hitch, bowline knot, and Blocker tie ring.**
- 3. Never tie a horse in a manner that creates pressure on its mouth if it pulls back, i.e. never tie it with reins or lead chain shanks.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press. You might also be interested in my *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*. Both are also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at: www.betteranimalhandling.com

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.