

Train Your Horse for Clipping

By Marie Hoffman

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A horse that will stand quietly for electric clippers is definitely a desirable thing. Clippers are much faster and produce a cleaner appearance than scissors. Most horses will not stand for clippers unless they have been trained to do so. The horse must learn to overcome the fear of the noise, the sight of them and the ticklish sensation of the clippers themselves.

When a handler has a problem clipping a horse it is a sign that the horse needs more training. A horse that came for me to train to clip, among other things, was a Quarter Horse bay gelding named Dream. This horse was so afraid of the noise of the clippers, just turning them on in the barn would make him want to try to get out of his stall and leave the area.

I started training him by taking the clippers to the farthest end of the barn and turning them on at feeding time. I made sure no matter how bad Dream wanted to escape he could not get out of the stall I put him in. The reason I started my lessons at feeding time is, when a horse is chewing it activates their para-sympathetic nervous system (the thinking state of mind). I did this for two weeks. At first he would go to the back of his stall and stand. Gradually his hunger overcame his fear and he would snatch at his grain. He would go back to where he was standing and chew it. Gradually he ate all his grain and I turned the clippers off.

I continued this until he did not act any different whether the clippers were on or not. It can take 30 to 50 times for a horse to accept or desensitize themselves to a stimulus. It took two weeks doing this exercise twice a day to accomplish this. I moved the clippers closer to his stall about 10 feet a day, always turning them on at feeding time. Dream gradually accepted them in the aisle outside his stall. My barn was 48 foot long. When he showed no reaction to whether the clippers were on or off, I would turn them on at other times during the day. He did not react as if he noticed them. This is the body language that I was looking for.

I moved him to a stall to where he could see me clip other horses, though a horse will not learn to clip this way. They will gain a higher level of acceptance by being close to a quiet horse that is being clipped. Using herd behavior, in this case the horse being clipped, can help calm the fearful horse. This quiet horse's body language told Dream that there is nothing to fear. My next step was to keep the quiet horse in the aisle and hold Dream in his stall. I had a helper available to give Dream a bite of oats when I turned on the clippers. I held them along my thigh where he could not see them. I kept the clippers running until he did not seem to notice them. The first day this is all we did.

The next session I repeated the situation and this time rubbed his shoulders with the clippers off. I then rubbed him all over. He was not afraid of the clippers themselves. He did not react at all when I rubbed him with them. Some horses do, and so time should be spent training the horse to accept the sight and feel of the clippers and cord.

I repeated having the helper give him a bite of grain, while I turned on the clippers out of sight by my leg. Dream stood fine, though he did tense up a little bit. He raised his head, tightened up his neck muscles and quit chewing for a few seconds. When I saw he was not going to panic I decided to leave the clippers on and wait until he started chewing again. Once he started chewing, I turned off the clippers and rubbed his shoulder with them. I stood right by his front leg and held him using a chain over his noseband of his halter. This is the safest position to be in if a horse is going to react to something.

I asked him to lower his head with the signal from the chain. He had learned this response to the signal from the chain previously. With his head lower than his withers he is also using his para-sympathetic nervous system. I had the helper give him a bite of oats and while he was chewing I calmly turned on the clippers again. This time he was fine, his head stayed low and he kept chewing calmly. The next step was to turn them on while they were still rubbing on his shoulders.

When I did this, he quit chewing and held his breath. I took a deep breath a few times to encourage him to breathe. I spoke to him in a toning kind of voice telling him it was ooooookkkkaaayyyy. He was just fffffiinnnnee. In a few minutes he started to chew the grain and I turned off the clippers. I ended this session

I would have turned them off instantly if he looked like he was going to panic. I did not want him to associate a panic response with the clippers so, I would turn them off long before that point. It is important to not accidentally teach the horse to do some body language that will make the "scary" clippers go away. It is equally important not to push their threshold of fear to the point they feel the need to panic and escape. Horses will only retain what you teach them when they are using their para-sympathetic nervous system (their thinking state).

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The next session was set up in the same manner with the horse in the aisle and Dream in the stall. I repeated the exact sequence of events from the day before. This time when I turned on the clippers, Dream kept chewing. I was able to move the clippers up and down his neck and forearm. If Dream tensed up at all I would move the clippers back to where he felt safe and his body language became more relaxed. Each day for the next several sessions, I would rub him with the clippers while turned off where I wanted eventually clip him. Then I would start at the shoulder and move the clippers toward the area gradually working toward his fetlocks, ears, muzzle and bridle path.

I was very pleased how well he did. It took about 10 more sessions in this situation before he felt safe enough to let me use the clippers all over. I did not clip him yet. Clipping causes a different sensation than just the vibration.

I also used a cool lube on the clippers, checking often to be sure they did not become hot. When you run the clippers a long time the blades can become very hot.

I moved him out in the aisle and repeated the procedure. It took only a few minutes during each of his grooming sessions. I gradually started to clip his fetlocks first, then his lower jaw. Then I clipped his bridle path. He stood just fine. The actual clipping did not bother him at all. He stood ground tied with his head held low of his own accord.

I introduced him to another type of clippers after a couple of weeks of using the original pair. New noise can bother some horses. Dream did not mind the new clippers.

Horses that are ticklish are actually much harder to train. They usually shake their heads when you try to clip them. You have to train their nervous system to accept the uncomfortable sensation. I use the same steps above only I take a lot more time getting the horse used to the sensation. I will increase the area rubbed little at a time. I will cut all the hair with scissors first. The shorter hair seems to tickle less. Make sure the hair is clean so it doesn't pull and that the clipper blades are very sharp. With some of these horses I will change clippers to find the one that bothers them less.

Patient persistence is the key. I will rub this type of horse for weeks with vibrating clippers. Then when that is absolutely no problem, I will rub them with the blades, being careful not to actually clip them. When the horse is very quiet with that I will clip where he tolerates it the best. Rubbing the blades everywhere else I will eventually clip. Gradually I will clip with firm pressure more and more of the area I want to clip.

One of the challenges is to keep the clippers on the horse when he shakes his head. I use approach and retreat. Hold them on his neck or jaw and move them toward where you want to clip. I watch his body language he will move his ears and posture to tell you he is becoming tickled by the clippers. I move up only to where I am challenging him to accept the clippers in a new spot. I retreat to where I know he will accept them BEFORE he shakes his head. This may be far from where I want to clip, but until he accepts the clippers on each spot closer, I will not be able to clip him where I want to.

I use a helper with grain and use the chain to keep the horse's head low the same as I did when the horse is afraid of the clipper noise. At NO time do I jerk on the chain or cause any pain to the horse.

Some horses are unable to tolerate the noise around their ears and these horses will not respond to training. Sometimes it helps to use cotton in their ears to deaden the noise. Cotton also helps keep the hair from falling down their ears. I will use the quietest clippers I can find for these horses.

Set your situation up to be successful. Decide to take twice the time I have indicated in this article so you have plenty of patience. Make sure you are in the mood to work with the horse for a long session and have no where to go or no one to demand your attention. Go through all the steps and if your horse is having trouble back up a step or two.

If your horse is still having trouble, take a good look at your body language. What are your expectations? Do you expect the session to be easy or difficult? Are you breathing deep slow breaths? Horses are very good at accommodating our expectations because of their sensitivity to the herd's (in this case your) body language indicating danger with new situations.

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Look at your clippers, are they sharp? Put them up to your cheek, are they hot or hurt in any way. I did have a pair once that shorted and was mildly shocking the horse. I couldn't figure out the problem until I tested them on my cheek.

For all your efforts your horse and you will develop a new level of communication and trust. Your horse will have a neater appearance too.

I strongly advise to clip only the fetlocks, jowl hair and bridle paths on horses that do not need to be clean shaven for shows. The hair on their muzzles and around their eyes does help them get along in the pasture. The hair in the ears is also of some help protecting the ears from the bugs.