

Special Equipment: Twitches, Hobbles, and Feedbags

Our topics for this week are:

- Twitches
 - Long-handled nose
 - Other nose twitches
 - Skin twitch
 - Ear twitch
- Hobbles
 - Front leg
 - One leg
 - Picket
 - Side
 - Breeding
 - Scotch
- Morrals

Twitches

Twitches are distraction techniques applied to the neck or nose of horses. Some of the procedures that twitches are used for include passing stomach tubes, standing castrations, treating wounds, and farrier work. Twitches should never be used on a foal.

Twitches cause a temporary diversionary stimulus while other procedures are done on a horse that otherwise would not tolerate the procedure. Twitches can injure tissue if applied too long (more than 10 to 15 minutes), and they should be applied effectively on first attempt. Gently rubbing the skin where the twitch was applied after its removal will improve recirculation of blood in the area and provide a kind release for the horse to remember. Twitches should not be used to try to control a distressed horse that is thrashing, when the area to be twitched has been previously injured, or as a means of discipline and training of horses.

Based on one study, conventional opinion is that twitches work by the release of endorphins. Endorphins are internally produced morphine-like substances, in the brain. Human long-distance runners' brains produce endorphins during running which causes euphoric sensation and addictive behavior associated with running. Conversely, horses do not become addicted to having a nose twitch applied. In fact, they usually become resentful and anxious about it being used repeatedly.

Endorphins are released to modulate the discomfort and speed the recovery of having a twitch applied. They do not cause the horse to become tractable from an endogenous opiate high. Horses that have had nose twitches used, particularly if used aggressively or for too long, are likely to strike with a forefoot when a handler works near its head. When a nose twitch is used, the horse becomes motionless and submissive to protect its lip from the possibility of being torn, risking the horse's survival.

The **long-handled nose twitch**, made from hickory wood, is most commonly used to twitch the nose (upper lip), but it should be used as infrequently as possible and for the shortest

possible time. Long-handled twitches are about 30 inches with a rope or cord, leather, or chain loop. Rope or cord twitches are preferable. The loop applies a clamping effect on the upper lip. The horse should be in stocks or standing with its right side next to a solid wall or fence. The handler holds the stick and halter with the right hand about 1 ft from the twitch loop, grasps the cheek piece of the halter, and pulls the head to the left while the handler stands close to the horse's left shoulder. There is risk of the horse striking out with a front leg if the handler stands in front of the horse. The handler places the twitch's loop over the left hand with the little finger outside to prevent the loop from sliding over the wrist. The horse's upper lip is grasped between the thumb and 3 fingers of the left hand and the loop is slid over the fingers onto the lip. While keeping fingers holding the lip out of the way, the handle is twisted clockwise with the right hand which also continues to hold the lead rope. The left hand assists in keeping the rope from wrapping around the twitch handle. When the twitch is applied, an assistant must continue to hold it as well as the lead rope and should slowly rock or jiggle the twitch handle to continue the distraction. Within 5 minutes the twitch should be removed by grasping the lip, untwisting the twitch, and removing it in a controlled manner (not pulled off) while desensitizing the horse by rubbing its nose and petting its neck. Neither twisting the loop on nor off should be done rapidly.

A nose twitch can be performed using a bare hand. The upper lip is squeezed between the thumb and the index and middle fingers. This is effective only for a very short period. A leveraged twitch can be improvised with a small loop of rope and a stick. This can be maintained longer than just using a bare hand. Application is the same as with a long-handled twitch.

A **skin twitch** (the "Gypsy Hold") consists of grasping a fold of skin on the neck just in front of a shoulder that can distract a horse for a short time. The fold of skin should be rolled over the fingers so it can be held in a tight fist and slowly rocked or jiggled.

The **humane or Kendal twitch** is a small hinged clamp that is curved to prevent excessive pinching effect that is placed on the horse's upper lip. It is no more or less humane than other twitches that are applied correctly. It is intended to be clipped to the halter to free the hands of the handler. However, the twitch can be knocked off by the horse allowing the twitch to become a swinging menace to the horse and handlers. It is much safer if used by an assistant who continues to keep hold of the twitch as long as it is applied, but this may not be possible if the horse rears or is tall in stature and elevates its head. Like other twitches, a jiggling or rocking motion will prolong the distraction effect. However, the humane twitch is more likely to slip off the nose than a rope or cord, long-handled twitch.

The **Wilform twitch** is a metal square with a screw and a bar that acts as a vice. It has no bars sticking out to the side.

Due to the leverage of the screw it can be applied too tightly and if not applied tightly enough, it can be slung off by the horse as a highly dangerous metal missile.

An **ear twitch**, is when the ear is roughly pulled on by a hand or a long-handled twitch, or even bitten by a handler. Ear twitches, should NEVER be used. Good horsemen spend hundreds of hours desensitizing horses to having their ears handled. This can be ruined in one application of an ear twitch. Ear twitching can damage the horse's ear cartilage, blood supply, or nerves. The pain can make the horse head-shy and a danger to anyone who tries to halter or bridle the horse in the future. If the horse becomes disfigured, useless, and unsafe, it may be put to death. In some states in the U.S., ear twitching is illegal.

Hobbles

Hobbles can be useful in restricting a horse's movement. However, hobbles should not be used on horses with a history of neuromuscular problems, those that are sedated, or if a painful procedure may be required. A handler who puts any type of hobbles on a horse should remain near enough to immediately provide reassurance and aid, if needed, to a horse that struggles violently.

Front Leg Hobbles

Front leg hobbles are also used to teach patience and discipline. They can teach the horse not to panic if the legs become entrapped in wire or with rope. However, some horses can learn to do a modified lope with hobbles on. Front leg hobbles will often calm a horse that is trained to accept them to many stimuli that might otherwise bother them, but using front leg hobbles on a horse for the first time in an emergency can cause them to panic and lead to injury. Hobble training should be done gradually.

Front leg hobbles are also used to prevent a horse from traveling far when turned loose. They may be used for short periods when a rider must be dismounted and cannot tie the horse to a suitable object or used for longer periods to allow grazing. Grazing hobbles should attach to the cannon bones rather than the pasterns to allow for better clearance of brush and for less rubbing of the legs. When multiple horses are hobbled for overnight, one horse should be tied, saddled, and fed grain to use to retrieve escaped horses. The lead horse in the group should also wear a neck strap with a bell to locate a group if they escape. Horses should be allowed to drink water before being hobbled. Hobbled horses that try to drink from ponds, lakes, or streams can trip and drown.

It has been suggested that the Tom Fool knot can be used as hobbles for horses. The Tom Fool knot is essentially two bights through a loop in a rope and is similar to the Handcuff knot. However, the Tom Fool knot cannot be applied to a horse's legs without picking each foot up. The knot jams the legs against each other making it hard for the horse to maintain its balance if it attempts to move. It may have value in restraining the legs of an anesthetized horse.

One Leg Hobble ("Rarey Strap")

One leg hobbles tie a front leg in flexion. It can be used to restraint difficult horses for procedures that they would otherwise not stand still for. If not trained in advance for a front leg hobble, the hobble should be applied on soft footing and the horse's movements controlled at a distance by the lead rope and halter, since struggling may result for a relatively short period before resolution to the restraint occurs. One leg hobbles are sometimes used for brief (5 minute) periods to establish leadership over a dangerous horse. Horses with a one leg hobble applied can still rear and pivot on the hindquarters and can be dangerous to handlers. The one leg hobble was made popular by an American horseman, John Rarey, who was called to England in the 1800s to assist training a horse for Queen Victoria.

Picket (Staking or Pegging) Hobble

A horse that has been trained for hobbles can be staked with a hobble on one leg. A single leg leather hobble with an attached metal ring, stake lead rope, and swivel snaps on the stake permit safe grazing within the radius of the stake lead rope. Either a front leg or a hind leg can be hobbled, but hobbling a hind leg is safer for the horse. If the horse should spook and jump and is

staked with a hobble on a front leg, it could be tripped and fall. The stake should be well anchored in the ground but visible above the ground and without sharp points.

Side Hobbles

Side hobbles are used to discourage kicking or as a transition to training for front leg hobbles. Two straps connected by a line are placed around a front leg and hind leg on the same side of the body. Side hobbles are tolerated better by most horses than one leg hobbles. They permit more freedom while grazing but do not allow a horse to lope. Australian hobbles are the use of two side hobbles attached diagonally to the front and hind legs forming an “X” beneath the horse.

Breeding Hobbles

Some breeders may use hobbles on the hocks of mares when breeding. Breeding hobbles can be created by using a folded rope with a bowline on the bight knot to form a collar. The long lines are run between the front legs to strap and ring hobbles over the hocks and back along the shoulders to the collar. The ends of the long lines are tied to the collar with quick release hitches.

Breeding hobbles may protect the stallion from being kicked, but the hobbles can also create a new danger of the stallion getting one of his forelegs caught in the hobble rope.

Scotch Hobbles

Scotch hobbles are used to inhibit kicking. A scotch hobble is created with a 18-foot long soft rope. A non-sliding neck loop is made a bowline knot. A working end of the rope is run from the neck loop to a hobble strap with metal rings on one hindleg pastern and then back through the neck loop. The movement of the pastern can then be restrained or the high leg lifted slightly (2 inches) toward the horse’s belly to prevent kicking.

The rope that goes to the pastern should not be run around the pastern because rope burns could result. The end of the rope should be run through the metal rings of a leather or nylon foot strap (hobble) from the inside aspect of the hind leg to outside. A makeshift pastern hobble can be made with 3 to 4 feet of rope tied by the ends with a sheetbend to form a circular rope. The rope is folded and placed on the back of the pastern and each end pulled forward. The bights on each side provide a channel for the long from the neck to slide and not burn the back of the pastern. The handler restrains the horse by a hand on the lead rope and the other hand on the rope to the pastern.

Scotch hobbles may be used to supplement chemical restraint for veterinary procedures. It is used to pull a hind leg up slightly and restrain it from kicking while a horse is anesthetized. As the horse is anesthetized and the head is controlled with a halter and lead rope, the hobble rope is used to pull the hind leg up and lay the horse down in a more controlled manner. It is continued to be used for leg control when the horse is laying on its side for castration or other veterinary procedures on the abdomen or groin.

A Scotch hobble should not be used to lay a horse down that has not been chemically sedated, because struggling can release myoglobin from muscular injury and can damage the horse’s kidneys.

Morral (Feedbag)

A feed bag, also called a morral, is a canvas bag with grain in it that is strapped over the horse’s

muzzle. The morral eliminates wasting of grain and makes horses easier to catch. A horse being fed with a morral should be supervised to reduce the risk of catching the morral on a fence or other structure, and it should not have access to water until the morral is removed. If a horse attempts to drink with a morral on, the bag could fill with water and possibly cause drowning or aspiration pneumonia. Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. To remain effective, twitches must be moved rhythmically during use.**
- 2. Rope or cord should be used on long-handled nose twitches, not chains.**
- 3. So-called "humane" nose twitches are no more humane than others.**
- 4. Front leg hobbles slow walking, inhibit trotting, but allows an athletic horse to still be able to lope.**
- 5. Tom Fool knots should not be used to hobble unanesthetized horses.**
- 6. The purpose of Scotch hobbles are to inhibit kicking.**
- 7. A horse with a morral on should not have access to water it may try to drink.**

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 bood 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.