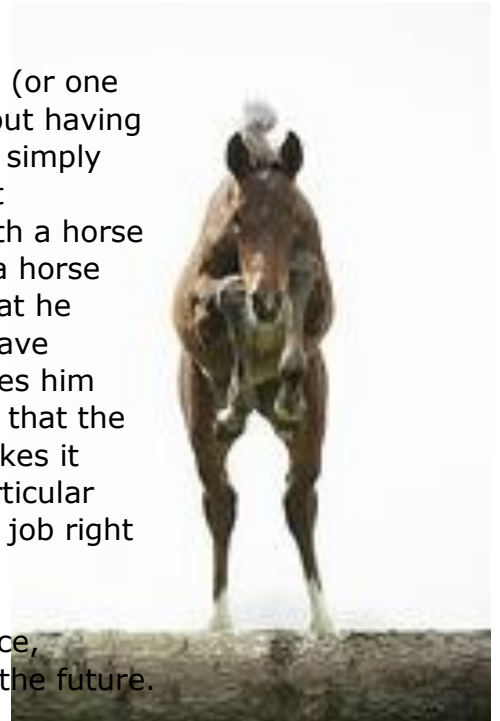




## Horsemanship for the Hoof Care Professional

by Claire Vale, NZ

If you have a lot to do with horses, then you've met (or one day will meet) horses that aren't well mannered about having their feet picked up and held. Most times, the horse simply hasn't been taught how to pick up a hoof and hold it comfortably for all involved. You may be starting with a horse where no-one has ever tried to pick the feet up, or a horse that has been inadvertently taught in such a way that he reacts incorrectly to your cues. Or, the horse may have memories of previous pain or ill treatment that makes him react in a way you don't want (we're assuming here that the horse doesn't have some current pain issue that makes it difficult for him to pick up the foot or hold it in a particular position at the moment). However, if you do a good job right from the first time you interact with the horse (regardless of what happened before), and teach him that hoof handling can be a nice, easy experience, you will make things much easier for all involved in the future.



Remember that young horses have quite a short attention span, and that they can get tired easily. It's better to split your training sessions into lots of little sessions with plenty of different things to do, rather than one great long marathon session that will leave the youngster feeling like all this human stuff is a drag he'd rather not be involved with. Make it fun and enjoyable for everyone.

### Safety

One thing that applies at ALL times when you are with a horse, regardless of what you are doing, is SAFETY. Always keep yourself in a position where you will be able to move away if necessary and won't get hurt. Start by looking at the area you are in. Make sure you're in a place where you won't be trapped against a wall or fence if you have to make a quick exit - the split second when he loses control and you have to bail out is not the time to be looking for the door. You may find that it's appropriate to move the horse around as you work on different things, to ensure that you always have an open escape route.

Then think about where to place yourself relative to the horse. Are you out of reach of a kick or bite? If he should happen to catch you, are you positioned so that you aren't likely to get hurt badly? For example, when picking up hind feet for the first time, I stand next to the front leg (or as far forwards as I can be and still reach the hind legs, anyway), with my back to the horse's body, then step the foot closest to the hind leg back a bit. Place your hand on the rump and run it down as you and lean down to the hind leg. In this position, the horse can feel where you are, and you are able to transfer your weight back over your fore-most foot quickly and shift away from those dangerous hind feet if needed. With your back to the horse, if the horse should manage to cow kick and catch you, the movement of the leg means you are



more likely to get a blow to the back of the leg, an area that is better designed to take concussion, rather than breaking your shin or dislocating your knee.

With trained horses these things aren't quite so important (although you should still be thinking about them), but with untrained horses that might do who-knows-what, it will save a lot of stress and tears.

## Communication

I start by introducing myself to the horse by smell and sound, and making friends with a nice scratch, so that right from the start the horse knows I'm not there to hurt him (actually, I do this with every horse I meet, it's just good manners. When the horse has decided you are there as a friend, THEN you can start teaching him to pick up his feet. If he thinks you are a scary horse eating monster, trying to do anything with his feet is probably going to end up as a big fight and the smallest combatant (you) is going to come out second best.

It's important to remember that if the horse has never been taught to pick up his feet before (or if he was taught incorrectly), he has NO IDEA what you want, and could do all sorts of bizarre things.

Reactions can range from absolutely nothing, to extreme movements like snatching or kicking - I even had one foal that would all but collapse to the ground in a little wobbly puddle every time I tried to get her to do the initial relaxing of the leg. Not so bad with a 75 kg foal - a lot more exciting if it had been a 500 kg adult! If the horse is feeling defensive or has previous bad memories, be prepared that he might try to kick, bite, pin you against a wall, or similar. He isn't being 'bad', he's trying to protect himself from the scary monster (you), so just back up a step and keep working patiently until he realizes it's not as bad as he thinks it is.

Remember, he isn't a mind reader and he doesn't automatically 'know' what you want - wild horses don't instinctively let humans pick up their feet. In wild situations, another animal touching his legs is either a mate playing colt dominance games, or a predator trying to take him down. He has inbuilt instincts that say it's a bad idea to let that happen, so it's up to you to overcome those instincts with careful considerate





communication with him. So to get the horse to understand what you want, you have to explain it carefully in a way he understands. Use communication methods that the horse will understand - he can't understand English (or whatever language you speak), but he is an expert on body language and tone, and you can certainly learn those. Rewards and Discouragements



Re-ward every effort that is something like what you're asking for, ignore 'neutral' behaviors (experimental stuff that doesn't approximate what you want), and discourage the 'bad' behavior in the instant that it occurs (snatching, kicking out, etc). For rewards I use releases (let the foot go again), a soothing voice, and lots and lots of skritchies\*.

Find the horses favorite skritch\* spot, give him some loving there, and he'll be putty in your hands in no time. You can even find ways to give skritchies\* while still holding the foot up in most cases, which is when he discovers that having the feet picked up is really good.

(\* New Zealand for Scratching)

I personally prefer NOT to have someone else interacting with the horse (e.g. giving feed) while training or trimming, as it usually acts more as a distraction than a help. If the horse is very highly food motivated, you can keep a handful of treats in your pocket and dish them out when needed yourself. You may have someone holding him, but make sure they are keeping his attention on what is going on with the rest of his body.

If you can, observe a band of horses. Watch how they interact in times of peace and times of strife. Watch how good mates hang out together and groom each other. Watch how 'ole grumpy' tells those whippersnappers to back off and behave themselves, from the Look up to the swift kick in the ribs. Use your observations to develop your own escalating series of rewards and discouragements that is based on equine behavior, and you will know that the horse is probably going to understand your 'horse language' easier.

When the horse does something 'bad', use the escalating series of steps to discourage the behavior - a minor transgression gets a minor discouragement, but a major transgression gets a major discouragement. My basic series is 1) growl, 2) Look, 3) poke in the neck 4) thump or kick in the ribs. Many people would say that striking or kicking the horse is an absolute no-no, but as far as I'm concerned another horse would do it (and with much more force than I could ever muster), so it's okay, as long as it is used appropriately.

For me discouraging is most often a simple deep growl, and maybe a "Look" (that annoyed mare giving an upstart colt the evil eye, ears flat back, eyes glaring, jaw tight, "I'm gonna GET you if you pull that again Sunshine"

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look works well). If it goes beyond that, I'll maybe do a few minutes of ground work to re-create communication, trust and respect. I'll only get tough on a horse if he actively tries to take me out - attempts to kick, bite, stomp or squish get an immediate thump or kick back, just like the grumpy mare would do. Mostly it's just one strike, then time out for both of us and start again.

It is always the same steps, always for the same behaviors, and ALWAYS right when the behavior occurs. If that doesn't have the desired effect, it's probably time to go back to the drawing board and reassess the situation, and maybe consider getting in someone more experienced to help. Timing is VERY important, as the horse will associate the discouragement (or the reward, for that matter) with whatever it was doing when you began discouraging. Leaving it even a few seconds, until the horse has put its hoof down, or relaxes, or whatever, just means you are punishing the horse for that behavior instead.



[This applies to ALL animals - they don't have a memory about 'being bad' - sorry to harp on about this but it is a pet peeve and I see people making mistakes all the time in this area.] If you can't discourage IMMEDIATELY, don't do it at all. If necessary, set up the situation so it happens again and discourage it then when you are prepared for it. The horse will catch on very quickly that when you growl he'd better try something else instead. After a big discouragement, let him know that everything is okay again—give the horse (and yourself) enough time to start to relax again and lower the energy, then re-introduce yourself as the nice skritchey person and start at the beginning. Move back a step and ask

for something the horse was successful with last time, so that he can experience getting it right, before again trying again.

If you can, make the 'bad' movement uncomfortable too. For example, if the horse wants to tense up and snatch the hoof away (and you know he knows how to pick up and hold the foot, because you've already been through the earlier steps), you can add pressure to the toe, 'locking' the joints into a flexed position. You need to be careful doing this with how much pressure you put on, as it can be very painful for the horse - the idea is to make tensing and pulling uncomfortable, and as soon as they relax you relax too and take the pressure off, and reward.

If you find he puts tension on the foot and holds it, try adjusting your pressure and see what he does - he may need a reminder that he can hold his foot up all by himself and relax. Remember, you don't want to hurt him so much he decides to do ANYTHING to get away from the scary monster that is trying to eat him. Picking up the Feet Set yourself up for success right from

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the start by making it as easy as possible for all concerned. Start out by making sure the horse is relaxed and happy in the area where you want to do the training. Is he concentrating on you, or is he busy looking for his mates?

Does he ignore the dogs and chickens going past, or is he about to widdle



himself in panic? If he isn't happy in that area, then don't even try doing something with the feet, it will probably backfire on you. It is better to work in a less ideal area where he is relaxed, than to pick the 'best' area but have to deal with a distracted upset horse.

Look at where he is positioned in the area - is he standing on a flat level area away from walls and fences? Does he have room to move around a bit and not get jammed against a fence or fall in a pot-hole? Next, check that the other feet are in a stable tripod position before asking for the hoof, so that he doesn't give it a go and fall flat on his nose and get upset. Later on once he's got the hang of picking the feet up, it can be useful to deliberately do it from a non-balanced position so that he learn how to get into balance himself.

If the horse isn't actively trying to kill you when you go to touch the lower legs, you can start right in. If he has a 'thing' about even having the legs handled (or the rest of his body), you need to back up a step and work on that first, of course. I like horses to be calm and happy to have the legs rubbed all over, without moving their feet about, BEFORE I teach them to pick up their feet. This way, the horse learns to pick up the feet only when specifically asked, and this helps avoid confusion when you want the feet to remain on the ground (e.g. for grooming or bandaging). When the horse is calm and relaxed, run your hand down the leg and lightly give the cue you use to ask for the leg to be picked up.

Various common cues include a little pressure on the fetlock or pastern, lightly tweaking the chestnut, and/or a voice cue. If you don't get some reaction, gradually increase the pressure (press harder, tweak more) - don't let the pressure off until the horse takes his weight off the foot. The key is to be absolutely consistent (this goes with anything you do) - always use the same cue the same way. All you want right at the beginning when the horse is learning from scratch is to relax the weight off the leg, and maybe rock the foot forward so it is resting on the toe. Immediately reward the horse with a nice skritch and / or friendly voice. The idea is that the horse learns to gently move the weight off the hoof, still keep in balance, and ENJOY it. Once the horse is happy and relaxed about removing his weight off the hoof, lift it a little bit (only a couple of inches), forward and up under his body for hind feet, and back and under the body for front feet. Again, little movements, slowly, are best. The idea is that the horse learns to let YOU lift / guide the hoof with a little assistance from them, not have them snatch the foot up as soon as they feel pressure which is a 'withdrawing from a predator' movement. Constant rewarding for little improvements will tell the horse "Yes, this

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is what I want, keep trying things like that". I usually use a little reward for a close approximation, and then a 'jackpot' for getting it right (lots of skritchies and a break). Don't try and get it perfect right from the start, because he has no understanding of what you're after. If a 'bad' behavior is displayed, use a discouragement, but then go back to the first step of making friends with the horse and showing that you aren't there to eat him.

Sometimes you'll get a combination of good and not-so-good behaviors, like holding the foot up nicely but hopping around in a circle on the other three feet - just wait until the undesired behavior stops, then reward him for that.



Or, just start again, in a situation where it is difficult for the other behavior to happen (e.g. close to a fence so he can't just move away).

Gradually increase the range of movement, forward, up, in, out, and the

length of time held. If the horse starts to resist, don't try to force the movement - don't pull against them any more than necessary, just stop in the position you were in and wait

for them to relax, then reward them for that and try again. Remember that many horses find it harder to have the front leg moved forward, and hind leg moved backwards, so be gentle and take it in slow steps. I like the horse to rest the hoof with a light pressure in my hand, not leaning on me, but it is up to you as to what you ask and reward for.

Remember though that a foal leaning on you isn't too bad, but when he grows up it might be a lot less comfortable for you and he won't understand why you suddenly don't want him to do it any more.

Once the horse is relaxed with you handling the feet, start to include things that you know are going to happen to the feet - picking out, light tapping with the pick, brushing dirt off, etc. Get the horse used to you moving about a bit, changing your hold on the leg, etc. If possible, get some other people to also pick up the feet so he learns that all humans are allowed to do it, not just you. reacts 'badly' when you try to pick it up, you might like to use a long soft lead rope looped behind the pastern instead of your hand so you are out of the firing range, and then start from there, again rewarding, ignoring or discouraging as is appropriate. If you're retraining a badly trained / abused horse, always be aware that something could set off old memories (sights, smells, sounds), or that the horse might not trust other people, and revert to the old 'bad' behavior at unexpected times even after it is seemingly retrained.

If he does well for a while and then starts to act up, it's time to end the session. Just give him a few seconds to gather himself, ask for something easy, and give him a big reward for getting it right, then put him out for the day. Next time he'll have assimilated today's learning and you'll probably find that he's learnt much more than you realized. It doesn't take long for the horse to



realize that you are a nice person who doesn't want to eat him, and that letting you have the hoof will result in a reward. I find teaching all this usually takes less than 20 minutes for all four feet on a horse that is relaxed from the beginning. I've taught 50+ weanlings/yearlings this way, along with a few older horses (including a couple of big 5 yrs + geldings who did think I wanted to eat them and were determined to kill me before I did), safely for me and them. My heart almost burst when 5 year old, 17 hh Cruise's hind hoof went past my ear while I was standing upright beside his shoulder, but after 40 minutes I was trimming his hinds like he'd been doing it since foal hood, and he never 'put a foot wrong' for hoof handling again. After training, picking up feet should be easy, provided you don't have other problems like pain, or another horse zooming past, or a paddock mate trying to pull your horse off his feet, or ... If you have been through this sort of training, or know from previous experience that the horse knows how to pick up its feet, and the horse later on begins to 'misbehave', look for non-training related issues (pain, outside situations) that could be causing the problem, as well as training issues. Never assume that he is 'just being bad' - he is trying to tell you something, be it 'I can't see my friend and I'm worried' or 'something really interesting/scary is going on over there' or 'that hurts' or 'I'm scared, I don't trust you' or ....



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