

## **Proper Tying Tips for Horse Handlers**

Our topics for this week are concerned with tying horses to an object for restraint, including::

- **Tying by a lead rope**
- **Tying with cross ties**
- **Tying in a horse trailer**

Being able to safely and effectively tie a horse is essential to good management of horses. Serious injury or death can occur to the horse or the handler if tying is done incorrectly. Most tying is tying by the lead rope. For easy access around the horse, cross tying with two ropes or cords are used. What the horse is tied to is very important and tying in and around horse trailers can add additional risks of danger.

### **Lead Tying**

The risk that a horse may try to pull itself free from being tied must always be anticipated. Horses should only be tied to solid objects that can hold a typical 1200 lb. horse pulling with all its strength and that does not rattle, clang, or make any other noise if pulled on. This excludes gates, fence rails, stall doors, and unhitched trailers as safe objects that a horse can be tied to.

Unbreakable halters and leads should be used. Slippery nylon leads that do not hold a hitch well should not be used. If a horse pulls back and breaks the halter, lead, lead clip, or object it is tied to, it is much more likely to attempt pull-backs again in the future. Horses should not be routinely tied in a manner that incorporates a string to service as a breakaway since permitting them to breakaway with ease at their discretion encourages future pull-backs. A horse should only be trained in a safe manner that they will gain untied freedom when quiet and released by the handler.

To create a safer environment for horses that may pull back when tied, leads should be tied with a safety hitch to more easily free a horse in trouble, and a handler should always have a knife ready to cut the horse free, if needed, to prevent injury. If a horse pulls back, it is more likely to become injured if tied too low or with too much lead between it and the hitch. A lead hitch should be tied at or just above withers height, about one arm length from the hitch. Tying longer away can allow the horse's neck to get wrapped in the lead rope or the horse to step over the rope. Tying closer can cause many horses to feel claustrophobic and panic. Tied horses should never be left alone or tied closer than 10 feet apart. If tying to a rail, a horse should not be tied so close to the end of the rail that they can move to the other side of the rail. A horse should never be tied to any kind of stall door.

The problem of pulling back usually begins by the horse being scared, pulling back, and escaping because of being tied to an insecure object or a halter or lead clip breaking. Therefore, a horse should not be tied and then introduced something potentially scary to horses. In potentially horse-scary situations, a handler or handler's assistant must hold the lead rope. Handlers should never duck under a tied lead rope. Horse cannot see under their jaw. This can startle even a quiet horse and cause a pull-back or catch the handler in a very dangerous position. Similarly, handlers should always remain in a position that they can move away from a horse quickly. They should never sit or kneel on the ground next to a tied horse. If a horse panics and a quick release is needed, the handler should hold on to lead after the hitch releases so that the horse does not run backwards, fall, and go over on its back injuring its neck or head.

To discourage pull-backs, some trainers use rubber inner tubes from automobiles or bungee cords around a stout post to tie to with a nonbreakable halter and lead rope. These can injure a young horse's neck from recoil, or the inner tube can break. If they do not break, the horse is required to stop and move toward the hitch to get relief. It is better to reward at the moment the horse stops pulling. Holding the end of a long lead rope that slips through a tie ring while a horse pulls back can prevent injury while teaching escape by pulling back does not happen. A Blocker tie ring is a metal ring with a curved metal bar in the middle that allows horses to pull back with varying degrees of resistance so that they gradually learn there is no escape by pulling back, but they do not get hurt in trying. Another, older method of preventing pull-backs involves putting a loop around the horse's chest with the honda underneath, the standing end of the rope is run between the front legs and then the halter. The horse is tied with a regular lead rope an arm's length way from the hitching ring. The chest rope is tied a little closer to the hitching ring than the lead rope. If the horse attempts to pull back, pressure on the chest will inhibit most horses from pulling back, whereas feeling the pull on a halter on their head can make them panic.

Horses must never be tied to a hitch ring or rail by their bridle reins. This can easily break the reins or cause the bit to do great harm to the horse's mouth and the incisor teeth. Horses should only be tied with a regular lead rope and halter or a neck loop with a non-slip knot (bowline). Horses should never be tied with a chain shank lead. In addition to injuring the horse, the chain could break and become a lashing weapon. All head restraint riding accessories (tiedowns, martingales) should be disconnected prior to leading or tying horses.

Horses are inquisitive and nimble with their lips. Many will teach themselves how to untie hitches. The end of the lead rope should be dropped through a bight in the hitch to prevent a pull on the end of the lead untying the hitch. A more secure tie is to use a bowline hitch.

## **Tack for Tying**

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 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.

## **Cross-Tying**

Cross-tying allows a groom to move 360 degrees around the horse easily. This is advantageous for grooming horses, but cross-ties have several potential disadvantages. Horses have to be trained to tolerate cross-ties, because cross-tying allows little head freedom and horses can feel claustrophobic. If they panic, they are more likely to get free and learn to pull back for freedom or injure their neck or back than if tied more securely by a single lead rope. Furthermore, cross-ties are often not available in a safe location.

Accustoming horses to cross-ties should be done gradually. A horse new to cross-ties should be allowed 1 to 2 feet of slack on each side and close supervision. Gradually the slack is decreased on subsequent tying instances until the slack is only 6 to 8 inches on each side.

Cross-ties are usually 10 ft apart. They should not be more than 11 ft apart to prevent a horse from turning and getting twisted in the tie ropes. Cross-tying should be done where there is a wall close behind the horse so that the horse cannot back up too far. The wall attachments should be 1 to 2 feet higher than the horse's head. The length of the ties should permit the horse to lower its head about 1 foot. Horses that need to lower their head more to clear their airway should not be tied by cross-ties. Cross-tying is often done in barn aisles, but a separate area not used for pass through should be used. If a horse is cross-tied, another horse should never be led underneath a cross-tied to move through an aisle. The tied horse must be disconnected from a side, moved over in the aisle, and the other horse led by with its handler leading on the side that positions the handler between the horses.

Agitated horses restrained by cross-ties can run forward and flip themselves over on their back, or lose their footing and fall with their head hanging from one or both cross-tie leads. If a horse rears, it can get a leg over a cross tie line and cause a fall on its side. Because of this, many handlers who use cross-ties use string connections tied to the halter so that they will break easily if the horse tries to escape and will not leave a length of rope attached to the halter of a fleeing horse. Other options are using quick release snaps and commercial connectors at the wall end of the tie leads that break easily. This option can result in having broken metal connectors on the ends of cross-tie leads on a loose horse that are dangerous to the horse and handler. Because of its greater versatility and safety, single lead tying is usually preferable to cross-tying

## **Tying in or Around Trailers**

After the horse enters the trailer, the butt bar or chain should be secured before tying the halter lead. The handler who secures the bar or chain should not stand directly behind the horse in case the horse suddenly tries a hasty exit. Past the age of weaning, horses in trailers should be haltered and tied. Foals or other horses that have not been halter broke should not be tied. The untied horse should be blocked off with a divider or gate and a trained and seasoned horse tied in the back of the trailer

The lead rope should be tied with enough slack to permit the horse to balance itself while being towed and reduce the risk of claustrophobia. A breakaway halter or tie ring that permits sliding (Blocker tie ring) should be used to inhibit the horse from lowering its head during a normal trip but still permit it to free its head if in a trailer accident. A cotton lead rope should be used for tying in a trailer.

The lead rope should be untied before releasing the butt bar or chain or opening the back door of the trailer. Untying must be done without entering trailer with the horse. Untying horses in stock trailers can be done from outside the trailer. Other trailers may allow the handler to get to the tie ring from a window, a front compartment, or an empty stall adjacent to the horse to be untied. Horses should be trained to wait a couple of minutes after being untied until given permission to come out.

After the horse is unloaded, care should be taken if tying to the trailer. Ties near door latches that may catch a lead rope or wheel wells where a pawing hoof might get caught should be avoided. Horses should never be tied to an unhitched trailer. A scared horse can pull a trailer and cause great damage to itself and anything around it.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at [CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com](mailto:CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com)

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

- 1. Never tie a horse by the reins of a bridle.**
- 2. Tie to objects that cannot be moved by a 1200 lb. horse.**
- 3. Never walk under the lead rope of a horse that is tied.**

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](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com) . This website has more than 200 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.