

## Lesson 9: Handling Horses

**S**afety is the most important aspect of handling horses, for both the rider and the horse.

### Leading a Horse

When leading a horse, a handler should always walk to the left of the horse with the right hand about 12-18 inches from the horse's head. The remaining length of rope should be held in the left hand, but not coiled around the hand. To prevent rope burn, never let a rope slip through the hand.

Walk evenly with the horse's head—not in front of it or too far behind it. Always make sure that gates are fully open. When releasing a horse into a stall or field, go all the way inside before unhooking the halter. Never leave a halter on a horse that is left out in the field. Horses wearing halters in the field can get caught on things, causing injury or even death. Halters need to be refitted periodically on young animals. If adjustments are not made, strangulation could result.

### Lunging

Lunging is a method of exercising and training a horse. Lunging can be done anywhere, but is best done in a circular pen that is about 30 feet in diameter. It is an excellent method of training a young horse to walk, trot, canter, and stop on command. When lunging, always work the horse equally in both directions. Lunging can also be an excellent way to rehabilitate a horse that has been injured and cannot be ridden. It gives horses the exercise they need without stress.

### Mounting and Dismounting

Before mounting, make sure the saddle is in the correct position and that the saddle blanket has not slipped or bunched up. Also, check that the girth is tight. Before mounting a horse, first move it forward a few steps to make sure it is standing squarely. Most people mount from the left side. Insert the left foot in the stirrup, straightening the left leg while swinging the right leg over the horse's back. Dismounting is simply reversing the mounting process.

## Equitation

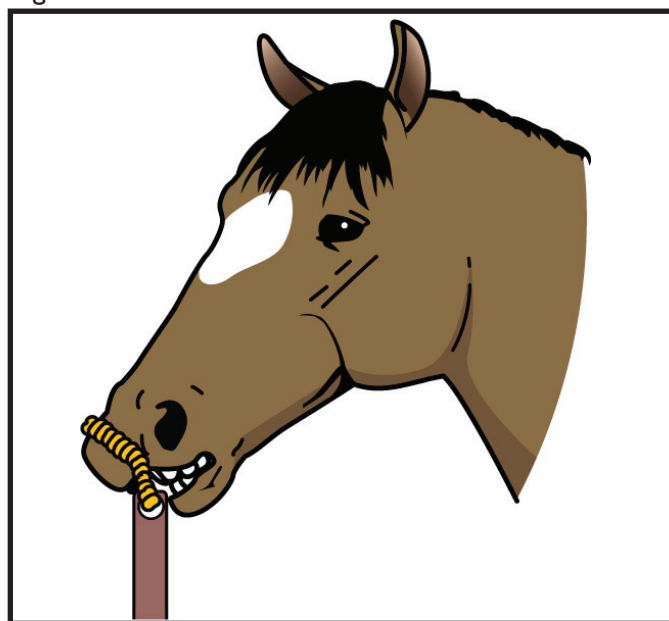
Equitation is the process of riding. There are several styles of riding; Western and English (hunter-jumper, hunt seat, racing, and dressage) are the most common. Most styles of riding are either Western or English. The English-type events contain more jumping and ballet-type movements than Western events.

## Restraints

It is important that a handler be able to properly restrain a horse when needed. The method of restraint will depend on the horse and its temperament. The simplest form of restraint is the halter. For most occasions, this will be all that is needed.

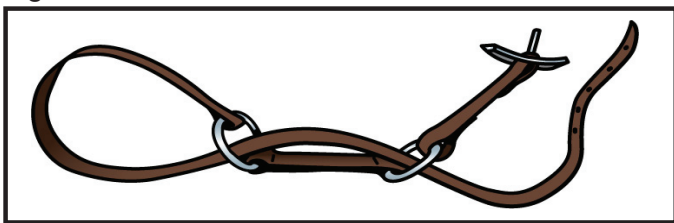
Occasionally, it becomes necessary to use something stronger. In this instance, grip the neck or twist an ear to restrain the animal. If this does not work, a mechanical device known as a twitch can be used. (See Figure 9.1.) A twitch can be either a loop of rope that is attached to the end of a wooden rod or a scissor-type device. Either type works about the same because they are put on the upper lip and pressure is applied. This pressure causes the horse's brain to release endorphins that act to calm the horse. Rubbing the upper gums also calms the horse. Other methods of restraining a horse are sidelines and hobbles. Sidelines keep one of the horse's feet off the

Figure 9.1 - Twitch



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Figure 9.2 - Hobbles



ground, while hobbles fit around the ankles and limit the speed an animal can walk. (See Figure 9.2.)

### Haltering

To catch and halter a horse, generally approach from its left side. Never approach directly from the front or from the rear because it cannot see well there. Always make the horse aware you are coming, never rush, and be confident. As you reach the horse, slip the lead rope around its neck to help restrain it, and then slip the halter around the neck and fasten it.

If the horse is hard to catch, keep the lead rope out of sight and keep the horse in a smaller area. Reward the horse after catching it, and remember that patience is a must.

Never tie the rope to yourself or allow yourself to become entangled. If the horse is startled, the handler could be dragged behind it. When tying a lead rope, it is important to tie to a secure object. The amount of freedom given to the horse's head is also critical. If too much freedom is given, the horse can get tangled in the rope. If too little slack is given, the horse could feel confined and react violently. (See Figure 9.3.)

### Grooming

Grooming is an important part of the horse's health and training. Grooming keeps parasites down, helps maintain coat condition, teaches the horse to stand patiently, and gives the handler an opportunity to check for injuries. The amount of time and the frequency of grooming depends on the conditions in which the horse is kept. A horse that is kept in a stable and is ridden a great deal will need grooming more frequently than one that is kept out in a pasture and ridden infrequently.

When washing a horse, the excess water can be removed with a sweat scraper. Use cool (not ice cold) water in the summer and warm water during cool weather. Then, brush the horse with the grain (the direction the hair lies). If needed, any hair around the bridle path would be clipped. (The bridle path is the area behind the ears where the strap of the bridle goes.) The bridle path should be kept clipped so the hair won't get tangled in the buckle of the bridle strap. If the weather is cool or insects are numerous, it might be necessary to put a blanket on the horse, especially if the horse is kept in a stable.

The mane and tail on some horses are braided for show. This also keeps the mane all on one side and out of the rider's way. If the mane or tail grows too long, it will get matted and will take several hours to undo. Grooming for show is similar to daily grooming except that more attention is given to fine details. Different people have different ways of preparing their horses for show. Grooming will also vary from breed to breed.

One other important thing that should be done while grooming is to pick out the hoofs. This will help prevent stone bruises and thrush.

### Safety Precautions for Trailering

The trailer should be in top condition with all running lights, latches, padding, and brakes in proper working order. The horse should have a strong, properly fitted halter, and lead rope. The horse should be well groomed with its legs wrapped for protection. Also, the tail should be wrapped to prevent it from being tangled by the wind. If the weather is cool, a blanket should be used to prevent the horse from getting too cold. The horse should be fed and watered two or three hours before loading. If going on a long trip, plans should be made to stop along the way to give the horse water and let it stretch its legs.

To load the horse, be careful when getting behind it. If it is resistant to loading, it might kick, which can injure a person severely. If needed, a rope can be tied around the hindquarters and pulled by the person leading the horse. If the trailer does not have a walk-through door at the front but only a side window, it is not advisable to lead the horse in. Instead, use a long rope and run it

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through the window to prevent getting crushed if the horse decides to go inside suddenly.

Before driving, double-check latches and prevent horses from putting their heads out of windows. A hay bag can be used to help keep the horse occupied while traveling and to give it some nourishment on a long trip. Tie the bag high enough to prevent leg tangling.

To unload a horse, use caution that the horse doesn't bolt out of the trailer. Always unload in a fenced-in area. Do not get between the horse and the trailer to avoid being pinned against the wall.

### Regulations Dealing with Horses

Whether traveling in or out of state, it is a good idea to call the Department of Agriculture to determine what quarantine regulations exist in that state. Some local regulations might also apply. For example, one regulation might require a negative Coggins blood test before being allowed to participate in a local saddle club show. It is also a good idea to have liability insurance. This will protect the horse's owner in case of an accident. An owner can contact an insurance representative to check on appropriate coverage.

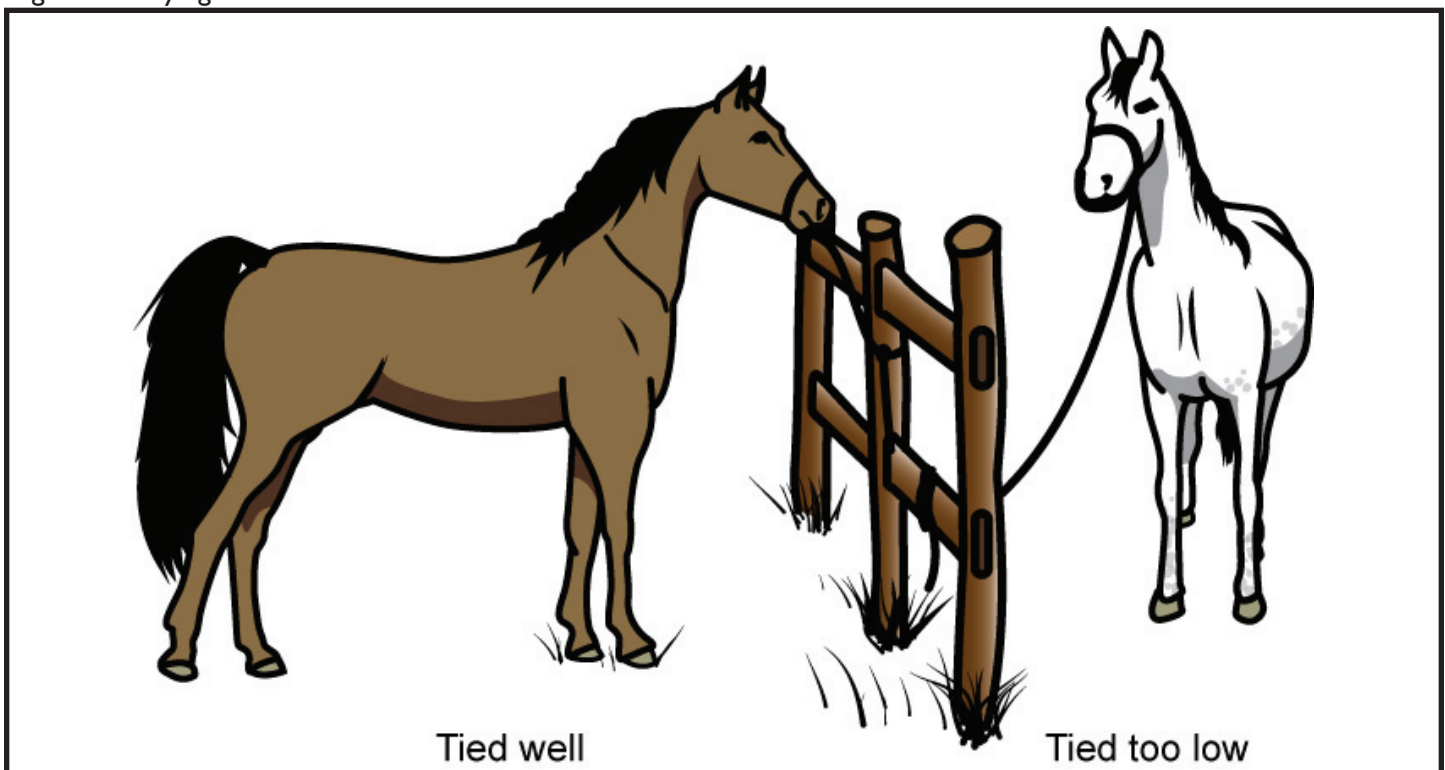
When buying a horse, it is a good idea to have a veterinarian give it a checkup. It is strongly advised to investigate regulations before going to a show or transporting the horse anywhere. Check with a local Extension agent, veterinarian, saddle club representative, and/or the Department of Agriculture for regulations. It can save a lot of time and money in the long run.

### Summary

Owning and handling horses can provide a great deal of enjoyment, but it requires thought, planning, and care. Without enough preparation, there will be many problems.

The next important thing to remember in order to have an enjoyable experience with a horse is **safety**. Nothing can substitute for following safe practices when handling a horse. Remember that horses are a great deal larger than people and can injure someone without meaning to. It is also important to remember that horses depend on their owners to provide them with proper care and a safe environment.

Figure 9.3 - Tying a Horse



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### Credits

Ensminger, M. Eugene. *Horses and Horsemanship*. 6th ed. Danville, IL: Interstate Publishers, Inc., 1990.

Hawcroft, Tim. *The Complete Book of Horse Care*. New York: Howell Book House, Inc., 1994.