

## **General Considerations in Approaching and Catching Horses**

Our topics for this week are:

- Head control and haltering
- Walking behind horses
- Key elements of capture
- Dangers of using food for capture

Approaches to horses have to be adjusted for the tameness and training level of the horse. Wild horses are captured differently than tame, domestic, or trained horses. Before attempting to capture a strange horse among other horses, the social structure in the herd should be observed and dominant horses removed first.

### **General Considerations**

Problems with capturing horses can be minimized by handling exercises. Feeding in stalls for 15 to 30 minutes at least once per day will permit easier capture, grooming, and an inspection for health. Walking up to a horse while it is in a pen or pasture solely to pet it briefly for standing still and then walking away desensitizes horses to the fear of work or medical treatment after each approach. Failure to do this results in most tame and trained horses having a flight distance of about 10 to 30 ft.

Calming techniques include using a calm voice when around the horse. Although a handler who assumes a glancing glaze toward the horse's body and legs, lowered chin, dropped shoulders, and keeps arms down and hands near body will be more successful in catching a horse, the speed of approach is the most important factor. Approaching too fast or too slow will negate other body language. The proper speed of approach has to be adapted to individual horses and is based on experience. If the handler tenses his muscles, uses an unnatural tone of voice, or holds his breath, the horse will become ill at ease.

Familiar unstressed voices aid in putting horses at ease. Grooming or massaging the horse with a curry comb before performing other tasks reduces resistance to other handling procedures. Being in close visual proximity to preferred herdmate horses can be a calming influence, but in some cases, an undesirable distraction if the others do not behave. Blocking visual distractions by handling a horse in a stall or small pen with solid walls aids in adapting horses to focusing its attention on a handler and being handled.

### **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.

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.

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. The lead rope should be attached to the halter tie ring or tie loop first.

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 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. We do NOT recommend this method. 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. Again, 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. Standard 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 will box with each other and can catch a foot in another's halter.

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 releasing the horse, the bight is released from the horse's nose, the loop around the horse's neck also releases, quickly freeing the horse.

## **Walking Behind Horses**

Horses kick when they are startled, mistreated, or have had no previous handling. Horses that have been handled and not mistreated will only kick if startled or are kicking at other irritations (flies, obnoxious dogs). Kicking is primarily a defensive behavior. An aggressive horse is more likely to bite or strike. Kicking at a nuisance is usually preceded by a lifted cocked leg (kick threat).

It is easy to startle a horse if approaching it directly from behind. Handlers should always talk to a horse or make other quiet noises, such as whistling, humming, singing, before approaching its hindquarters. A hand should be kept on the rump as the handler moves around its rump. The handler should stay close enough to be brushing the rump with the side of his body as he goes around. If biting flies are present, it is wise for the handler to be prepared to block the tail with his other arm to prevent possible injury to his eye from the horse's swishing tail.

## **Key Elements of Capture**

If the horse is alone in an enclosure and avoids being caught, the handler should walk briskly toward it staring it in the eye with an upright posture and his shoulders back. His arms should be kept down near his body. The moment the horse turns its head toward the handler, he should stop, look down, soften his posture, and turn at least 90 degrees away. Intermittent pauses and turning away are used to reward the horse for looking at the handler and not moving. If it stands still, the handler can continue on slowly not looking directly at the horse and approaching it at a 45 degree angle to its shoulder. If the horse moves away, the handler should calmly persist. The horse should not be allowed to stand still to eat. The handler should continue with a soft posture, eyes down, and indirect approach, if the horse's head is down. If it raises its head and moves away, the handler should go back to a brisk, direct, eyes forward, straight posture approach. Again, the handler should pause and turn away briefly if the horse stops and maintains attention toward him. This same approach and pause are continued until the horse can be touched.

After first touching the horse, the handler should walk a short distance away and give the horse a brief break to think about being touched. Then, the handler should approach the horse's left shoulder coming at 45 degrees from the front. The handler should lower his chin, and look at the horse's shoulder, not its eye. The handler should keep his shoulders relaxed and slightly drooped. His arms should be at his sides. He should move at a normal pace with confidence. After briefly stroking its shoulder, the handler should stroke its shoulder with his hand and the end of the lead rope, and finally, put the lead rope around its lower neck. After the lead rope is looped completely around the horse's neck, it is moved toward the mid-upper neck to be able to pull head around and move the hindquarters away, if needed.

Some handlers recommend training a hard-to-catch horse by keeping in a small pen and using a breakaway halter with a short lead rope or for a very difficult horse using a breakaway halter extra long lead rope that he has to drag but can be reached by the handler at a distance. However, this method risks of the halter becoming caught on a structure. Trying to quickly snatch a short or drag lead on a difficult-to-catch horse is extremely hazardous.

## **Dangers of Using Food**

Hand feeding horses or using food in a pen or pasture to capture a horse will teach the horse to invade handler's personal space and become a nuisance. It can be particularly dangerous if other horses are in the same pasture or pen. Treats are not always available when a handler needs to

capture a horse. The reward should only be standing near the handler and being petted.

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

- **Approaches to horses have to be adjusted for the tameness and training level of the horse.**
- **Horses should be briefly caught, petted, and released quietly with no other goal as part of basic training.**
- **Proper body language of the handler is essential to capture horses in a pen or pasture.**
- **The first step in catching a horse is to gain control of its head, so you have control of its hindquarters.**
- **The “bear hug” application of a halter is the safest means of applying a halter.**
- **Halters should not be left on horses in stalls, pens, and pastures.**
- **Walking behind horses should be done very closely or very widely to avoid the impact danger zone.**
- **It is dangerous to use food as a lure to capture horses.**

Abby says it is time to wrap up this episode.

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](http://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.