

Proper Use of an Equine Halter and Lead Rope

Our topics for this week are

- **Types of equine halters and lead ropes**
- **Proper handling of a halter and lead rope**
- **Creating an emergency halter**

Importance of Head Control and Haltering

Control of the horse's head is paramount to controlling a horse and protecting both it and the handler. No horse should be handled or restrained without being able to control its head with the use of a halter, or a rope around the upper part of its neck.

Halters

Halters and lead ropes are the most basic equipment needed to handle and restrain horses. Halters are usually made of leather, rope, nylon, or polyester. Parts of a halter are the noseband which includes the nosepiece and chinpiece, connecting strap, throat latch piece, cheekpiece, crownpiece, buckle or tie strings and loop, and tie ring or loop. Leather and synthetic strap halters have metal nose and cheek connectors.

Leather halters will break under pressure and cause little discomfort when pulled against. These characteristics promote disrespect for restraint and will trap moisture underneath the halter that can cause skin problems. Nylon or polyester will not break, although their metal connectors can. They cause little discomfort when resisted, traps less moisture and dirt than leather. If near a fire, a nylon halter can melt and glue itself to the horse's skin. Rope halters will not break, causing discomfort if pulled on and therefore less resistance to restraint. Rope halters do not trap moisture or dirt.

Leather or nylon strap halters have rings (connectors) that the nosepiece, chinstrap, cheekpieces, throatlatches, and crownpiece attach to. There are noseband, cheekpiece, and throatlatch rings and a single leading or tying ring on the lower aspect of the noseband. Attachments to the rings or the rings can break under moderate stress.

Lead straps with a chain shank and clip are sometimes used on difficult to handle horses, primarily racehorses and breeding stallions. The chain shank is clipped to a halter and then run through some of the halter rings to exert leverage and pressure on the nose, chin, or gums. Halters with round rings should be used if a chain shank will be used to reduce the chain from binding in the ring.

Although common in Europe and with racing thoroughbreds in the U.S., horses should not be turned out in a pasture or pen with a halter on. If a pasture halter is considered absolutely necessary, a breakaway halter with velcro attachments or a leather "fuse" (adjoining leather straps thinner than normal halter straps) joined by a Chicago screw. Breakaway halters have an important disadvantage that they may break at a time that restraint is needed. They can also teach a horse that pulling back with a halter on is an effective escape route which eliminates an important psychological advantage that handlers usually have with properly trained horses, i.e., pulling back does not lead to escape.

Lead Ropes

Twisted cotton lead ropes are the most comfortable for handlers. They are strong, provide good traction for gripping with the hand, and hold hitches well. Metal halter clips can be attached, but are not necessary for attachment to the halter since a double sheet bend hitch can be used. Braided nylon is available in a variety of colors and is a popular choice, but is slick and does not hold hitches as well. Metal halter clips are clamped on the end of nylon lead ropes. The metal clips or their clamp on the rope is the weakest part of a nylon lead. Lead ropes for only leading and tying horses are usually 9 to 12 feet in length. Longer, heavier lead ropes of 15 to 20 feet are used for longeing or leading other horses, such as pack horses from horseback.

Using a Halter

Horses are claustrophobic. Some, especially quarter horses, may initially tolerate head restraint and then with explosive force, attempt escape, including flinging the head which can deliver a lethal blow to anyone nearby. To reduce the risk, a handler should never put his head near the horse's head. If necessary to be near the head and keep the horse still, the handler should hold the cheek piece of the halter with the elbow of the same arm against the horse's neck. Proper fitting of a halter permits two fingers under the crownpiece and the nose band.

Applying a Halter

Control of the head permits control of the hindquarters which controls the horse. Handlers should never work with a horse that does not have a halter on with a lead attached. The best method of putting a halter on a horse is the "bear hug" technique. First, the lead rope should be attached to the halter tie ring or tie loop.

The handler should approach the horse's left shoulder (also called the near side; the right side is far side) at 45 degrees to the horse's neck and rub and scratch the shoulder. The lead rope is then put around the horse's neck just in front of the withers and then reach under its neck to capture the horse by the loop of lead rope around its neck. The loop should be moved to about the mid-neck area. If necessary, the horse is repositioned in the stall or pen. The handler faces forward relative to the horse, releases the lead rope, and holds halter buckle and strap in his left

hand. The handler's right arm reaches over the horse's neck. The unbuckled crownpiece strap is transferred to the handler's right hand, which then allows him to restrict movement of the horse by a loop of his arms and the halter around its neck. The nose band of the halter is placed over the horse's nose with a scooping movement. The right hand brings the crownpiece over the neck just behind the ears and the halter is buckled, or tied if a rope halter.

There is an underneath method of putting a halter on that involves having a lead rope in hand and looped around the horse's neck. The handler stands on the left side with his right shoulder under the upper part of the horse's neck. The nose band is placed over the nose. The crownpiece strap is held in the right hand and the buckle in the left hand and both arms are raised, one on each side of the horse's neck. The crownpiece strap is flipped over the neck with the right hand and grasped with the left. The handler then steps to the left side and fastens the buckle. This method puts the handler at undue risk of being struck, run over, and hit by the horse's jaw. It also puts the horse at risk of having an ear slapped by a halter's crownpiece strap being flipped over its head. The underneath method of haltering is not recommended.

A lead rope should always be used on a halter. A horse should never be led by holding onto its halter. A lead rope should never be looped around a hand or arm or allow it to get caught around a handler's leg.

Halters should not be left on a horse in a pen or pasture because they will catch on objects, leading to injury to the horse, and sometimes death. If a halter is an absolute necessity on a pastured horse, a breakaway halter should be used. If head control is needed on a horse that has not been trained to be captured, the use of horse neck straps are another option that is safer than halters on pastured horses. Leather or webbed halters will also lead to skin problems if left on for days in warm weather. Foals, weanlings, and yearlings like to scratch their heads with a hind foot and may catch their foot in a halter or they may box with each other and can catch a foot in another's halter.

Temporary Halters

The need to catch a horse is sometimes unanticipated. Temporary halters can be created with 15 ft of rope put around the horse's upper neck and tied with a bowline knot. A bight can then be put between the lower part of the neck loop and the horse's throat and then over the horse's nose. A quick release or slip halter is similar. A small loop (about 2 in diameter) is created near the end of a 15-ft rope and tied with a bowline knot. The rope with the small loop is placed around the horse's neck and then a bight is run through the small loop and then over the horse's nose. When the bight is released from the horse's nose, the loop around the horse's neck also releases, quickly freeing the horse.

Importance of the Correct Release

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.

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

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

- 1. Rope halters are better halters for training horses than flat strap leather halters.**
- 2. Horses should only wear breakaway halters when grazing in a pasture.**
- 3. Placing the lead rope around a horse's neck should always occur before placing a halter on a horse's head and before removing a halter to release a horse.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 350 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

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.