

Picking up Your Horses Feet Without Picking a Fight!

One of the daily tasks you'll have to perform on your horse is to pick out and clean his feet. This effort can be a pleasing "time together" for you and your horse, or it can be a frustrating, sometimes even dangerous, or painful (if he steps on you or kicks at you) experience. I'll tell you how to achieve the former and eliminate the latter, but first, we must understand why a horse might initially be reluctant to give you his feet.

Horses are prey animals with a flight response to danger, whether real or perceived. Their very survival depends on their ability to flee from a potential predator or dangerous situation. Horses, when confronted with something new, run away from it to a safe distance and then approach cautiously, a little at a time to make sure it isn't harmful. Once they know that they are safe, and that the object won't hurt them, then they can think about enjoying it in some way. I once left my disabled tractor in a paddock overnight. As I was leaving the horses were snorting and running away from it. However, when I returned in the morning, they had pulled all the rubber off the pedals, the plastic balls on the shift handles were gone, and they were playing soccer with the seat!

In contrast, when we are confronted with something new, we walk straight up to it, look at it, touch it, and either eat it, sit on it, or otherwise engage it. This difference in approach is most aptly reflected by the act of trying to pick up a horse's foot. We walk right up to him, grab his foot, and use pressure to try and pull it off the ground.

Think about this from the horse's perspective. Some predator, us, walks straight up to him and tries "to eat" his foot, tries to grab onto his foot so he can't get away, or tries to pull a foot out from under him, causing him to fall, which threatens his very life. As you can see, it's no wonder our horses are reluctant to yield to this task. However, if we act just a little bit more like a horse, we would turn this situation around in a very short amount of time.

Start by sacking out your horse with your hands all over his body. This term just means petting your horse and getting him used to your touch. This sacking out process builds trust. Make sure you can touch any part of the horse without his flinching or being scared. If you touch a sensitive spot use the approach and retreat method (as a horse would approaching the tractor in the field) until he's comfortable with your touch.

Now that he feels safe, you can pet down his front leg all the way to his hoof. Spend some time doing this so he's completely comfortable with your hands on his legs and feet. Now apply just a little pressure with your hand at the top of his leg (where it attaches to the body) until he'll shift his weight just slightly away from your push. When he does reward him with a release of the pressure and verbal praise to let him know he did what you wanted. When he'll take weight off the foot you want to pick up very time you ask, then you can try to pick up that foot.

Let's say we're asking for the left front foot. Press on the top of the horse's leg at his shoulder until he shifts his weight off the left foot. Now hold the horse's leg just above the knee with your left hand and try to lift up, but only about a half inch or so. As the foot comes off the ground, cup the hoof in your right hand and let it rest there for a few seconds before returning it to the ground gently. Repeat many times, praising him each time. Now put a cue (a signal for him to pick up the left foot) on it, by either lightly pinching the chestnut (the hairless bump on the inside of his knee) or tapping on it gently with your left hand until he picks up that foot. When he does, cup the foot with your right hand. Don't grab the foot, just cup it, and he won't fear being trapped. Repeat the same procedure on the right front foot using your right hand to pick up the leg and your left hand to cup the hoof.

Pick up the back feet using the same system. When picking up the left hind step in close to the horse by his flank area and apply pressure with your right hand on his hindquarters at the top of his leg until he shifts his weight. Then slip the same hand down to just below his hock and lift the foot gently off the ground. When he'll pick it up every time you ask, put your cue on it (let's say tapping with your hand just below the hock). When he lifts the foot, cup it in your left hand, clean or pick the hoof with your other hand, and place it back on the ground. Reverse the directions and repeat on the other side. Using this method will keep your horse quiet, trusting and your vet and Farrier will both thank you.

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