

"Ground Manners - Clip without a Twitch"

By Lynn Palm

Even though the weather may not be warm enough for clipping in some parts of the Country, it is the logical topic to follow the previous articles on grooming and bathing. Clipping does not have to be an ordeal for you or your horse. By using these step-by-step procedures, you can teach your horse to accept the procedure and gain his trust so that you never have to use a twitch as a restraint for clipping.

Like all basic ground training, the more time you take to gradually introduce this lesson, the more willing your horse will be to accept new things and trust you. Take your time and make sure that your horse accepts each step in the process before moving on to the next. Practice these lessons on the horse's near (left) side and off (right) side.

Clipping is a grooming procedure that is especially important to master if you will be showing your horse. We are asking the horse to accept the unnatural sound of the clipper and its vibrating touch on some of his most sensitive areas.

Introduction to Clippers

Clipping should be introduced in a stall or confined area where the smaller environment gives your horse security and you have more control of him. As with all basic ground training, your horse should be equipped with a properly fitting halter and longe line or lead rope for these lessons.

Give your horse an advantage by positioning him in the corner of the stall, facing one wall with his off side along the other. Stand in front of his left shoulder, about two feet away from him. Hold the clippers in your right hand while maintaining a loose contact on his longe or lead line. Control his head to keep him straight. If your horse becomes insecure



Twitch Free Clipping

Photo by Erin Winkowski

during this lesson, he will come toward you. To prevent this, use your left hand on the middle and side of his head to gently push his head away and back into a straight-line alignment.

When you are sure that his attention is on you, start the clippers to let him hear the noise, but do not approach him. Use a soft tone of voice to relax and reassure him if he is startled. Keep the clippers running and allow him to approach you to smell and investigate them.

Once he accepts the sound of the clippers, reposition him so that he is straight and slowly move towards his shoulder. With the clippers still running in your right hand, rotate your wrist and stroke the horse with the back of your hand. This will give him an indirect feeling of the clipper's vibration while you maintain contact with him. Start at his withers and stroke him from his topline down his legs, from his front to his back. If he moves, move with him. With the stall

wall in front of him he cannot go forward, but he may try backing up. If he backs up, move with him, keep the touch, and give the "whoa" command.

Watch your horse's responses and reassure him with your voice. If he gets nervous, stop stroking him, but keep the clippers running and just hold the side of your "clipper hand" on him. This will decrease the amount of vibrating area you have on contact with his body while still keeping the touch. Maintain this contact until he shows acceptance.

Heads Up

The bridle path (the top part of the mane behind the poll) is the first place to introduce clipping. This area is routinely clipped to make a neat, level place or "path" for the crownpiece of the halter or bridle. The amount of mane to clip away should be at least the

width of a bridle's crownpiece. It should be no longer than from the top of his poll to where the end of his ear would touch if it was folded down to his neck, or approximately five inches long.

Start by gently holding your hand on the horse's poll without the clippers to test his acceptance to being touched in this sensitive area. If he remains relaxed, take the clippers in your right hand and turn them on. Rotate your wrist so that the back of your hand, not the clippers, will be in direct contact with your horse. Slowly make contact with the horse's neck and move the back of your "clipper hand" up until it rests on his poll. Gently maintain this touch until he relaxes. At the same time, put your left hand on the bridge of your horse's nose to control him and keep his head straight.

When he relaxes, rotate your hand so bottom of the clippers (not the cutting blades) touches his poll. Let him get

accustomed to the sound and more direct feel of the clippers. When he accepts this, then clip a small section of his bridle path, keeping his head straight with your left hand. Once he accepts this step, continue clipping his entire bridle path.

A basic ground training reminder worth repeating: our goal is to teach the horse to accept whatever we want to do with him. Achieving this takes time. A horse will tell you when he accepts what you are teaching him by staying quiet and not fidgeting. His breathing will be quiet and relaxed. Hurrying through the basics will make him ignore commands, lose confidence in you, and take charge. A "quick fix" training approach only makes it harder for you and your horse in the long run.

Teach your horse to accept clipping other areas of his body, including the underside of his face, whiskers, muzzle, ears, and lower legs. If you plan to show, these areas must be neatly clipped. However, if your equine partner is a recreational horse, you do not need to clip his whiskers, muzzle, or legs. Only clip his bridle path to keep his mane and forelock from tangling in the halter or bridle. You can clip the outside of his ears to keep them looking neat, but don't clip the hair on the inside, as it protects his sensitive ears from flies.

Clipping the ears can be challenging and will take the most time. Practice using the clippers so you are familiar with them before moving on to the ears. Follow the same step-by-step procedures we discussed to introduce clipping the bridle path, only move up to his ears. The key is to follow the same progression: touch the ear with the back of your "clipper hand," then touch with the bottom of the clippers, then finally with the clipper blades. When clipping the ear, support it with one hand while operating the clippers with the other. Be very careful not prick his ears with the blades.

At any time if your horse resists and pulls away, you must move with him and keep touching the ear. If this is not done, it will take longer to teaching ear clipping or your horse may never accept it. Above all, be patient!

You may have to apply a twitch in the early training sessions because the ears are so sensitive, but if you incorporate the clippers into your daily training, you should be able to eliminate using the twitch very soon. Clipping advances your horse's basic ground training, and signals that your horse trusts and accepts you.

Need more help learning how to teach your horse to accept clipping? Let me show you how in my visual "Advancing Basic Training." Bring the popcorn because this 90-minute DVD is packed full of training techniques to help you teach your horse how to accept ground tying, bathing, clipping, brushing, and trailer loading.

Find this and other educational products at www.lynnpalm.com or call 800-503-2824.

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