

Preparing a Horse for Shoeing – by Wade Black

I do not feel that I am an expert in this field by any means. However, I have been around horses my whole life, and have been working with colts since I was very young. I am not saying that my way is the only way to do it, but I have found some things that have worked for me, and I have definitely found some things that did not work. If nothing else, maybe by not doing the things that didn't work for me, you can save yourself some headaches.

An old cowboy told my dad once, "The way you shoe a horse the first time will likely be the way he gets shod for the rest of his life." Meaning that if you take the time and get him good to shoe first, he will likely be good forever, but if you hurry and get in an argument the first time, an argument will come easy the next time.

Preparing a horse to shoe is a job that easily gets over looked, and the job that often gets left to the horse shoer. This poses a problem in many situations. It is the horseshoer's job to shoe the horse, not to train the horse. The horseshoer is getting paid by the job, not by the hour, so the sooner he gets the job done, the quicker he can get down the road and have an opportunity to make more money. Too often with young horses the handling of their feet has been avoided or neglected, and the shoer shows up on a tight schedule without the time to make it a good experience for the horse. First impressions are very important, and if the experience is good for the horse, they can be better the next time, but if the experience is bad for the horse, they can be worse the next time.

I feel it is the owner's job to get the horse ready to shoe, but if the owner has failed to do this, the horseshoer must. Bottom line, a horseshoer can not afford to spend all day working with a young horse preparing them to shoe, but if they can take a little extra time, the horse will be much better the next time they come back to shoe the horse.

There are 2 things that are important in preparing the horse to pick up a foot. First they need to stand still. If a horse is trying to move around, they are going to pull the foot away to travel. And secondly, the horse needs to be comfortable being touched all the way down the legs. If the horse is not comfortable with the person touching all around the legs inside and out, there is no reason for them to be any better after the foot is raised up. If the horse will allow a person to touch them all over their body, and the horse can stand still while being rubbed down to the coronet band, inside the gaskin and cannon bone, this can be a big help when the time comes to pick the feet up.

Most of the trouble we have with the horse is dealing with their self-preservation or defensiveness. If we can eliminate or minimize this issue, the horse and person can have a better experience and eliminate many issues that may arise. Once a person gets past the point of getting the horse comfortable, it is pretty much an issue of just getting the horse to transfer the weight off of the foot to the other 3 feet. With a rope or by hand you can apply pressure until the horse transfers weight as if they were to cock a hind leg to rest or a front foot that is sore. Once they learn to balance on the other 3 feet, taking 1 foot up and keeping it should not be a problem.

The sound of tools against the hoof or the feel of tools jarring the hoof may need an introduction, but most horses will gain confidence quickly and tolerate this if the experience has been good up to this point. If the horse has learned to stand on 3 legs patiently, rasping the foot is usually not a problem. However, when pounding in the nails the horse may feel a little bothered, and try to pull his foot away. It is important to prevent this from happening. When introducing the horse to the sound and feel of tools against his feet, be sure to start lightly and then work your way to pounding on the horse's hoof. If the horse is comfortable with sliding the hammer across the shoe or light taps on the hoof, then you can build to the point where you can pound the nails in.

Another thing that can help maintain the horse's confidence with picking the foot up would be to not hold the foot up too long. If the person is working with more than 1 foot at a time and rotates around, the person can be efficient with their time and the horse has more opportunities to prepare and give their feet. When shoeing a horse and especially a green colt, I will rotate around to all the feet as I am shoeing them, making sure that the horse does not have to keep a certain foot up for a prolonged period of time.

I have talked about building the horse's confidence, and helping the horse get past his self-preservation. I have also said that they need to trust you touching them on the legs and to stand comfortably on 3 legs. It is good to take your time doing this, but there are many instances when there is not enough time. Sometimes the horse will want to pull his foot away after it is picked up, and you don't have time to slowly build his confidence. The horse will generally pull his foot away for 2 reasons, the first being self-preservation. The horse does not feel safe or comfortable with you or in the surroundings and would like to have all his feet on the ground to maneuver away from trouble. The second reason is that the horse is not scared or bothered, but simply impatient. Most of the time this comes from having excess energy and in some horses they are just spoiled and are used to walking over the people around them and doing what they want.

It is very important that the horse does not get in a habit of pulling his foot away from you. Something I do quite regularly that takes very little time, and will help the horse to become better the next time you shoe him, is to tie a foot up. The horse needs to stand quietly and learn to stand on 3 legs. By hobbling a foot (putting a hobble around the pastern, picking the foot up and hobbling the foot to the forearm) they learn to stand on 3 legs, they get rid of excess energy, and they learn to become more accepting of their surroundings. It is a lot of work for a horse to travel on 3 legs, and after they have moved around a little, they will be much more willing to stand still.

In summary, we need to get the horse comfortable with our touch and willing to stand still. Then he must balance on the other 3 feet when we pick 1 foot up. It is important not to hold 1 foot up until the horse starts leaning or pulls away. Set the foot down before they take control.