

Making Life A TTouch Easier....

Catching your horse

By Robyn Hood

Have you ever had a horse who you couldn't get near in the pasture? Or one who would come over, take a treat and turn and run, or simply keep moving just enough to stay out of reach? This is a problem many people have to deal with, at some time or another. There are various reasons horses may not want to be caught including fear of people, not wanting to go into their stalls when the grass and fresh air are the alternative or being apprehensive of what might be done with them once they are caught.

I have imported many horses from Iceland. Commonly in Iceland, when they want to catch one horse, they chase the entire herd into a small pen and as quietly as possible corner the one they want to catch. At this point the horse usually has his head in a corner and the handler quietly touches the horse's hindquarters and moves forward on the horse's body to the head. Once most horses realize they are trapped they simply stand still for the halter.

Needless to say the first thing we do when the horses arrive is teach them to be caught and usually walk up to us. With most horses we are able to achieve this in just a few days. We normally start with the horses in a paddock – the size depends on the number of horses – but if there is one horse that is particularly difficult to catch we will have him in an area where we can let him walk into a smaller pen or stall before catching.

Some of the exercises we use:

- ⇒ Walk up to the horse, give him a treat and walk away.
- ⇒ Use TTouches to change the horse's perspective of people – mouth work and work on the face is very effective in changing the hard to catch horse
- ⇒ Lead the horses without a halter – see free-work article
- ⇒ Clicker training for those horses that are really difficult to catch.

Approaching a horse:

When approaching a horse, some people suggest, to never look at the horse. I find that while it is important to be non-threatening to a horse not making *any* eye contact does *not* work for me. As I walk towards a horse I generally approach the shoulder, rather than the head, and will often stop and use some "calming signals" such as looking away or licking my lips or blinking. With a horse that is difficult to catch I find that as soon as he returns one of these signs I know it is okay to walk up to him. At this point I will just give the horse a treat and walk away. I will do this several times in a day and then sometimes scratch the horse, give a treat and walk away. Be sure to 'picture' the horse standing, not running away.

Group circles:

At several clinics we have used the group to make either a

large circle around the horse or a half circle using a fence as the other part of the circle with the horse in the middle. We take turns passing a bucket from one person to another and have each person walk to the horse, offer a bite of food, and walk back to the group. Ideally the horse is able to stand and simply turn his head towards the food giver, rather than having to move his entire body to face the handler. We talk to the horse as we approach and do so moving towards the shoulder of the horse so he can see the person.

I have used the same exercise using a clicker and a target (for the horse to touch with his nose) and multiple people. Sometimes the horse gets a treat and sometimes just a scratch, or both. This really changes the expectation horses have about people approaching them.

Be sure to sometimes just catch the horse and bring him in for fun – TTouches or just to be groomed rather than always for work, the vet etc.

TTouches:

To improve the relationship with horses that are aloof, cautious or fearful of people using the TTouches can have an amazing influence on your horse. It not only improves your bond with the horse but also how the horse responds to people in general.

Touches to use: **Mouthwork**; **Raccoon** TTouches on the face; **Chimp** or **Llama** TTouches for those horses who are head or ear shy; forelock slides.



Photo 1: With one hand on the nosepiece of the halter use the other hand to start making tiny circles on the face. It may be necessary to start below the eyes and then gradually move up towards the forehead. Try using either the raccoon touch (with the fingertips) or the Clouded leopard touch (with the pads of the fingers) and starting at 6 on the clock make a single clockwise circle - 9:00 - 12:00 - 3:00 -7:00 - pause and release. The circle should move some skin rather than just rubbing across the hair. If your horse is sensitive to touch curl your fingers and use the

Chimp TTouch or turn your hand over and use the backs of your fingers or hand.

As you work the area between the eyes and the ears you will have an effect on the emotions of the horse. When he accepts this TTouch and starts to relax, lower his head, lick and chew you will be influencing the parasympathetic nervous system.



Photo 2: Using the side of your index finger and open thumb go into the mouth at the top of the gums. Run your fingers back and forth across the upper gums. Your other hand should be holding the side of the halter.

Work the bottom gums by lightly hooking your finger in the chin groove, to prevent your hand from being pulled into the mouth, and use your thumb to work back and forth on the gums.

If your horse has a dry mouth be sure and wet your hand before rubbing the gums so they don't become irritated and be sure to remove any large rings should you wear them.

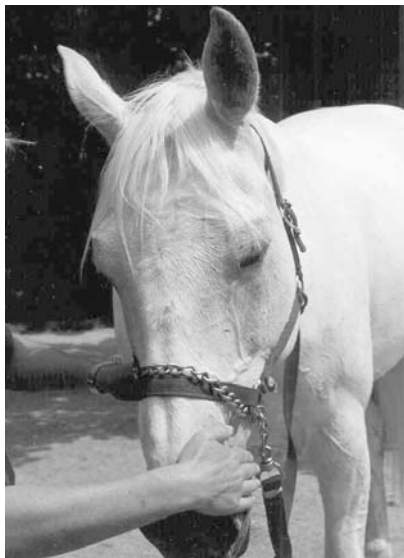


Photo 3: If your horse is defensive about having his mouth touched it may indicate emotional or physical tension. Start by working the outside of the muzzle. We often see major personality changes in horses once they accept having their mouth worked. Be sure to check your horse's teeth because if the teeth are floating or the horse is getting new teeth he may also be sensitive in the mouth.

Even if you can do 2-5 minutes a few times you will make a difference to your horse's behaviour.



Photo 4: Besides working these specific areas of the head, teaching a horse to lower his head from a hand on the top of the neck and one on the halter will help him

override the flight instinct. Most horses really appreciate the TTouch and gentle lifts along the crest.

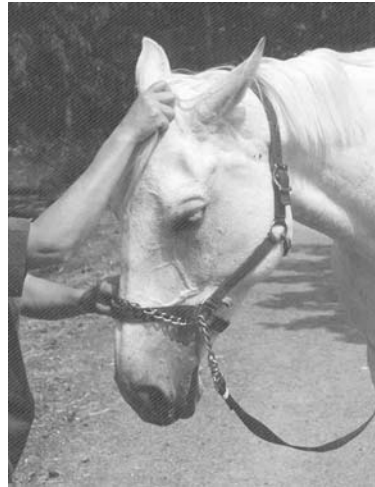


Photo 5: Pick up the forelock and make gentle circles followed by sliding down the hair. This is very relaxing to many horses. Touching the forehead is generally very acceptable to horses. If your horse objects to being touched around the TMJ (just about the eyes) or you notice that the musculing is different on one side of the forehead than the other it could be an imbalance in his teeth. Be

sure to have a trained dentist to check his teeth.

While some people think having a one-person horse is a good thing, consider how difficult that makes things for other people needing to handle your horse – the vet, farrier, etc, not to mention if your horse had to be sold. Since we are in the business of selling horses it is important for us that our horses trust humans in general and not just us.

Free-work

Teaching a horse to be lead without a halter is very helpful in making a horse easier to catch. (see following article).

Clicker training

If you have a horse that does not respond quickly to the above techniques clicker training is a great tool to add. I have used it with a few horses that had responded, but did not maintain easy catch-ability in a larger situation or were very difficult to halter.

I start by conditioning the horse to the clicker, which means simply having him associate the clicker with a pleasant experience. In a stall or pen I click and then immediately offer a small treat, or you can use a target (a object for a horse to touch and then click/treat-c/t). If the horse is nervous about the sound of the clicker you can muffle it in your pocket (there are also clickers available with variable loudness). I then start to raise the criteria to get a treat – ie the horse must stand quietly to be touched – c/t, or I may ask them to target/touch the lead rope – c/t. Basically it asks a horse to have more self-control in order to get what he wants. I also start random reinforcement fairly early. That means that sometimes when I click I will just scratch the horse or maybe just say 'good'. I find that the variable reinforcement helps reduce some of the 'mugging' that can happen early on, especially if the horse gets more food oriented when he is nervous.

Case history using a clicker:

Years ago when I first saw the clicker used with dogs I was not so keen on it. I did not like the fact that many people stopped touching their dogs and only used food. What I saw were a lot of dogs that would do anything for food and not much without it. However, I always like to re-look at things

and when Alexandra Kurland came out with her first book on Clicker Training horses I decided to try it on a very difficult mare. It definitely made a difference into our progress.

I now see clicker training as a great tool for both horse and human. I think it gives horses some sense of 'control' or influence over their lessons and makes them think more. Even if it did nothing for horses it causes people to think about what they want; to break learning into smaller steps; reward more often; and improve their timing.

Esther:

One of the most recent horses I used the clicker with was a beautiful 4-year-old Welsh Cob palomino mare at a course in England. Due to various circumstances Esther had pretty much run unhandled until she was 3 at which time she was quite wild. For the past year she had been kept in a stall with small turn out, simply because she was so flighty and reactive to being handled. Sharon, one of our course participants, had been doing some work with her for about a month and had made some progress but brought her to Tilley Farm for the TTEAM course to get more ideas since she was very difficult to lead and could not be touched behind her shoulder.

Esther was trailered to the course and was very good getting into the barn where there is a lot of activity. Although the mare really wanted to be friendly she was very difficult to halter and consequently had the halter left on most of the time. I noticed immediately she was very head shy. Sharon had said that she was very reactive to the wand, which is where I would generally have started. Once she was caught by the halter she did not try to get away but had to kind of be snuck up on to get the halter. This is where I thought the clicker would be a good tool so I briefly conditioned her to c/t, which was very quick as she loved food, and then started her targeting her lead rope instead of being afraid of it. This didn't take more than a short session. The next step was to c/t her for standing still when I touched her with the back of my hand on her face and then on her halter. I didn't want to have to grab for the halter which was the only way to catch her in the past.

This mare was very quick to learn this lesson. I led her in the stall using a target to get her to come forward and stop. Because she had not been turned out to run for a year I wanted to quickly get her outside, safely. By using the clicker we were able to do this the second day she was at the farm. We put her into the ménage, (outdoor arena) where there was grass around the outside. She ran around a bit and then went to eat the grass. I used the clicker to walk up to her c/t as she stood still, gave her a treat and then walked away. I did this several times and had her target her lead. We left her out for about 30 minutes and then caught her easily and took her back to the stall. From that day on we were able to turn her out into a grassy paddock and after a few days started having other people catch her.

While she was in the stall I haltered her using the rope for a halter as shown in the Freework article. That allowed me to

put the "rope" halter on her under her regular halter and then take off her nylon halter. I then re-haltered her several times using the clicker to "mark" the behaviour that I wanted, which was to keep her head quiet as I put on the halter.

When I took the halter off I discovered that one of the biggest reasons for her reactivity of being touched, haltered and led was because she was incredibly sore in the poll, one of the sorest and most reactive horses I have ever met. This was also the reason that she couldn't tolerate having either her forelock or mane touched in the beginning. The clicker allowed her to accept the TTouches on her neck and poll area within a few sessions.

For me the clicker was a much faster way to help Esther realize what we wanted instead of just reacting and we were then able to go on with the bodywrap and more leading and bodywork. It gave her a refocus and helped her stop and think.

Many people and horses have benefited from these exercises to make catching simply a matter of going to pasture and indicating you would like to bring your horse in. Ideally if you call your horse's name he/she will start to walk over or at the least respond by looking at you. If your horse should suddenly get hard to catch do some thinking. Have you changed anything about the way your horse is being worked; a new saddle; maybe the grass is really green or he has a new friend. This is another opportunity to learn to 'hear' what your horse has to say and strengthen your bond.

Interspecies Communication



Linda and Roland's Westie, Rayne getting acquainted with a visiting mongoose, named Ricky Ticky Tave by Roland. Ricky is a wild mongoose who sometimes comes to visit and has formed a fascinating friendship with Roland, after one short TTouch session cautiously applied as Ricky was helping himself to a drink of Rayne's water. Ricky doesn't come around enough to actually form an interspecies friendship like Rayne has with our neighbor's Siamese cat, Jazz, but Rayne is careful and quiet around Ricky.