

Working In Hand—*Teach Your Horse to Ground Tie*

By Lynn Palm

We have taught our horses to lead at the walk and trot, and how to set up. Now we add another important in-hand lesson—ground tying. A horse that ground ties will stand “set up” and balanced on all four feet. He will stay in this position on a very long loose line or with the lead hanging down, requiring little or no contact between himself and his handler.

Ground tying teaches the horse acceptance. He becomes better mannered for grooming, farrier work, bathing and other tasks that require him to stand still. If he moves around, this immediately shows that he is not accepting or respecting your commands.

Getting Started

For this lesson, you will need the basic ground training tack we have used for past in-hand work: a properly fitting halter with a six- to eight-foot lead, leg protection, and an in-hand whip. The lead should be attached by “threading” it over the nose or under the horse’s chin, then snapping it to the opposite side of the halter. Once the

horse is consistent with this lesson, the lead can be snapped to either side of the halter you are working on at the time.

Because the goal of this lesson is for the horse to learn to stand and stay with little or no direct contact with you, you need to teach the horse in gradual steps. There are two variables that must be incorporated into a ground tying lesson plan. It is important to change only one of these variables at a time to keep your horse from losing his attention or getting confused.

The first variable is the training location. Introduce the first ground-tying lesson in a very secure location, such as a stall. I recommend a training location sequence of starting in a stall, then moving to a barn aisle, and finally to a more open environment, such as an enclosed working area, small paddock or arena.

The second variable is the distance you move away from the horse when asking him to stand ground tied. The further you move away from him, the less secure he may become. Therefore it is very important that this step be gradual, too. When first

introducing this command, you may only be able to move three or four feet away from your horse before he becomes insecure or loses his focus. When you find a distance that allows him to stay focused and secure, keep this distance constant as you repeat the lesson through the sequence of training locations (stall, aisle way, paddock or arena).

Once the horse consistently responds to your command at that distance in each location, you can repeat the location sequence and slightly increase the distance you move away from him. Continue this progression until you can move at least 15 feet away from him, keeping little or no contact on the lead, in a paddock or arena. The final step is asking the horse to stand and stay ground tied in an open area with no contact on his lead.

If the horse becomes inconsistent in obeying your command to ground tie after making progress, he is telling you that he is not ready for the next step. Go back to a more secure environment and repeat the lesson where he did it well until he shows more consistency.

Learning to Ground Tie

Start by positioning your horse along the stall wall or fence to help keep him straight, but far enough away so you can walk between him and the wall or fence. Ask him to 'set up' or square up so that he is balanced on his four legs using the techniques I explained in earlier articles. If you are starting on the horse's near (left) side, your right hand holds the lead line shank approximately four to five inches from the horse. Your left hand holds the lead in an organized neat coil, together with the in-hand whip.

Once he is in position, ask him to "whoa." Loosen your contact on the line with your right hand so there is slack between you and the horse. Reinforce the command for him to stand by repeating "whoa" as needed, and gradually step away from him. Remember, you may only be able to move a few feet before he loses attention.

Only ask the horse to stand ground tied for a very short period of time, 15 seconds or less. Praise him if he obeys, and then do something else to keep his focus like asking him to pick up a hoof or do a basic in-hand maneuver. Ask him to ground tie again, for a short time, and go on to some other maneuver. Adding variety to this lesson will help your horse keep his attention on you.

Constantly evaluate your horse's reactions and notice his expression, including his eyes, ears, and even if his nostrils are active. If the horse remains relaxed, but his eyes and ears are always following you, he is focused on your command and will stand still. If he follows the lead line down to the ground with his nose or sniffs the ground, it is a clear sign that he has lost his attention on you and will move. Gently tap him underneath his chin with the toe of your boot to get his attention, bring his head back up, and come back to your command.

The horse may try to follow you as you step away from him. If he leans or steps toward you, either toss the line towards him to ask him to move away, or push the side of his head away to realign it with the rest of his body. If he walks toward you, put your hand up like a stop sign to block his forward movement. Reposition him, give the command "whoa," and repeat the lesson.

As he accepts this lesson and the distance you can move away from him increases, change your position and start moving around him. Evaluate his attentiveness as you move. His eyes and ears should be focused on you. Talk to him to keep his focus on you, give him a pet on his hip, and praise him if he stands still. Add a "whoa" if you need to reinforce your ground-tying command. If you find you need a longer line to keep enough slack as you progressively move further away from the horse, substitute a longe line for the lead.

It may take six to eight months of this progressive training for your horse to understand and learn to ground tie. He will tell you through his reactions and obedience to your requests when he is ready for the next step in the ground-tying training progression.

When teaching ground tying, if your horse walks forward or gets startled and moves, just let him. Because you are introducing this lesson in an enclosed area he will not get away from you. Simply bring him back to the spot where you gave the command by repositioning him. Do not circle him to bring him back to the spot. This only reinforces the idea that he will be allowed to walk away from what you are asking him to do. Ask him to set up and start again.

Ground tying is one of the many lessons covered in the section of my **Longevity Training Series** titled "Working In Hand." Visit www.lynnpalm.com to learn about this and other valuable training materials as well as our courses.

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