

Train Your Horse to Pick Up a Foot

Step-by-step advice for teaching your horse to pick up a hoof.

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When a horse won't tolerate having his foot picked up, it's not some quirky behavioral issue that you should learn to live with. For the horse's own safety and his general well being, and the sanity of your farrier, he needs to get over this foot-phobia, right away.

Whenever you deal with behavioral issues like this, remember that some prior experience has caused your horse to act this way. Always rule out any health concerns that may be causing your horse to resist before proceeding with training.

Also, ask yourself if you're the right person to be training your horse. You must be confident and calm in order to be successful. Your horse already dislikes people fussing with his feet. Getting mad at him will only exacerbate the problem. Instead, show your horse that the dreaded thing—in this case, picking up his foot—really isn't so bad after all. Here's how.

Horses generally have two evasions to hoof handling: They either pretend to have a stone leg that can't possibly be lifted or they jerk a foot up quickly, only to smash it immediately back down, sometimes lurching forward in the process. To prevent this behavior, you'll need to first outfit your horse in a halter and lead. A knotted rope halter or a chain shank properly attached to a leather halter will provide added control. Next, ask a capable friend to hold your horse in a very wide aisle. Better yet, have your friend hold your horse facing in the corner of his stall where he can't bolt forward. (Both you and your friend should be wearing sturdy shoes or paddock boots, especially during this type of training, to protect yourselves from an inadvertent hoof misstep.)

Now, ask your horse to pick up a foot that's easy for him: Sometimes a horse will pick up one foot easily—a front leg, perhaps—but not allow a back leg to be lifted. Practice picking up the "easy" leg several times before you move on to the difficult one. Reward your horse every time he does this well.

There is one surefire trick that may really help you out: Pinch together the two sides of the chestnut on the leg you're trying to lift. Try this, and you'll find that your horse will most likely respond by lifting his foot. (I've asked many vets for a physiological explanation for this behavior, but no one seems to know why this works so well.)

You can also try shifting the horse's weight away from the leg you're trying to pick up by leaning against his shoulder. When you feel him lean away from you, pick up his foot. Gently pinching the lower tendon that runs along the back side of his leg as you try to lift the foot also helps.

When your horse picks his foot up, have your helper praise him effusively with pats, a soothing voice or a treat. Then, put the foot down gently and repeat. Don't ask the horse to hold the foot up for long at first.

If your horse tries to stomp his foot back down, you're going to have to be strong and not let go of that leg, however hard he tries to pull it away. (This is why your friend is there; if your horse can't move forward, he has less chance of pulling the leg away from you.) Just hold the foot for a short time, so the horse learns he can't jerk it away. Then, reward him and let him put his foot down.

If your horse kicks at you or becomes upset, you need to first bring him back to a relaxed state of mind. Again, be honest about your own ability. If you're not strong enough or quick enough to hang onto your horse's leg when he tries to pull it away from you, get a more experienced friend or trainer to work on this problem until your horse improves.

If your horse regularly tries to back away from you while you're picking up his foot, position him so his rear end faces the corner of his stall, or close the back doors of your barn and have your friend hold him in the aisle with his rear end facing the door so he can't escape.

You'll need to repeat these training sessions over and over until your horse understands that picking up his feet is part of everyday life. Over time you can gradually lengthen the amount of time you ask him to hold a foot up.

Once your horse seems truly relaxed about this whole process, you can begin lightly tapping on the bottom of his hoof, first with your knuckles, then eventually with a small hammer, to prepare him for the farrier. Even if you don't plan to shoe your horse, he'll still need his feet trimmed, so gradually introduce touching the hoof with a rasp until he tolerates this as well. (Your farrier might be willing to give you an old, dull rasp that you can use for training. He may even wish to work with you on this last step!)

Training problems like refusing to pick up a hoof can be avoided if foals are handled properly from a very young age. Mona Gardella, who runs a breeding and training farm in Hoffman, N.C., suggests picking up a foal's leg as early as a day or two after birth. Gently put a little pressure on the back of a foal's knee with your elbow as you grasp the fetlock; the baby should instantly lift his leg. Remember that a young foal has a tenuous sense of balance, so don't ask him to hold his foot high or for longer than a brief moment. Make sure to work with a youngster's front and back legs.

Getting your horse to pick up a hoof will become an easy routine as long as you are patient and spend the time to train him correctly.