



Horse Handling Mindfully

By Heidi J. Potter

It's time to groom and head off for your ride. It is often common practice to rush through this in order to get to the fun part—the riding! However, as we work around our horse it is important to remember that he is not in a hurry. He lives in the moment and isn't thinking about what's to come. If you are doing your job well, he is most likely enjoying the massaging and caressing that he is receiving. Along with enjoying each other's company, grooming serves as a great opportunity to check out the overall health and condition of your horse. Here are some tips to help ensure that the grooming process is enjoyable and productive.

1. When grooming the face be mindful of brushing dirt and hair in a direction away from the eyes. Cupping your hand over the eye while brushing above and around it works well.
2. Using one of the soft, flexible curry combs will allow you to curry the boney places, like the lower legs and face. The hard rubber curry combs can be too rough on these areas.
3. Be aware of the horse's reaction to how much pressure you are using on his body. If he is acting relaxed while you groom him it is safe to assume that your pressure is fine. If he is flinching or moving away from your touch it could be a sign that you may be going in too hard. Soften your pressure and see if that changes his reaction. Horses have different levels of skin sensitivity and tolerance to pressure. You may notice that this can even be breed-specific. It's important to develop an understanding for each horse's level of sensitivity and share that with all who groom him.
4. Use a conditioner and/or go slowly when grooming the mane and tail. Take the time to untangle knots by hand before using the comb or brush. They really do feel it when you pull their hair out.
5. Look for the "sweet spot". The horse will clearly tell you when you have hit it. They will often raise and twist their head, make faces and even move into the pressure. It's nice to spend a little extra time in those areas.
6. Be mindful when cleaning hooves. These creatures of flight are ever so trusting to allow us to tie them up and then lift their hoof. Let's respect the trust they are offering us and not rudely drop their hoof to the ground when we are done. Set it down gently and give them a pat to say "thanks".
7. Be concerned if your horse flinches quickly and/or collapses his body away from pressure while you are grooming. For example, if you are currying his back and it drops away from your touch. He could be telling you that his back is sore. There could be a variety of causes for such a reaction. Just know that you need to stop, investigate and possibly enlist the help of a veterinarian before deciding whether it is okay to ride or not. One of the leading causes for back pain and behavior issues is ill-fitting tack. I strongly recommend having an assessment of tack fit for all of your horses by a knowledgeable saddle fitter.

Horses become more relaxed when they know what to expect. Therefore, it is important to teach every student and horse handler how to work mindfully and in a consistent manner with each horse. In this way we can help to gain and keep the trust of our equine friends.