

Catching Horses in Stalls or Pastures and in Special Situations

Our topics for this week are:

- Safer working with horses in stalls
- Catching horses in pastures
- Trapping horses
- Releasing horses safely
- Capture of foals and stallions

Inside Stalls

To catch a horse in a stall, the horse's attitude should first be assessed. If the horse has its rump directed toward the stall door, the handler should not enter until he can get the horse to turn around. A handler can cluck, tap on walls escalating to loud banging on a wall until the horse faces the handler and then the stimulus to face the handler should stop instantly. This may need to be repeated several times to reposition the horse in the stall.

Most horse stalls only have one exit, the stall door. Therefore, the stall door must always be unlatched when inside a stall and a horse should never be allowed to get between the handler and the stall door. A lead should be attached to the halter. The handler's presence should be announced in a soothing voice.

After the horse is facing the handler, the handler diagonally approaches the left shoulder, puts the lead rope around the horse's neck, and places the halter using the bear hug technique. All handlers should use good manners in a stable by avoiding loud noises or sudden quiet appearances that could startle a horse in a stall with another person.

Doors should be sliding or should open to outside of the stall. When leading into or out of stalls the stall door should be fully open. Sliding latches or other protruding hardware should be fully retracted to prevent poking or scraping the handler or the horse.

Pastures, Pens, Corrals

Horses should be taught to respond to a whistle or call to come to a stall or pen for grain. The same whistle or call should be used every time grain will be provided to them. A small catch pen adjacent to pastures where horses can be fed, caught, and individually released can improve safe handling of young or otherwise poorly trained groups of horses.

If a horse that needs to be caught has not been taught to come for feeding and is difficult to capture, it should be gathered with herdmates in a pen. The most willing horse to be caught should be captured first and tied outside the pen in a nearby location. The next most willing horse is caught, taken out, and tied, and so, on until all other horses are tied up outside or the one desired is willing to be caught beforehand.

If the last one that is not captured and tied is the one that is desired to be caught, the handler should walk at normal speed with quiet determination directly toward horse's shoulder. There should not be any efforts to hide the halter. As the horse moves away, the handler needs to apply pressure by continuing to walk toward him. Eventually the horse will stop and look toward the handler. At that instance, the handler must stop and turn away. After a 10-second rest, if the

horse continues to stand still, the handler can walk a little slower in a zig-zag pattern toward the horse without looking directly at it. The handler should continue until he is close enough to rub the horse's forehead and approach its neck to put a lead rope around it. If the horse walks away at any point in the process, pressure should be applied by walking toward him and repeating the release of pressure at appropriate times until he permits capture.

After capturing the horse and haltering it, he should remain where he was caught and haltered while being briefly groomed, scratched on its withers, and rubbed on its forehead and throat. The handler should then put the lead rope back around the horse's neck to control its movements, take the halter off, and then take rope off its neck, and walk away before the horse moves. Capture should not be associated only with work or medically treating a horse or it will develop an aversion to being caught. This catch and release should be repeated daily as often as necessary.

Handlers should not work with a horse when other free horses can mill around the handler and the captured horse. If catching or returning a horse in a pasture or pen with other horses is unavoidable, the other horses may try to play or harass the caught horse or the horse to be released may attempt to escape and join the herd too soon. A second handler can provide interference, but if the handler is alone handling a horse grouped with other free horses, he should have a short whip or stick with a flag to control potential troublemakers.

Trapping Horses

Capturing horses by driving them into traps can be time efficient. However, trapping untamed horses forces them to stay still while handlers invade their flight zone. This is counterproductive to the basic training of horses. To learn to be calm around handlers, horses need to be able to move their feet and have some initial control of how far the handler is allowed to invade their flight zone until they learn the handler is a benevolent leader. That is the reason for round pen training.

Feral horses have been trapped or moved using groups of trained handlers using steel tubular horse panels manufactured for small modular pens. The panels are 10 to 12 ft long, 5 ft tall, and weigh 50 to 80 lb. Pressing untamed horses into close confinement with steel tubular panels can be hazardous to the legs of horses that may kick, strike, or step through the panels and to untrained handlers who attempt to hold or move the panels against an untamed horse. Some trapping methods involve tying one end of a panel to another fence. If a gap of more than 3 inches is left between the panel and the fence, a horse can rear and trap a foot in the gap.

Trapping or moving horses with tubular steel panels should be restricted to catching wild horses, performed by groups of trained handlers, and done with humane oversight by regulatory agencies.

Releasing Horses

How a captured horse is released affects how successful the next capture of it will be. Release should be done only after the horse is calm and relaxed. The lead rope should be placed around the horse's neck for control during and after removing the halter. Control of the horse is maintained only with the lead rope around the neck while briefly petting it for standing still and talking to it in a soothing voice. The lead rope should be removed smoothly and the handler must walk away before the horse can walk away from the handler.

When releasing a horse into a paddock or pasture, it can get very playful just after release

and may try to pull the handler or may kick up as it leaves the handler. They should be released when the handler has an immediate exit and in a manner that they have to change directions to go join their herd mates.

The horse should be led through the gate and into the pasture and turned back toward the gate. The handler needs to be positioned so that he may exit the gate as soon as he releases the horse and moves away. A handler should never attempt to release a horse by reaching over or through a gate or fence. If a catch pen is adjacent to the pasture, the horse should be released in the pen and then given access to the pasture.

New horses should be introduced to established herd members in different pastures separated by an alleyway. At other times, they should also be stalled next to each other with a barred grill between stalls. After the excitement of the new horse and the herd seeing, hearing, and smelling each other wears off, the new horse can be pastured or penned with the most submissive herd members. After acceptance by a portion of the herd, all horses can be kept together. However, dominant herd members may still bully the new horse. Introducing them all to fresh pasture at the same time as introducing a new horse will ease the acceptance of the new member.

SPECIAL CAPTURES

Capture of Foals

Capture of a foal requires two handlers. It is imperative to catch and control a nursing mare before attempting to capture its foal. After catching the mare, it should be backed into a flat paneled corner that is strongly built. The handler of the mare should position the mare so that the foal can go between the mare and the wall to hide its face but not escape behind her.

The foal handler should not try to pet the foal prior to getting it restrained. After the mare is restrained and quiet, the foal handler should move at normal walking speed toward the foal and confine the foal with an arm in front of its chest and the other arm behind its rump. Whenever walking behind a foal, the handler should keep his side toward it to protect his abdomen and kneecaps from a kick. The tail should not be held if possible, since some foals will sit down when their tail is held. A foal should never be held just around its neck. It will rapidly back up and either escape or cause injury. The handler should hold the foal as lightly as possible, and position it so that the foal is next to the mare in nursing position. The handler should never be between the foal and mare. The handler's arms should be used as barrier to excessive movement. The foal should not be persistently hugged or it will resent and resist the restraint. When holding a foal, the handler should turn his head toward its rump to protect the handler's face if the foal struggles and rears suddenly. A gate should not be used as a squeeze panel for restraint on foals or small horses if the gate does not have a solid panel on the lower half.

Large foals may need to be held by two people. The front handler holds under the neck with a knee behind its elbow and the back handler stands on the same side as the front handler and holds the base of the tail with a knee in its flank. The foal should not be lifted off its feet as this will add to fear and struggling.

If needed, a small foal can be laid down on its side by a handler standing by its side, bending its head away from the handler and toward the withers. The outside flank should be grasped and the foal gently slid down the handler's legs. Lateral restraint can be maintained by a handler squatting with knee pressure on the foal's neck and reaching between the hind legs and

pulling the tail through the hind legs and holding it. Placing a towel over its head and humming to it will increase its relaxation while down. Large foals or weanlings should be chemically restrained for lateral restraint.

Capture of Stallions

The capture and restraint of stallions should not be attempted by novices. Only after a good degree of proficiency is reached by the handler in handling mares and geldings should the handling of stallions be attempted. No one, regardless of experience, should handle a stallion without another person within voice range.

The value of a stallion is in passing on genes that are hoped to improve the quality of future horses. This supercedes the priority of any other use. Therefore, only stallions of exceptional quality that will be bred to high quality mares should remain sexually intact. Determination of exceptional quality should be based on the unbiased opinions of others, not just the owner. After all, the foals produced will have to be appreciated by others to find future homes and proper care.

Because of their potential value, stallions are often kept in separate enclosures and away from other horses. This added to their strength, unflappable interest in mares in season, and desire to dominate other stallions makes handling stallions more hazardous than handling mares and geldings. Regardless of a stallion's prior handling and training, a handler in an enclosure with a stallion or restraining a stallion on a lead should always be conscious of the stallion's position and demeanor by keeping it in the handler's peripheral vision. No handler should ever ignore a stallion or allow it out of his peripheral vision. A handler should never turn his back on a stallion when leaving its pen or stall.

Wild stallions control mares and challengers to their authority mostly by biting and striking. If agitated, they are much more likely to bite or strike handlers than mares and geldings. When entering a stallion pen, a handler should back the stallion away if it walks into the handler's personal space. When handling a stallion the handler should stay at their shoulder or slightly behind it when possible for safety. After the halter is on, it is helpful to back the stallion to signal the handler's authority. Its attention should always be on the handler until just prior to breeding.

Handling of stallions is easier if breeding occurs in a dedicated shed or barn, training occurs in a separate arena, and turnout is a paddock not near the breeding or training sites. Different halters and leads should be used for breeding than for training or exercise. Stallions will recognize the difference and become less excited when the non-breeding halter is used. An extra long lead rope should be used to handle stallions when breeding because they have to rear up to breed.

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

- **Horses should be trained or required to face the handler when the handler enters a stall**
- **Horses should be trained to come to a catch pen or stall for grain when called**
- **Trapping horses in pens is a method of catching wild horses by a team of handlers, not a means of catching riding horses**
- **After releasing a horse, the handler should always move away from the horse**

before the horse moves

- **The dam, that is mother mare, should be caught before its foal is caught**
- **Stallions should be caught only by experienced handlers**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is 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.