

Catching a Horse

Determine why your horse runs from you, then work to reestablish your relationship.

By Marcia King

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The rider walks out to the pasture where five horses are grazing. Carrying a halter and lead rope, she leans against a rail and watches. The horses raise their heads, flicking their ears forward. After a few minutes, they amble over to her. She greets each one with pats, praise and ear scratches, then she places the halter on one, snaps on the lead, makes a kissing sound and moves forward; the horse obediently follows. This is the way it is — and should be — between a knowledgeable handler who understands equine behavior and a horse that is properly trained and trusting of his handler.

Most horses can be trained to allow a handler to catch them, and the job is much easier when catching and handling is done correctly when they are still foals. But even an older, difficult horse can be transformed from evasive runaway into acquiescent follower if the handler is willing to become a circumspective leader who takes the time to understand the horse.

What Makes Equus Run?

The first step to understanding the elusive horse is determining what drives the horse away from his handler.

Does the horse fear humans? "Horses have only two goals in life: to survive and to reproduce," says Monty Roberts, a noted horse trainer and animal behaviorist. "Certainly when they're difficult to catch, they're not thinking about reproduction; their only thought can be survival. Anything that is uncomfortable for them could then lead to their ultimate death, so they perceive you as a predator and act upon that instinct."

Is the horse afraid to leave the herd? "If horses are housed in a herd situation, their strongest instincts are to stay with the herd, whether the herd is inside the barn or consists of two or three buddies out in the pasture," says Carol A. Collyer, director of equine services at Cornell University's Equine Research Park. "When we take the horse away from the herd, where he's comfortable, that may create some anxiety because we're basically taking him away from where his instincts tell him it's safest to be."

Did the horse have a bad first experience with being caught? "A foal may never have been halter trained, then the veterinarian comes out at 6 weeks of age, and the horse is caught for the first time," says Sharon Spier, DVM, associate professor and chief of equine field service at the University of California, Davis. "He gets wormed, vaccinated and restrained; that's a fearful experience for the foal and not an ideal first way to handle a horse. Those horses can then be difficult to catch, needle-shy and fearful because that's been their first experience with restraint."

Does the horse lack good training? Many horses run away because they've not been properly schooled to respond to a handler's commands.

Does the horse receive negative reinforcement? Clumsy handling, being put to work, or undergoing shots, worming or other unpleasant procedures every time the horse is apprehended reinforces his distrust of humans.

Does the horse receive inappropriate positive reinforcement? Some horses learn that if they evade their handlers, they're offered a bribe. Soon it becomes a game.

Although it may be impossible to figure out why a horse acts the way he does, it is helpful to know whether the cause is due to fear, insufficient training, handler error or a combination of all three.

Regardless, the second step in correcting runaway behavior is careful consideration of each cause and then making the appropriate adjustments toward a better partnership. This is done by establishing trust, reschooling in the basics and/or learning better handling techniques.

Restoring Trust

For a fearful horse, or one whose experiences after getting caught are primarily negative ones, the handler must gain the horse's trust and confidence. Restore the relationship by giving the horse positive experiences. Handle him without demanding anything from him. "Spend more time not catching him and taking him away," suggests Collyer, "but just catching and handling him, giving him a pleasant experience. In time he will associate you with the pleasant experiences as well as other experiences. Do something nice like grooming him, giving him a scratch, or just approaching him and handling him."

This method is also applied to the horse that's afraid to leave his buddies. "Accustom the horse to being taken out of the herd with a good experience," says Collyer. "Hopefully, the horse will soon develop enough confidence in you that he no longer sees you as a threat to his herding instinct."

Practice approaching the horse in a small enclosure, like a box stall, round pen or paddock. "If you can't catch your horse in a box stall, you're not going to be able to catch him in the field," notes Collyer. "Teaching them to allow you to approach and handle them, and giving them positive reinforcement, will help a lot when you start having to catch them in different situations. By establishing this relationship of being able to walk up to the horse, the horse should be able to relate to the experience no matter where he is turned loose."

Retraining

For the horse that chooses to ignore his handler's commands or that plays games in hopes of getting a bribe, retraining in the fundamentals should correct the problem. Because the goal of retraining the evasive horse is to create a horse that will listen and obey his handler, use tools that make it easier for the horse to understand: the longe line, body language and, if possible, a round pen.

Dr. Spier, who raises and trains dressage and trail horses, says, "If you don't have a round corral, use the longe line to teach him to come into you at whatever gait you select. Have him change direction. Instead of doing endless circles, train your horse to back up on the longe line, go through obstacles and over jumps. Ask him for different tasks, with plenty of praise and rest so he gets his mind concentrating on you." Commands learned on the longe line should soon transfer to the horse at liberty.

Work with the horse through body language. "Approach the horse with the idea that you don't want to catch him, that he ought to go away," says Roberts.

"When you push him away, you do it with shoulders square, your eyes on their eyes, and all your motions square. As they go away, they will communicate back to you when they're ready to renegotiate the deal. They do that with a series of four or five gestures — a position of their ears, eyes, shoulders, neck, tongue, lips, head. Once the conversation is complete about them wanting to return to you, then you go passive instead of aggressive: Don't look them in the eye." "Use your body language to send the horse out, then when the horse wants to stop, use your body language to draw him back in," adds Dr. Spier. "The horse will be naturally drawn in to you."

Round Pen Training

"The round pen is an ideal situation where you can use your body language to communicate with the horse," says Collyer. "You learn in the round pen how to ask your horse to go faster, slower, stop, turn, and to be alert to your body language. The same basic principles can be accomplished without a round pen, but a round pen makes it easier by taking away all the other man-made barriers that get in the way."

Teach your horse the meaning of "whoa." "A horse that is properly taught 'whoa' will probably stand still in any situation, as long as he's told 'whoa,'" says Collyer. "That's a really useful word."

Better Handling

Sometimes the problem with the elusive horse is not so much the horse as it is how the handler approaches or catches him. Don't approach a horse, especially a young or inexperienced one, in what may be perceived as a threatening manner. Says Collyer, who has to catch her share of the 80 to 100 client- and college-owned horses at Cornell's equine reproduction center, "Approaching in a frontal position with direct eye-to-eye contact is very predator-like, and the horse may turn and go away. If you approach the horse casually with a side-long glance, the horse may allow you to approach."

Sometimes squatting down arouses a horse's curiosity, drawing him into you.

Never chase a horse. You can't outrun him, and chasing may reinforce a fearful horse's instincts that your actions are predatory or aggressive. Walk him down instead. This usually works with a stubborn horse, Collyer says. "You continue to walk slowly after the horse. Eventually the horse knows what's going on and will tire of the game. Sometimes a stubborn horse, if you just walk quietly along with him, will just give up." But keep your cool; walking him down can take awhile.

Cornering a wise old horse in a paddock or field might be OK, but it could be dangerous with other types of horses. "A frightened or nervous horse without a lot of experience may run right over you to escape, because being trapped is not naturally comfortable for a horse," warns Collyer. "If he runs over you once, he'll probably try it again."

Use the buddy system. Go up to another approachable horse and scratch or pat him. Start walking him to the gate, and the reluctant horse may follow. Or, if the horses are buddies, walk the approachable horse over to the evasive one and see if you can transfer control from one horse to the other.

Erect a catch pen or small paddock by the pasture gate and gather the whole herd in there before cutting out the hard-to-catch horse. Explains Collyer, "He's probably going to follow his companions in, and then you have a much smaller area to deal with."

Think ahead. Don't turn your horse out in a large field 30 minutes before you're going to ride or before the veterinarian comes. "When he's all full of energy, you know he's not going to be ready to be caught for a couple of hours," says Collyer. "That sets up a bad situation, and if the horse refuses to be caught it reinforces bad behavior." Likewise, don't turn out a horse that has had very little handling into a large area without a catch pen or companions to use as lures.

Be Sensible and Sensitive

Never punish a horse once you've caught him. "Pulling him around on the halter, being very aggressive with him or whipping the horse tells him, 'Never let me catch you again,'" says Roberts.

Be sensitive to negative patterns. Part of the reason the horse may elude you is because the only time you fetch him is for work, so don't overdo retraining (or training) your horse. Play with him, do other exercises, go on trail rides, et cetera.

Always reward your horse with a pat or encouragement. Be wary of food rewards. "If we always use food as a bribe, there may be times when the horse is not hungry and the herd instinct is stronger than his desire to eat," says Collyer. In addition, attempting to lure one horse out of a herd by taking a bucket of grain into the area could be dangerous. "The horse you're trying to catch is probably not the No. 1 dominant horse," Collyer says. "If you go in there with feed, the other horses are going to be competing for the feed and, if anything, they're going to be chasing away the horse you want to catch. That puts the handler in the middle of a bunch of milling horses — a very precarious position."

Retraining the hard-to-catch horse may take a lot of time. Whether the horse has to overcome a fear response or go back to square one for training, there simply are no quick fixes. Each horse is also an individual; what works for one may not work so well for another. But if you take the time to understand what your horse's problem is, those fixes could last a lifetime.