

"Ground Manners - Handling Your Horse's Feet"

By Lynn Palm

"Good manners matter!"

Your mother may have told you this countless times and guess what...she is right.

The fact is that manners also are important when it comes to horses. Our horses must have the good manners to allow us to safely and effectively work with them for daily grooming and health care maintenance. Good manners come through proper training and taking the time it requires.

With proper ground manners, routine-grooming procedures can be safe and pleasurable for both you and your horse. You should introduce these lessons to young horses as part of their basic ground training, and to older horses whose ground manners may need some re-schooling. Introduce these lessons in a safe, confined area such as the horse's stall or barn aisle. Your horse should be outfitted with a well fitting halter and a longe or lead rope.

Picking Up Your Horse's Feet

A horse must willingly let us pick up each of his feet for daily hoof care and routine blacksmith work. This is a good lesson to introduce in a stall and it easily can be incorporated into your basic ground training sessions.

Use the "come to me" command to position your horse so that his right side is alongside the stall wall. This will give you an advantage to keep him straight and give you an extra measure of control.

Stand parallel to your horse on his near (left) side facing his hindquarters. Hold the longe or lead in your left hand and maintain a loose contact throughout the maneuver, but keep his head straight. If he swings his head toward you, use your left hand on the side of his head to gently push it back into alignment.

Start by stroking your horse's neck with your right hand. As he accepts your touch, extend your stroke to his shoulder, then down his left front leg. Keep your body parallel to your horse and bend at the waist as you extend your touch. Your knees should be slightly bent to protect your back and help you move with your horse.

Gently push your left shoulder into his left shoulder to help him release the weight off his foreleg. Keep your touch on his leg, moving your hand down his leg. As he releases his weight, gently but firmly hold his leg between his pastern (located just below the fetlock joint which similar to our ankle) and his coronet band (the top of his hoof) to support his leg as he lifts his foot. Your contact on his shoulder and leg will help him to balance.

He may be unsteady when you first introduce this lesson. If he is, be ready to move with him. Hold his foot up for only a moment or so, then gently replace it on the ground. Keep your touch on his leg as you relax your support at his shoulder. Continue stroking him from his lower leg back up to his shoulder as you praise him.

Picking up the hind leg is a little more challenging because you still need to keep your horse straight even though you will be positioned further away from his head. Be precise in your position and aware of his reactions to stay safe in case he kicks.

Stand facing your horse's hindquarters with the lead in your left hand. Make sure you are positioned parallel to his hind leg. This is a safe zone. If you are too far forward, the horse can "cow kick" towards you with a forward kick. If you are too far back, the horse can get you off balance or kick backwards. Keep your eye on the horse at all times to evaluate his reactions.

Start by stroking him with your right hand along his back, on his barrel, under his belly, to his hip. When he accepts this contact, continue stroking him over his rump and down the back of his hind leg to

just above his hind fetlock joint. Be careful not to unknowingly tighten the tension on the lead or pull his head toward you as you reach with your right hand to stroke his hindquarters. Extend your left hand towards his head to keep the lead line loose.

Push your left shoulder against his hip to support him and encourage him to release his weight off his hind leg. Extend your touch and run your hand down his leg and gently, but firmly grasp it just above the fetlock joint as your horse lifts his leg. If your horse reacts by moving his hind leg more than you've asked for, move with him. Keep your contact as you lower his foot back to the ground. Stroke him back up his hind leg, to his rump, up to his back as you praise him.

Repeat the entire lesson on your horse's off (right) side. Remember to change your horse's position so his left side is against the stall wall.

These tips will make it easier to teach your horse to pick up his feet:

- 1) Keep your horse positioned straight so he can stay balanced;
- 2) Keep his lifted leg underneath his body; and
- 3) Keep your touch on the horse even if he pulls away or resists. If you keep your touch, the lesson will improve each time you practice. If you release the touch, your horse will learn that he can avoid what you are asking.

A horse that has mastered this lesson will be well-mannered for daily hoof care. This is especially important because it teaches the horse to stay relaxed, which will allow the blacksmith to do his work.

Teaching your horse basic training lessons is covered in "Advancing Basic Training," the second tape or disc in my 6-part **Longevity Series**. Learn more about building a partnership with your horse from the ground up at www.lynnpalm.com.