

GROOMING AND HANDLING OBJECTIVES:

If you groom properly and are sensitive to the horse, the process of being groomed should provide physical and social comfort to the horse and the training objectives are beneficial byproducts. Grooming should be an important element of the bonding process between horse and handler.

- Define terms associated with handling and grooming the horse.
- List safety factors to consider when around horses.
- List steps to take in physically approaching the horse & label the sensitive areas of the horse.
- Identify parts of the halter.
- List rules for tying the horse & tie a quick release knot..
- List reasons for grooming the horse.
- Identify grooming equipment.
- Halter a horse.
- Groom a horse.
- Wash a horse.

Why Grooming is Important

Much has been written and taught about round penning, working with a pole, working on lines and other methods to train horses. These are important skills, however they represent only part of the process of truly gentling a horse. Particularly with horses of a stand-offish nature, limiting your work to only these methods will often come up short of the results that you need.

Many horses can figure out pretty quickly how to deal with humans in the round pen or on a lead line. It is critical is for a horse to be able to relax while someone is haltering it, grooming it or even picking up and working on his foot. Yet constantly vets, farriers and others are asked to work on tense, reactive horses that may not be able to maintain their balance or may react violently when they reach their stress limits in a confined situation.

Getting into the Horse's Space:

Horses naturally don't like predators in their personal space. Additionally, a horse's space is generally off-limits to a lesser ranked horse unless an invitation is offered, usually in the form of the more dominant horse offering some reciprocal grooming. While to a wild horse, having a human rub a brush over a him is a foreign concept, most horses figure out pretty quickly that this is how those strange two legged creatures do their grooming and accept the process as not only something to tolerate, but something to appreciate.

Once that connection is made, the handler is coming from the more dominant space of initiating grooming which reinforces the much needed hierarchical relationship between handler and horse.

Making Contact with the Horse:

In the early going, making contact with a wild or unsocialized horse is a tenuous process at best. The horse, which does not have good depth perception, is programmed to avoid any movement which is threatening or unfamiliar. A tiny mistake on the handler's part and the horse is likely to react in flight. However for both practical and safety reasons we want the horse to be comfortable with our making contact anywhere without reacting by leaving, kicking, pawing or biting.

Once the horse accepts being groomed, the handler can retract the brush and make repeated contacts. When done correctly the horse should consider, rather than react to the contact and be conditioned to the concept that being touched by humans is not fundamentally a bad thing.

Expanding the Safe Zone:

Most horses have safe zones and forbidden zones. Safe zones may include the horse's face or shoulder. Forbidden zones may include flanks, belly, legs, ears, etc. These areas differ from horse to horse due to their character as well as their previous experiences.

Grooming provides a relatively low intensity way to expand into areas that are unsettling to the horse. The grooming process itself is relaxing and positive so it is mainly a matter of engaging in sensible "advance and retreat" into these areas until the horse is desensitized. As the "safe zone" expands, we proceed into those forbidden areas.

Learning About the Horse:

A horse is an emotion in physical form. He is what he feels. Therefore he also is what he fears. It's important that the handler safely discover all the scary physical elements of the horse. Also for the horse to lower his guard and be more tractable during training, he has to release all those scary areas to the handler. This requires the trainer to desensitize the horse so that he is confident, not only when being touched by the handler, but also when encountering other situations which could impact his emotional well being and self confidence.

Desired Outcome:

A horse should be comfortable with being touched all over, not only along the legs but in the thigh and belly areas. The horse must be desensitized to human touch. Similarly if the horse needs a vaccination, worming or an injury treated, he needs to be calm about being touched and handled in order to effectively deal with whatever it is that we have to do to him. The horse that is less guarding of areas on his body, allows for successful, stress free tacking of the horse.