

How to train your horse to be comfortable when hobbled

The practice of hobbling has been around since humans began riding horses. For some horsemen hobbling is as common and comfortable as putting on a halter. For others, hobbling a horse seems intimidating and maybe even dangerous. In this article I'll discuss the value of hobble breaking a horse and the procedures I use to teach this form of restraint.

Some may say, "I don't need to hobble break my horse. If I want my horse to stay put, I'll tie him up." That might be true. However, there are other benefits of hobbling you might not have considered. The number one reason is that it might one day save your horse's life. A horse's basic instinct of survival is to run away. If they feel caught by something such as a barbed wire fence, their instinct tells them to pull, jerk, and fight until they are free. If he has his foot stuck in a barbed wire fence, it could be disastrous. If your horse understands the concept of restraint and yielding to pressure rather than resisting and pulling against it, he just might survive the experience.

Horses that incessantly paw while tied can also benefit from hobbling. A hobbled horse can learn patience at the hitching rail and not paw a hole clear to China in the process. I've also observed busy, nervous horses anxiously pawing at the ground while tied to floats. They have torn off hub caps, dented trailers, and at times even hurt themselves. Putting on a set of hobbles often quiets everything down and defuses the situation. But remember - Never put hobbles on a horse until you know that your horse is adequately prepared and hobble broken beforehand.

This is how I do it:

I recommend that hobbling be introduced in a confined area such as a round yard, or in a paddock with soft ground which is my preferred environment. Good ground helps prevent burns and scrapes should the horse fall down on his knees during this training session. I also put support wraps on the horse's front legs to help prevent the hobbles from being abrasive should the horse struggle during the process.

Preparing your horse for hobbling beforehand can allow this experience to be less traumatic. It is recommended that you exercise your horse for a couple of hours so that the horse is ready to relax and have a feed. Placing a rope around each front foot and asking the horse to yield to pressure can be a great preparation exercise prior to introducing the hobbles. This is often a good indicator of how the horse will respond and or react to being restrained when hobbled. You can take a few minutes or even a few days preparing your horse with these preliminary exercises.

When putting hobbles on your horse, it is important to be aware that you do not put yourself in danger. Begin this process in the center of the arena (away from the perimeter panels) and stand along-side your horse in such a way as not to get hit or knocked over should your horse react negatively and struggle. Always place the first hobble strap on the leg furthest away from you. There is nothing worse than to be smacked by a hobble strap and chain just because your horse lifted their foot causing the hobble to swing around. Being hobbled for the first time can be scary for your horse. They could rear up and strike out. It's important that you stay in a safe position along-side and not in front of your horse.

Once the hobbles are on, I want my horse to feel the perimeters of his restraint. Keeping hold of the lead rope, I'll place my hands on his withers and rock my horse back and forth until he moves his feet feeling the confines of the hobbles. Once that is accomplished, I'll step away while still holding onto the lead rope. His natural inclination might be to follow. I'll raise my free hand (like a policeman stopping traffic) and say "whoa." This will be the cue to let my horse know that he should stand still rather than follow me. I then let him work it out for himself. If you are out in the paddock he will start eating and only notice the hobbles as he steps forward.

When first hobbled, horses react differently and with varying degrees. They might lunge forward, hop around, or fall down on their front knees. I'll continue to say "whoa" and wait for them to stop. When my horse gets quiet and stands still for a moment I'll walk up to him and begin rubbing him reassuringly. I will then step away again and repeat this process many times on both sides of my horse. At this point I might remove the hobbles and walk my horse around for a couple minutes and then hobble them again. I'll then repeat the same process. After two or three days of these hobbling lessons, a horse is well on his way to being hobble broken. This method is based on the first rule of horsemanship--'Belly will beat him every time'.

It's important to understand that hobbling a horse is not to be used as a method to keep your horse in one place in your absence. Horses can travel great distances while hobbled if they're so inclined. More than one back country rider has been left stranded when their hobbled horse was nowhere to be seen the following morning.

Hobbling is a great exercise and every horse can benefit from learning this training technique. If you or a trusted professional adds hobbling to your horse's repertoire, it just might save his life someday!