

## CATCH AND RELEASE

- ☐ *Catch horse in stall and pasture, with safe technique.*

**OBJECTIVE:** One of the most useful skills for your students to acquire, especially if they take mounted lessons, is **the ability to bring their horse out of the stall or pasture safely**. This is also the Red Level skill with the **highest degree of risk**, and the one that will likely take the most practice.

Students must be able to **read the horse's body language** and **conduct themselves safely in the horse's territory**, where they may be considered a part of the herd. They must **understand how their own body language can influence their horse**, approaching and positioning themselves accordingly. They must be **familiar enough with their equipment that they can handle it in a confident, organized manner**, with consideration for the horse. Eventually, they must master the intricacies of maneuvering the horse **through a stall door or pasture gate**—while this is a separate leading skill in the Red Level requirements, you'll likely be teaching it at the same time!

Whether it takes your student one lesson or twenty to become comfortable haltering the horse on their own, you will both reap the rewards when they are able to catch and turn out independently.

**CHECKING IT OFF:** If your students take mounted lessons, this is a skill that you may choose to teach in introductory classes, or practice on rainy days. While the Learning Levels do not **require** students in the **Horsemanship** program to demonstrate safe catching until Green Level (recognizing that many beginning riders are too young or small to safely handle a horse on their own), they should **practice** catching their horses under supervision at every available opportunity.

Catching a horse in a stall can be very different than removing it from its herd. Make sure to teach both scenarios thoroughly, and never assume that a student comfortable handling their horse in the barn will be equally confident and competent in an open field!

**You'll know they've got it:** if they can confidently approach the horse at the point of shoulder, place the rope over the horse's neck and considerately put on the halter, without fumbling equipment, demonstrating awareness of horse and environment throughout.

### LET'S TALK ABOUT IT:

*"What do you notice about the horse's ears? Posture? Facial expression? What does this tell you about his mood? Do you think you should walk up to him right now?"*

*"Do you think it's a good idea to close the stall door behind you? What about gates?"*

*"The halter can be fastened using the crownpiece or the snap at the throatlatch. Which method do you think is best for your horse? How can you hold the halter as you approach to make haltering easier?"*

*"What should you do if your horse runs away from you in the pasture?"*

THINK  
LIKE A  
HORSE!

## TWO-LEGGED HORSES

To a beginner rider, halters (like saddles, bridles and other items of tack) can initially look like an incomprehensible jumble of straps. Before they approach an actual horse, they need to figure out which end is up—we've all seen the long-suffering school horse with the crownpiece buckled under his chin!

When you first introduce students to the halter and lead rope, **label each piece of equipment**. These labels can contain the actual name of each part or say something along the lines of "The nose goes here!" If they only retain one piece of information, it should be that the lead rope fastens to the ring under the chin groove; this will help them reorient their halter when they drop or tangle it. (When, not if; this is almost a guarantee with beginners.)

Once they can tell their nosebands from their crownpieces, it's time to **practice holding the halter and rope** as they approach—a human, not a horse. Students may pair up, or in the event of a private or uneven lesson, you can volunteer to be a horse yourself. Have each student walk up to their "horse" at the shoulder, gently place the rope over the neck, and put the halter on so that the crownpiece rests on the volunteer's head. "Horses" should be quick to offer feedback if the student flips the crownpiece up too hard or sticks an elbow near their eye!

This exercise can be combined with leading and/or tying practice, and should be repeated until students have demonstrated ease with their equipment.



**On a rainy day...** this **horseless horse handling** can be combined with a hands-on lesson on catching and maneuvering a real horse. (Assuming you have indoor stalls, a covered round pen, or another suitable place to work out of the elements!) Begin by practicing haltering and leading techniques in the barn aisle, giving each student an opportunity to "graduate" to a live horse when ready.

## HOW WILL THEY HALTER?

To further confuse new students, there are technically **three different ways to fasten a halter**: by buckling the crownpiece, by sliding the crownpiece over the ears and closing the snap on the throatlatch, and by tying a rope halter. (We recommend always using some kind of breakaway function, so if you use nylon or rope halters on your lesson horses, consider tying to a loop of twine or breakaway ring.)

You probably have a preference, but since we like HorseSense students to learn to think rationally about their horse handling decisions (a skill that will hopefully save them from grief down the road!) we always try to **explain the pros and cons of each method**, and encourage students to choose with their individual horse in mind.

-  **Buckling the crownpiece:** Presents the halter in a non-threatening manner, necessary for horses who are ear-shy or raise their heads when handled near ears or eyes. Requires good organization of halter and rope. Vertically-challenged students may struggle to get crownpiece over poll without smacking the horse in the neck!
-  **Fastening the throatlatch:** Requires student to draw crownpiece gently over ears of a compliant horse. This method makes it much easier to carry and hang the halter, as the crownpiece is already fastened.
-  **Rope halters:** Teach the knot thoroughly before catching. (Tail of the crownpiece should run *behind the* loop, not above, with loose end pulled away from horse's eye.) Many students tie rope halters too loose and low; make sure throatlatch is drawn all the way up to the correct position, behind the horse's cheeks.

## READ THE ROOM

Catching and handling the horse should, of course, be taught *after* students have demonstrated an **understanding of basic horse safety**. You might choose to introduce this skill after the student has earned their checkmark for barn, pasture and arena safety. You might also find it easiest to include pasture safety in your lessons on catching. However you go about it, make sure you have already covered the basics: no yelling, no running or sudden movements; horses have blind spots; horses will spook/bite/kick if provoked!

Before asking your student to approach and halter a horse on their own, you should feel confident in their awareness of the horse's body cues. They need to be able to recognize the subtle signs of a horse preparing to turn away or spook; they should also be conscious of their own body position and the effect it has on the horse's behavior.

It is well worth having students **observe and study horse behavior** before sending them out into a herd. This can take the form of a field walk, with students staying close to you on a guided walk through the pasture. You could also turn a couple of horses out together in an accessible paddock, arena or round pen. Encourage students to watch how the horses interact with each other, how they communicate mood, and how they react to frightening stimuli.

**A skit can be a fun way to review equine body language, especially in a camp or another group setting.** Assign each student the persona of a horse: "The Moody Mare," "The Food Shark," "Low Man on the Totem Pole," etc. Create a non-verbal drama in which the horses must react to a variety of situations—including the bumbling human who walks in with a halter and does everything wrong!



## MAKING FRIENDS

Veteran school horses know exactly what they're in for when they see a timid child coming at them with a halter. Small wonder they can be prone to evasion in the pasture (especially those with pony genes!).

Have your students **practice walking up to the horse and making brief contact without haltering**. This undemanding interaction should include approaching, a friendly head rub, and a safe retreat—*maybe* a small food offering IF you use them while catching AND the horse can remain polite in the presence of treats. (Two big IFs when the horse lives in a herd. **If in doubt, leave the treats out!**) Emphasize that students must not expect to do anything else with the horse while it is unhaltered. **No petting, hugging, grooming or moving around the horse until it is safely tied!**

Approaching without intent should be practiced under your direct supervision, one student at a time. **Choose your horse(s) carefully for this.** Ideally, you want a quiet, low-key senior citizen who will forgive any mistakes made within his personal space. An outgoing, in-your-pocket type of horse might seem like a good candidate, but he can easily become pushy or start to do all the approaching on his own. Hostile or dominant horses need not apply.

It is never too early to start encouraging your students to think like a horse. This exercise is a great opportunity to discuss concepts such as approach and retreat, herd hierarchy, and qualities of effective leadership.



**For safety's sake, require students to wear their ASTM-SEI approved helmets during all of their horse handling—especially when interacting with a horse in the pasture.**

## ON AGAIN, OFF AGAIN

When your students are ready to practice catching and releasing an actual horse, **start small and work your way up.** Ideally, students should begin by catching the horse in a stall, then practice in a paddock, round pen or similar small turnout space before progressing to a big pasture. Remember that if you are leaving the enclosure, you will first need to teach **safe leading techniques**, with an emphasis on maneuvering the horse through doorways and gates.

If horses are tolerant and can be haltered multiple times without resentment, you can test students by performing a **catching and leading drill**. Have them start by catching the horse in the field and leading it to a smaller pen or paddock, where they can turn out and shut the gate. Then they can catch the horse in the paddock (perhaps fastening the halter in a different way), lead it into the stall, and turn it loose. After catching a third time (with a rope halter, if they need the practice) they can lead the horse to a suitable post and tie with a quick-release knot.



**All your early practice should ideally take place with easy, uncomplicated horses.** If you have a school horse that is difficult to catch, teach your students positive methods of dealing with this after they are skilled at approaching and haltering, or they may contribute to the unwanted behavior.

## PLAY IT SAFE

Aside from requiring an approved helmet and boots for all of your hands-on practice, there are a few ways in which you can **minimize the risk** involved in having your students approach a loose horse:

- 🐾 **Know your horses and trust your gut**, keeping in mind that even the safest old school horse will respond differently to a small or unconfident handler than it will respond to you. Wait to send your students out on their first solo horse-catching expedition until you are one-hundred percent confident in their ability to interact with the horse safely—even if it means weeks of walking out into the pasture with them.
- 🐾 **Watch out for intruders.** Frequently the greatest risk when catching in the pasture comes not from the lesson horse, but its herd mates. Any horse that likes to crowd the gate, tailgate a horse being led, or otherwise insert himself into the action should be **removed from the pasture, if possible**. Otherwise, be prepared to run interference, or ask a more experienced student to act as “law enforcement” while the lesson horse is caught.
- 🐾 **No Cookie Monsters.** While positive reinforcement can be a hugely helpful tool in training, it takes some experience and good judgment to use effectively. If a school horse absolutely cannot be caught without a food offering, make sure it is an approved **small treat that can be hidden** in a palm or pocket. Watch out for **plastic peppermint wrappers**, which inevitably will get dropped in the field. (Plus, a food shark type of horse can hear the crinkle of plastic from miles away!) Make sure students have practiced feeding a horse safely by hand, and that they understand the best timing of the offering - after securing the horse with the lead rope, **not** when ears are pinned or horse is otherwise hostile.
- 🐾 **Set an example.** Just as you should be mindful of your attire when working in the barn, check your own horse handling for careless habits. Even if your horse leads by a wisp of mane and loves belly scratches, save this interaction for private moments. **What a student sees, a student will do!**