

Catch Me If You Can!

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Catching Your Horse - Wouldn't it be easier if your horse walked up to you?

Not knowing how to catch a horse keeps many horses locked up in small paddocks or stalls, or forces the horse to wear a halter all the time.

It's a beautiful, sunny Saturday afternoon. Your friends have arrived with their horse trailer to pick you and your horse up to go on a trail ride with the local Horse Club. You load your lunch and all your tack into the trailer and then grab the halter and go out to the pasture to catch your horse, but he decides he wants to play the "Catch Me If You Can" game today.

You chase him around until you're ready to drop. You try oats, hay and horse cookies, but each time you get close and try to lunge at him to catch him, he takes off running again. Finally, your friends decide to leave because they're going to be late for the trail ride start time. You sit down on a stump to shed a few tears of frustration, embarrassment and disappointment. As you sit there, your horse comes up to you and puts his head down next to yours, and now he lets you put the halter on!! Urgh-h-h-h!!!

The "Catch Me If You Can" game is one of the most frustrating ones for horse owners. More than that, it can even be dangerous for your horse if you need to catch him in an emergency situation.

Not knowing what to do about it probably keeps many a horse locked up in a small paddock or stall, or forces the horse to wear a halter all the time. This is an especially dangerous practice, as the halter can get hooked on something solid, and the horse can pull back and injure himself. Also, the halter is uncomfortable, and a too-tight halter will eventually make a permanent indentation in the horse's nose. However, chances are if you can't catch your horse without a halter, you probably won't be able to catch him with a halter either.

Sometimes horses play this game out of genuine fear or mistrust (for example, young foals, untouched wild horses or horses that have been abused by people), or sometimes it could be out of aggressiveness or disrespect. More often than not, it's just a game to horses, however, and they do it simply because they can. It doesn't matter what the reason for the behavior is, if you use the method outlined below, you can teach your horse to be caught, each and every time, even in dangerous, emergency situations.

So, what's a person to do?

You need to know how to respond to your horse's game with your own game. For the purpose of these sessions in training your horse to be caught, use a smaller paddock or pen, or even a round pen if you have one, so that you won't have to run so far. Start to approach your horse. Don't sneak up on him as if you are going to pounce on him like a hungry mountain lion, but walk assertively and with confidence. Don't "stare" at him intently as you approach, but be very aware of his movements and intentions. If your horse looks like he is getting ready to wheel around and take off, then quickly turn on your heel before he gets a chance to take a step (as if you forgot something at the house), and walk away from him back the way you came assertively and with confidence. Act as if you were never intending to catch him at all - - your plan all along was just to get to within 20 yards of him and then go back to the house.

As you walk away, keep an eye on him unobtrusively, and when you see that he no longer looks like he is thinking of running away, then turn back and start walking confidently towards him again. Then when he looks like he wants to run off, turn and walk off again before he gets a chance to take a step to run away. Anticipate him leaving and make sure you leave first. You may have to do this many times depending on how long your horse has been playing this game with you.

If you are doing it right and releasing the pressure at the correct time, you should be able to get closer and closer to your horse each time. Your horse may even start to follow you when you are walking away, curious as to what you are doing, and realizing that you are not a threat. Resist the impulse to turn around and try to grab him, however. Keep on playing this "approach/retreat" game until you get close enough to touch the horse. Keep on resisting your natural impulse to lunge at the horse and grab him. Instead, just walk up towards his shoulder and confidently stroke his neck briefly, and then walk away.

Keep on walking up to him, stroking him and then turning and walking away until he drops his head and you can tell by the look on his face that he is conceding the game to you, and will allow you to catch him and put the halter on (providing he has had a halter on before, of course). You can usually tell what the horse is thinking by his posture and head position. Eventually you should even be able to run up to the horse and he should stand stock still and wait for you to catch him.

Now, what do you do if your timing is a little off or if the horse is very frightened and he does actually take off while you are playing the "approach/retreat" game? Switch gears quickly and immediately and start chasing the horse, "kissing" to him to move and even twirling the lead rope towards his hip if he tries to stop. Make him think it was your idea after all for him to run away. Do what you have to do to keep him going, but don't keep after him when he is moving around the pen and doing what you want him to do. Put the rope

down, stop "kissing" and release all pressure on him as long as he keeps moving. Don't let him slow down or stop on his own, even if he looks at you with those big brown eyes and says, "Okay, okay, I'm ready to stop".

Depending on how fast and how wildly your horse is running around the pen, position your body further ahead in relation to the horse. If he is running at a medium speed, move ahead until your body is about even with his shoulder. If he is really careening around wildly, you may have to move ahead farther towards his nose. Don't say "Whoa!" or anything. Just stop your own body, and turn away from the horse into the center of the circle, rotating in the same direction in which you and the horse have been moving. Concentrate your focus intently on the horse's shoulder or slightly ahead of the shoulder if he isn't slowing down. Keep this position until the horse slows down and stops.

Then, as soon as his feet stop, turn and walk away. Ideally, the horse should come to a stop parallel with the fence, not with his nose facing out of the pen and his hind end facing in towards you. The longer it takes for the horse to stop, the longer should be his release from pressure (this is also unnatural for us, since we think that we should not reward him for taking so long to respond). Then start the process over again and continue on as you were before the horse moved off, walking towards his shoulder until you perceive that he is thinking about moving, and then, before he moves off, walk away.

If the horse is really running wildly and uncontrollably around the pen and you cannot get him to stop using the method described above, then you may have to focus on the nose and drive him into an outside turn with your finger or cue stick. The horse must stop briefly before he makes an outside turn (into the fence), and this will give him the idea to slow down and stop. Keep on getting him to do outside turns at shorter and shorter intervals, until he stops his feet. He may be facing outside the pen, with his butt towards you, particularly if he is very frightened or very disrespectful.

If this happens, work on getting him to stop parallel to the fence. Try moving him ahead just a little, by focusing on his hip and then moving up to focus on his shoulder. In round pen work, focusing on the nose turns the head and tells the horse to do an outside turn. Focusing back further towards the shoulder tells the horse to slow down or stop, and focusing on the hip tells the horse to move ahead. Focusing means to direct your focus in graduated steps, with your eyes, your body energy and also your body position itself.

Eventually, you will want your horse to turn his eyes, and his head in towards you before you release the pressure and walk away. Then you can ask a little more, step backwards a little, "kiss" to the horse until he takes a step into the center of the circle towards you before you release your cues.

Then you can build on that response until he will walk, trot or even canter right up to you and stand for you to put the halter on!! You won't have to miss any more trail rides if you work on these steps. Build up your horse's "Come to Me" response to whatever degree you wish, but you won't have to play the "Catch Me If You Can" game again if you play the game outlined here.

As with other horse training techniques, however, you must always play the game to win, and don't start unless you are committed to winning.