

Herd Bound Part 2: Alone Training

By Marie Hoffman

On Eagle's Wings Equine Center LLC
oewequinecenter.com Mariehorse@aol.com

Page 1 of 4

We know that it is much better for the horse to grow up and live with others of his own kind if at all possible. Most horse owners keep horses for recreation. To use the horse for our needs, we need the horse to be obedient and calm away from his herd mates. The goal in "Alone" training is to train the horse to have confidence when he is away from the herd, so he is obedient and happy.

The horse example I am using for this article is the type of horse that is very herd bound and has no confidence away from his equine friends. Not all horses are this difficult and need to go through all the steps. You will know what steps to try on your horse and if he is unable to cope just go back a step or so.

Horses are gregarious. They instinctively want company. They know that they are safest in a herd situation. To be left by the herd or wander off alone made them easy prey for the predators. All horses are born with this behavior pattern. I start to "alone" train the horses as foals when they are weaned. I feel this is the best time to teach them that they can be alone and safe. At this time they already are learning to have confidence without their dam. So I take it one step farther and let them learn confidence in themselves when they are totally alone.

I wean them in a stall where they are separated from all other horses. This only stresses them once. Instead of weaning them with a friend, then separating them later from their friend, which stresses them twice. This may seem harsh but it is much easier to teach these lessons to them at an earlier age than when they are older. They learn quicker and are more accepting of change when they are younger.

If they pace a wall or climb it, I will board up that wall so they can't see out. This usually stops their pacing and climbing. I have mats on my floors so pawing to dig their way out is not possible. I had one filly that used both hooves and dug like a dog. Even she gave up when she could not make any progress.

Usually in one to three days they settle down. At the end of a week or several days of staying calm, I turn them out daily with the other weaned weanlings. For several weeks they are brought back in again at night and separated from their friends. Then they just stay out with their friends to do some growing up.

The worst foals will carry on for two weeks at weaning. I will usually leave them alone for the first few days. If they are really frantic I leave them alone to figure things out. Some of these foals will take out their frustrations out on the human that came to visit. Some are in the instinctive state of flight or fight that they are not even aware the human is there, making it dangerous for the human handler.

If they are thinking enough for it to be safe with me in the stall, I will go in. This is when I can go into the stall and I am able gain their attention. I halter them and stroke them all over with the wand (a four foot stiff whip). I use my fingers to play on their tongue to get them to chew. The chewing activates the para-sympathetic system (the thinking state instead of the sympathetic nervous system instinctive states). Sometimes this helps to get them over being in their instinctive states of flight and fight. They soon realize they are not being harmed and they have food and water.

If the foal has been frantic, you will see a distinct change in the look of his eye when he goes from his instinctive state of flight into his thinking state of mind. Once you can recognize the difference of the look of his eye and posture, it will be very helpful for future training.

No training is learned while the horse is in his instinctive state of mind. A horse will respond but will have to be reminded each time out, when a horse was taught something in the instinctive state of mind. If the same thing was learned without fear or pain while the horse was in the para-sympathetic nervous system (thinking state), he will not need to be reminded how, when he is asked to perform again. Only when a horse is thinking and thus learning will he retain his lessons and perform them without retraining reminders.

An example is tying. Once the foals learn to move forward to halter pressure through a step by step learning process, they will tie easily and consistently well the rest of their life.

Herd Bound Part 2: Alone Training

By Marie Hoffman

On Eagle's Wings Equine Center LLC
oewequinecenter.com Mariehorse@aol.com

Page 2 of 4

I do not turn them out until they are resigned to stay in the stall and have given up trying to get out on their own. I know this by watching their behavior. The foal will stand quietly in his stall and eat his ration eagerly. Then they are turned out daily or they are left out all the time on the nicer days of winter.

I teach the newly weaned foals to tie while I clean the stalls. I wait until after they have settled down before I start their tying training. They need to be able to think, if they are pacing and crying for their dam, they are not thinking or ready to learn something new. I first use T.T.E.A.M. Taming the Tiger way of tying. I attach a long line to the side ring of their halter and slide that line around a post in their stall, then back through the lower middle ring of the halter. With this set up I can let the line out until the foal runs backwards into the wall. I never want them to learn they can pull. I use a tug and release on the line until I can get the foal to make any movement forward. Once the foal will move forward I let him rest a minute or so. Then I ask for one step at a time until the foal is back where I want him. I use T.T.E.A.M. Taming the Tiger until the foal moves easily forward from signals on the line.

Once they do this, I tie them with an elastic rope that will easily stretch if they pull. The elastic rope is tied at the top of the stall and is long enough to let the foals hit their rump on the back of the stall before they pull hard on the rope. Once they tie well, I will shorten up the elastic rope so it will not let them hit their rump on the wall. When I am confident the foals learned their tie lessons with the elastic rope by moving forward easily from halter pressure, only then I tie them with the regular rope. Gradually I increase the time they are tied until I can go into the barn tie all the weanlings before I clean all the stalls. Then they learn to stand for about an hour or so. Then I let them all go. Because the weanlings learned to tie while I cleaned their stall when they were weaned, all tie well as yearlings.

To continue the alone training as yearlings, I halter and tie each yearling before I turn any out. Then I rotate the order I turn them out. It is much harder for the horse to watch his buddies leave than it is to leave them. If the yearling is dancing, pawing, whining, or even rearing. I walk on by, but keep an eye on them. I do have a knife on hand in case any get a foot over the rope. So far none have. I tie well above their withers and with just enough rope to let them stand comfortably next to the wall. The walls are solid so the foal can't hurt himself in anyway. It is imperative that the yearling tie very well before this step of alone training is started. To use this method it is very important to have safe facilities. I tie them for two reasons. One reason is that it is easier to keep them out of the instinctive stages of flight (pacing and running around) and fight (pawing and kicking).

The other reason is that horses need to learn to stand quietly tied when other horses leave them at shows or trail rides. I find the earlier they learn this, the easier it is on the youngsters and the more accepting the young horses will be later in life. If you do not have a safe place to tie, use a stall that your foal can't hurt himself or escape. Instead of tying the foal, make sure he is in a safe stall and do the next steps. This way usually takes longer but is a better alternative to having the foal hurt himself or escape. Make sure the young horse can't get out. I had a yearling AQHA mare that accidentally broke down the front of her stall when she was learning to be alone. In that one time, she learned she was stronger than any stall front she could get her head over. For the rest of her life, if she was stalled she had to have a stall where she could not reach her head over the walls or door. If she could, she would calmly break down the stall when she wanted out. She had learned that she was stronger than the stalls.

If a yearling is carrying on, I wait until he stops for a few seconds. Only then will I go into the stall, if he is tied, I untie him. Then I make him stand a little more while I stroke him with the wand and use my fingers to make him work his mouth. I will do TTouches on his neck and around his ears. This activates the horse's para-sympathetic nervous system (his thinking state) One TTouch I like to use: standing slightly to the side and stroking the horse's ears. This activates many acupressure points and work around the base of the ear activates the para sympathetic nervous system (the thinking state in a horse).

Only when he will stand still and work his mouth will I lead him out. I make sure I give a distinct signal that I want the horse to move forward. I use a click of my tongue. Many horses are told when to stop but must guess what the signal is when they are to walk forward. It makes learning much easier if the signals the horse is to respond to are purposefully given by the handler. It is very important that the yearling work his mouth or chew before he is led out. His standing still for a few seconds does not tell me what nervous system he is in. He may not have come out of his sympathetic nervous system (instinctive state). If I lead him out without him being in his sympathetic nervous system (thinking state), he will not have learned that I wanted him to stand still, breathe and relax, before he is led out. When a horse is able work his mouth, he is thinking and

Herd Bound Part 2: Alone Training

By Marie Hoffman

On Eagle's Wings Equine Center LLC
oewequinecenter.com Mariehorse@aol.com

Page 3 of 4

learning. When I lead the horses out of their stalls I use the T.T.E.A.M. Elegant Elephant to keep them in the para-sympathetic thinking state of mind. Once I get them thinking, this leading position helps keep them thinking.

Soon the foals stop carrying on when they see me come back into the barn and stand quiet until I lead them out. Not much longer and they quit carrying on at all. This can happen in a few weeks, but it may take several months. It is well worth the trouble. Each foal is very different. Most take only a few times to learn what is expected, but some take much longer. The most important thing is that the horse is learning to think instead of react when he is away from his friends.

It doesn't take too long and the youngster learns what I expect of him and cooperates. All will stand quiet and some will even chew on their own when I go into their stalls to let them out.

I continue this periodically during the winter, whenever the weather is bad enough to bring them in the barn. Our weanlings coming yearlings stay out on the nicer winter nights in addition to being out all day.

The next step in their "alone" training is to bring the yearlings in and feed them one horse in the barn at a time. If I have other horses in the barn I use a stall where they can't see another horse. I tie them in a standing stall or regular stall. I like to use standing stalls because it also helps to teach them to stand while confined. It also helps when it comes time to back out of a trailer, because they have learned to back out of a smaller space. I bring the feed in with the yearling and feed him, then turn him right out after he is done. After a few times, I bring him in and in a few minutes feed him and delay a little turning him out. I gradually increase the time before and after until the yearling is alone in the barn for several hours.

Gradually I will leave him in the barn all day. If he does well and it usually only takes about 10 days or so, I will not work on this much more. I will rotate putting him in a standing stall or a box stall. I will occasionally bring one in and tie or leave it in the barn a while as a reminder that it can be safe while alone.

The next step in alone training is to take the each yearling for a trailer ride in our stock trailer. I will usually take an experienced horse with the first time but after that I trailer them alone. They usually are fine because of the previous training. As long as I own the horse, I will continue to take the horse away from his friends sporadically to help remind him he is fine without his friends.

The older horse that is very herd bound can be harder to retrain.

There are several management tips that can help. The first is to turn the horse out with a different group of horses, if possible. The next way is it to rotate the horse between the groups. This is not always possible but when it is, it helps the horses that want to form "a set in cement" bond with one particular horse. I have two geldings here that have been raised 12 of their 14 years on my farm. As young horses I needed to rotate their pens because one wanted to bond so close to the other it was impossible to get either to cooperate or concentrate when the owners wanted to work with them. After the age of 5 or so it was no longer necessary to swap their pens. Both had learned enough confidence to be worked alone. Both continue to be easily ridden and trailered alone. These two are together 24 hours a day in a pasture with a shelter.

If changing turnout pens is not possible make sure the horses that are strongly bonded are stalled where they can't see each other at night. This helps them learn they are safe when apart. I routinely change which stalls the horses are brought into. This helps them be more accepting of new surroundings. This step is preparing them to be calm at the show grounds or at the trail ride site. It also helps the horses that want too, from bonding too strongly to their neighbors.

Separate older horses where they can see their friends first. Once they have settled, gradually over several days move them further and further away. Use as many gradual steps and days as necessary. Move to the next step only once the horse is settled in the previous one. Older horses are bigger and able to do more damage to themselves and humans. I will go through all the steps with the older horses just as I do with the young horses.

In addition, I will add working them. I work them at first near their herd mates if they are not trained enough yet, to be easily controlled away from their buddies. If this is not possible I will tie a herd mate on the outside of the riding arena so the horse I am working can see him. As the horse becomes better trained, I will move the buddy further and further away, or if I was

Herd Bound Part 2: Alone Training

By Marie Hoffman

On Eagle's Wings Equine Center LLC
oewequinecenter.com Mariehorse@aol.com

Page 4 of 4

working near the buddies pen I will work the horse further and further away. When I work the horse I work near his friend and then work a little away, then near his buddy(s) again. I repeat this yo-yo type of session until the horses are able to be confident away from the safety of his herd or herd mate.

Training the horse in this way does not set up the scenario of the horse becoming upset because he is alone and scared. Then control becomes an issue, the rider trying to get the horse to be obedient and the horse trying to get back to his herd mates where he feels safe. If the rider uses force to keep the horse under control then the horse learns that he is now being hurt away from his herd. Now he feels he REALLY needs to get back where it is safe. The horses instinctively want to go back to his herd where he feels the safest.

If I find I am in a situation where the horse decides he has to get back to his herd, I will dismount and lead the horse in the elegant Elephant BEFORE the horse rears, bucks or carries on. I will lead the horse until he is calm. I stop him often, lower his head below his withers, lead regular speed and slow, and use my fingers in his mouth to ask him to work his mouth any chance I can. Once he is calm again I will mount and continue my work.

Alone training is well worth the trouble. I have found a few horses that only learn to be confident the time you have taken them away from the herd. For example, if you only take the horse away one half hour each time. He will become upset or worried in 45 min to an hour. If you have a horse like this, practice taking the horse away longer than you expect to normally need. I find this is truer in more horses in the beginning of their alone training. Over time their confidence was built from their many experiences of being alone. They do not "need" the herd because they feel safe alone or with their human handler no matter how long they are away.

Set your situation up to be successful. Go through all the steps. Be patient and persistent. Remember how you would feel if your safety were totally dependent on another and you were taken away from that security.

Let your horse be a horse when you are not with him and train your horse to be confident when he is with you alone. Your horse will be happier and so will you. In the process of "alone" training you may find a new awareness of communication with your horse too!