

Basic Horsemanship Principles

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Catching a horse safely and correctly is not so simple. To catch a horse the correct way, you must know that a horse has keen sight and hearing and is sensitive to your touch.

Catching a horse means to come up to a horse and properly place the halter on the horse's head. Catching a horse safely involves three stages.

- **Organizing Stage:** getting the halter ready.
- **Approach Stage:** getting next to the horse.
- **Haltering Stage:** putting the halter on the horse (know the parts of the halter and leadrope).

Organizing Stage

Catching begins by getting the halter and leadrope ready prior to entering the stall, pasture or paddock where the horse is located. Get ready by:

1. Placing the unbuckled halter in the left hand with the crownpiece of the halter up.
2. Placing the end of the leadrope in the first two fingers of the left hand with the end of the leadrope up.

Approach Stage

This is the most important part of catching. If the horse is not approached calmly and confidently, it will be hard to catch. Approach the horse safely or you could get hurt. Remember, the horse can't see an object closer than 4 feet in front of its face or an object directly behind the hindquarters, commonly known as the blind spot. The horse is especially sensitive to touch around the ears, eyes and nose — so go calmly and slowly as you approach these areas. The approach is divided into five steps:

1. Walk up to the horse's left shoulder, making sure the horse sees you.
2. Firmly place your right hand with the leadrope on the horse's left shoulder.
3. Slide the leadrope over the neck until 1 or 2 feet of rope is hanging on the horse's right side.
4. Move the leadrope up the neck; then grasp both parts of the rope together with your right hand.
5. Rotate the rope in a clockwise direction (toward you) so the right hand and the end of the leadrope are at the top of the poll.

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Approach Safety Precautions

Never approach the horse:

- ▼ Frontally, at the head, because this is a sensitive area to touch and the horse can't see you clearly (blind spot).
- ▼ Directly from behind because the horse can't see you and kicking may result.
- ▼ At the hip because this will cause the horse to move forward resulting in not being able to see you.

Always speak to the horse to be certain it sees you and to reassure it.

Haltering Stage

The halter is in the left hand. The right hand is at the poll holding the leadrope to keep control of the horse. Move the halter under the horse's neck so the right hand can grab the crownpiece and place it over the poll. Then slide the noseband up and over the horse's nose. Finish by fastening the crownpiece to the buckle on the halter. Be sure the noseband of the halter is about 1 1/2 inches from the cheekbone.

Leading Position

It is important to lead a horse correctly to keep control of the horse and to avoid being run over or stepped on. To lead a horse, take a position on the left side of the horse, between the horse's head and shoulder. Have your right hand on the leadrope about 8 to 10 inches below the snap. Keep some slack in the leadrope so the horse can carry its head in a natural position. Your left hand holds the extra leadrope folded in a figure eight.

Haltering Safety Precautions

- ▼ Never wrap the leadrope (or bridle reins) around your hand, wrist or body.
- ▼ Always turn the horse to the right (away from you) so the horse won't step on you.
- ▼ Should the horse pull back suddenly, do not rush to the horse's head or grasp the halter. This will frighten the horse and may cause it to pull back and resist more.
- ▼ If the horse rears up, let go with the hand closest to halter, hold onto the folded end and wait for the horse to calm down. Return to your original position.

Leading

To move the horse forward, give a slight pull on the leadrope in a forward direction. At the same time, give a low clucking sound, then stop pulling as the horse steps forward. Using light pressure, continue pulling and releasing until the horse is moving steadily. The horse should walk or trot alongside you, not behind you. Do not let your horse lead you! To stop the horse, pull with the right hand and leadrope back toward the horse's chest, stop walking and say "whoa." Do not pull down on the leadrope as this pulls the horse's head down and out of position.

Tying

Once the horse is caught, tie the horse to something that is safe, secure and solid. Use the quick-release knot, and tie it so the knot is at least as high as the horse's withers. In all cases, the safety of your horse will depend on its willingness to stand when tied. Your first lessons in tying horses should be provided by your 4-H leader or another experienced handler.

Tying Safety Precautions

- ▼ Do not tie the horse to fence boards, wire fences, gates, wobbly or rotten posts, cars, machinery, etc.
- ▼ If a horse is pulling back on the leadrope while tied, approach to the side and back of the shoulder to urge the horse forward. Do not approach the front, which may cause the horse to pull back more ("blind spot").
- ▼ When the horse is tied, do not work around its head from the throatlatch forward. The head is very sensitive and the horse may pull back.
- ▼ Always tie with a halter and leadrope — **never** tie with bridle reins, rope or twine.

The Natural Cues

Cues are the signals by which the rider tells the horse what to do. They are signals the horse must be taught to understand and obey. These are natural cues – hands, legs, seat or weight and voice. No special equipment like whips or spurs is required.

Hands

The hands communicate the rider's commands to a well-trained horse by applying pressure or contact to the horse's mouth. The horse can respond in

several different ways, depending on the kind of pressure or contact. The hands can ask the horse to stop, help control the horse's speed or ask the horse to turn.

Riders may have heavy hands, passive hands or controlled hands.

- **Heavy hands** typically disturb the horse. This is usually the result of an unsteady seat or the fear that the horse will get out of control.
- **Passive hands** are light but ineffective. Passive hands belong to riders with a good balanced seat but little knowledge about riding a horse.
- **Controlled hands** are quiet but effective. These riders combine the use of hands and legs. Controlled hands get the desired results without upsetting the horse.

Legs

The rider's legs communicate motion to the horse. Squeezing with both lower legs (calves) will make the horse go forward. If the horse is properly trained, leg pressure, combined with proper contact on the horse's mouth, will produce the following types of movements:

- Sidepass (horse moves sideways)
- Haunch turn (horse pivots on its hindquarters)
- Forehand pivot (horse pivots on its forequarters)
- Bending (horse bends its body to the inside of a circle)

Seat (Weight)

Slight shifts in the rider's weight help the horse in going forward, backing or sidepassing. When the rider's weight shifts slightly forward, this helps the horse in moving forward. If the rider's weight shifts slightly back, this helps the horse in backing. It is important to learn how to sit naturally and softly and to use body movements in harmony with the movements of the horse. Remember to use only slight shifts in body movement, not exaggerated weight shifts that may throw the horse off balance.

Voice

The horse will also respond to voice cues such as "walk," "jog" (trot), "lope" (canter) and "whoa." It is important to use the voice quietly but firmly. The horse has a very good sense of hearing, so never yell or scream – the noise may frighten it.

Application of Cues

Always apply the lightest possible cue that will get the horse to respond. Do not jerk the horse's mouth or kick the horse's sides. The cues applied on a trained horse should be almost invisible to the onlooker but clear and definite to the horse. Each cue should include the complete harmony of the rider's hands, legs, seat and voice. For the best performance from the horse, all cues are given together, not each one by itself.

Walk

To get the horse to walk:

1. Maintain a slight amount of contact on the horse's mouth.
2. Squeeze with the calves of both legs.
3. Shift your body weight slightly forward.
4. Tell the horse to "walk."

Once the horse is walking:

1. Release the leg pressure.
2. Release a little of the pressure on the horse's mouth.

Jog or Trot

To get the horse to jog or trot:

1. Maintain a slight amount of contact on the horse's mouth.
2. Squeeze with the calves of both legs (use more pressure than you do for the walk).
3. Shift your body weight slightly forward.
4. Tell the horse to "jog" or "trot."

Once the horse is jogging (trotting):

1. Release the leg pressure.
2. Release a slight amount of pressure on the horse's mouth.

Lope or Canter

For the horse to lope or canter in balance, it must be in the correct lead. A horse that is circling to the left (counterclockwise) must be on the left lead. A horse circling to the right (clockwise) must be on the right lead.

To get the horse to lope or canter in the left lead:

1. Maintain a slight amount of contact on the horse's mouth.
2. Apply leg pressure with the right calf.
3. Shift your body weight slightly forward. Do not shift your weight to the left.
4. Tell the horse to "lope" or "canter."

To get the horse to lope or canter in the right lead:

1. Maintain a slight amount of contact on the horse's mouth.
2. Apply leg pressure with the left calf.
3. Shift your body weight slightly forward. Do not shift your weight to the right.
4. Tell the horse to "lope" or "canter."

Once the horse is loping (cantering):

1. Release the leg pressure.
2. Release a slight amount of pressure in the horse's mouth.