

# Making Life a TTouch Easier ... Handling Your Horse's Feet

By Robyn Hood

Over the past few months numerous people have asked for advice about horses with problems picking up their feet for the farrier. Here is an example of a letter from the TTEAM email list.

*I help at a horse ranch near me and have been working with a horse there some of you gave me advise on Cherokee...he has made such improvement!!*

*He still has some issues with other people and getting his feet worked with is an ordeal. Today one of the trainers was working with him and Cherokee was getting very upset. I didn't agree with the methods the trainer was using to "Calm him down" ..I had to walk away. I was really disturbed...*

*They never did get his feet done as time ran out by the time he was settling down.*

*NOW...I need suggestions from those of you with experience in feet trimming etc.... What would you suggest I do with him before they attempt to do his feet again??? I want to make this a much more positive experience for him rather than a battle of the wills and dominance.*

Your farrier gets paid to trim or shoe your horse; it is not his job to train. It is difficult enough to nail a shoe on or trim a hoof level with a well-behaved horse, so wriggling, rearing, kicking or pulling away does not make for a happy farrier, holder or horse. Being a farrier is a hard job and if you get hurt with a difficult horse there goes your income. If you have a farrier who is patient and competent, treat him well.

Your horse needs to be prepared. There are many ways of using the TTEAM methods to help with hoof trimming. Consider why a horse may be difficult with picking up his feet. Poor balance is probably the number one reason. Taking a foot away from a horse by picking it up is very threatening to an animal whose first choice would be to leave if threatened. The belief that once the foot is lifted you must keep it up no matter what, just makes balancing more difficult and does not instill a feeling of 'safety' for the horse.

Nervous and many young horses are sensitive about even having their legs touched. This is apparent if a horse immediately picks his leg up if you touch it or brush it. When an animal is tense the Sympathetic Nervous System kicks in and the blood draws away from the legs to support the heart and lungs in preparation for flight – so picking up a foot at that time does not feel like a 'safe' thing to do.

One of the basic philosophies of TTEAM work is to "chunk" things down. Start by making sure you can stroke the horse's legs with the wand. It is safer for you and less threatening for the horse. Be sure that you are stroking firmly enough that

there is a slight bend in the wand to insure it is not 'tickling' the horse. It makes a difference if you stroke as you exhale rather than on an inhale and think of the movement of the wand as coming from your feet, through your body, rather than just your arm.

Be sure to start with the wand on an area of the horse's body where he feels safe, like the chest and down the front legs. Continue on to include the back of the front legs, the belly and then the hind legs. Use the 'hand-shake' approach rather than thinking of desensitization, this means that you just do a couple of strokes and either stop or move to another area rather than repeating the stroking 'until they put up with it'. This is an example of doing something for 'moments not minutes'.

When the horse is comfortable with the wand, stroke down the leg with the back of your hand/fingers using the Llama Touch. Horses who snatch their legs up when you stroke them with your hand are often nervous about the process. Change from stroking with the Llama or Chimp TTouch to doing light connected TTouches down the legs.

Once the horse is comfortable with the hand and keeps his feet on the ground, ask him to pick up a foot with an upward scratching motion at the top of the tendon just below the back of the knee. Be careful not to push your shoulder into the horse as this just triggers him to lean into you and put more weight on the leg. What you want is for the horse to be comfortable balancing on three legs.

Just ask for the hoof to lift, let it go down and tell him how good he is. The idea that "once you have the leg, don't let it go" is just ridiculous in my experience. Repeat this with every leg and then just start to hold the leg for moments longer each time. This is where the clicker can come in very handy to make the experience positive and in my experience can work very quickly.

I have found that if horses are very unbalanced (the main reason they have difficulty picking and holding up their feet) it is often easier for them to pick their hind feet up than the front. Since horses carries 60% of their weight on the front end it can be easier to pick up the hind legs.

## **TTouches:**

Using a variety of TTouches down the horse's leg will also help improve his confidence, circulation and balance. Besides connected TTouches (make a single 1 ¼ circle, pause and then slide down the leg an inch or so and repeat); Python Lifts, Octopus (see April 05 NL) and the Rainbow Touch down each leg are all beneficial. You can vary what you do depending on the day.

## **Preparing for the Farrier:**

Stroking with Wand  
Back of hand  
Bodyrope or wrap  
TTouches down legs  
Leg exercises  
Clicker Training  
Movement exercises – The  
Dance  
Taming The Tiger



### Python Lifts:

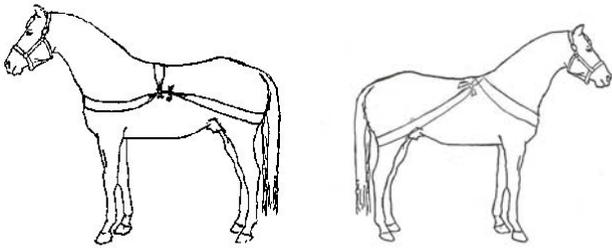
The open hand is placed around the leg with just enough pressure to gently support the tissue up about a 1/2", pause for a few seconds and then slowly carry the tissue to the starting point, maintaining the connection as you come down.

If your horse tenses or moves his leg lift less and use less pressure. You may even have to do a modified lift using the back of your fingers as it is less threatening.

**Coiled Python**— Make a circle with the Abalone or Lying Leopard with one hand and then do a Python lift with both hands as in the above directions.

### Bodywrap or rope:

A bodywrap or rope can help improve a horse's balance making it much easier for a horse to pick up his feet. We start foals with a bodyrope as it allows us to help balance the foal by holding the rope at the foal's withers.



**Drawings: Bodywrap** (2 elastic bandages or leg wraps) using a 'bridge' across the horse's back (left drawing), notice that it sits a bit higher around the hindquarters than the right drawing which is the Figure 8. If you use the **body rope** it would be in the Figure 8 configuration with the rope twisted several times at the withers and sit a bit lower, at the top of the gaskin, to allow the horse to move.

### Movement exercises:

Since balance is a big part of the horse being able to hold his hooves up, movement exercises like The Dance (page 19), the Labyrinth and pole work can help to improve it.

### Leg Exercises:

Hold the horse's tail in your outside hand and run the back of your inside hand down the leg. Once the horse is giving his foot for a few seconds, start using simple leg exercises by circling the hoof a couple of times in each direction in a small circle. Keep the leg close to his other leg, well under his body, and then put the hoof down. Repeat this exercise on the other side. Starting with short sessions of leg exercises goes a long way towards making trimming easier.



**Photo 1:** Pick up the hoof with one hand, keeping it at whatever height the horse offers. Circle a few times in each direction and then put the hoof down or rest the toe.

The same goes for the front legs, start the leg exercises with holding the hoof with your inside hand, just a couple of small circles, very close to the other front leg and then put the hoof down. Keeping his leg well under the horse's body helps release tension in the shoulders or hindquarters.

Once the horse is comfortable with picking up his feet for short periods of time you can start to ask for longer periods and introduce different aspects of the leg exercises which will help with the farrier by improving the horse's balance, coordination and freedom of movement.

A few days before the farrier comes ramp up your homework.



**Photo 2:** Pick up your horse's foot by stroking down the leg with the back of your hand. With your fingertips just below the back of the knee or just above the fetlock joint, apply an upward scratching pressure and then release. This signal teaches the horse to take his weight onto his other three legs and to rebalance to lift his foot. Avoid pushing your shoulder into your horses as it will trigger him to lean into you.

Support the fetlock joint with your inside hand and keep your forearm along

the tendon to prevent torquing the horse's knee. Your outside hand supports the hoof. Your thumb is on the heel and your fingers are around the hoof. Point the horse's toe toward the ground and support the fetlock joint. Your outside elbow can rest on your outside thigh so your legs do the work rather than your back. Your feet are pointed at about 45 degrees toward the horse to avoid twisting your body.

To help release your horse's shoulder support his forearm with your upper arm. Lift slightly with your upper arm and then circle the leg. You should notice that the horse's shoul-

der becomes freer as would be required for the farrier placing the horse's leg between his.



**Photo 3:** Circle the hoof around the point where it had rested on the ground. Use a horizontal motion like a helicopter propeller. The circle takes the hoof in toward the other leg, forward, to the outside and then back. With a young horse or one that is tight in the shoulders keep the circle very close to the other front leg, this will help release the shoulder more quickly.

The roundness of the circle is more important than its size. A small round circle is better than a large oval. If this exercise is difficult for your horse, make very small, quick circles, then put down the hoof. In a few lessons, without force, the leg will be much freer.



**Photo 4:** When your horse is well-balanced instead of just putting the hoof down, continue to circle the hoof as close to the ground as possible and tap the toe on the ground at several points of the circle. Rest the toe as shown, so the shoulder can release in a non-habitual way. If your horse is very tight in the shoulder or low in

the heels, resting the toe may be difficult at first.

With some horses it's necessary to build up the ground using a block of wood or pile of leg quilts for a couple of sessions until they can release to the ground. Stroking the tendon when the toe is down relaxes the leg and shoulder. Most horses rest the front toe only for a moment. When the toe is rested at the back of the circle you are making on the ground it allows the forearm to relax more.

**Photo 5:** With the hind leg, stand beside your horse rather than with your hip into him. This teaches the horse to keep his balance instead of leaning on his handler. Run your hand down the back of the leg and ask with the same upward scratch-release signal that you used for the front leg. If your horse tends to pick up the hind leg too quickly or you don't know how he will react, hold his tail with your outside hand. When the horse is tight in the hindquarters or nervous about having his leg held, support the leg in the direction he



wants to take it. This will usually be more underneath body. If you try and take the leg out to the side or back immediately, he'll likely become more stiff and tense.

Pick up the leg as shown, and make horizontal circles with the horse's foot at whatever height is easy for him. Take the hoof forward, to the outside, back and to the inside. Circle the leg two or three times in each direction and then rest the toe. Rest your outside elbow on your outside leg. Use your body rather than just arms to circle the leg. Think of circling your knees around your ankles to initiate the movement. This will prevent stress on your back. The only place in your body you should feel this exercise is in your thighs. Remember to breathe.



**Photo 6:** Most horses expect that the leg will be held up after it is picked up. Resting the toe is non-habitual and helps the horse release tension in the hindquarters. Hold the hock lightly and gently rock it to encourage the toe to stay in this position. Some people teach their horses to rest a toe as they clean out the hoof.

When you incorporate TTEAM leg exercises into your normal hoof-cleaning session you make life eas-

ier for your farrier and your horse, you increase the range of motion in your horse's shoulders and hindquarters, lengthen his stride and improve his balance. You're also able to detect problems early on. A change in your horse's range of motion or reluctance to pick up a leg may indicate soreness or tightness in other parts of the body.

## Leg Exercise Variations:

If you have a horse that snatches the leg up and pulls away simply follow the leg in the direction that it wants to go rather than trying to pull it outwards. If you have a horse that falls into your direction then try picking up the right hind from the left side and vice versa. This helps the horse learn how to take their weight onto the hind leg that should be supporting the weight rather than falling into you.



To ask for the left hind: stand on the horse's right side, hold the tail to keep the horse weighting the right hind, stroke the opposite hind leg and then ask the horse to pick up his foot. When you ask, with an upward scratch with your fingernail just below the hock, wait for a moment to give the horse a

chance to respond. Some people count one thousand one, one thousand two before asking again.

Remember the signal has to go from your brain, to your body, to the horse's body, to his brain and then back to the body before responding.

It is quite a non-habitual experience for a horse to have his hoof picked up from the opposite site.



The position of the horse's hind leg on the side you are standing will determine where you can pick up the other hind leg. In this photo it was easier to take the hoof behind the right hind.

Make a few small circles and rest the horse's toe.

This position teaches the horse to take his weight onto the opposite leg than you are picking up and will

teach him about balancing on three legs.

Do the leg exercises in the same location the horse will be trimmed. If shoeing is on the calendar find an old horseshoe and a hammer and tap on it. First near the horse and building up to hold the horse's leg between yours as the farrier would. Have someone there to hold the horse, or use Taming The Tiger, as would be the case when the farrier comes. Have the horse holder watch the horse's posture. His head should be close to level to the withers and straight ahead. A little food can be used to make the experience a pleasant one.

## When the farrier comes:

If several horses are being done time it so it is as quiet as possible during the trim. The end of a riding lesson when other horses are coming into the barn, or feeding time, are less than ideal. If you have an extra helper have him support (not push) the opposite hip with a few light TTouches while the farrier works. Remember to breathe and keep a positive picture in your mind of the horse standing quietly. Keep in mind that all four feet don't have to be done the same day.

Good luck with Cherokee, and the others who have written, and let us know how they do.

## Clicker Training

I incorporate clicker training in some situations and find it very helpful. In a nutshell, the first thing to do is 'condition' your horse to the clicker. That simply means click and then treat immediately afterwards so the horse makes the connection between the click and a pleasant experience. You can sometimes 'treat' with scratching an itchy spot. You can go on to using the clicker in conjunction with picking up his feet. Chunk these steps down as well. You can start by clicking the horse for letting you touch his leg without moving. When that is done on all four feet move on to asking for him to pick up a hoof, be sure to click as the hoof is coming up – if you click when it is doing down then you are teaching him to put his foot down. You can gradually raise the criteria it takes to get a click – keeping the hoof up for longer and longer. This helps the horse be more of a participant in the exercise. I have had horses start lifting feet for a specific signal and just hold them up. This goes a long way in improving balance and changes the expectation of unpleasant things happening around the feet.

If you want to learn more about clicker training there are many good books and videos on the market. Alexandra Kurland has a series of videos and a couple of very good books on the subject. [www.theclickercenter.com](http://www.theclickercenter.com)

...suggestions continue next page

## Picking up a hind leg using a Rope

Since we are dealing with some horses that have problems picking up the back feet here is another possibility. This can be helpful if a horse snatches his foot, kicks or has difficulty responding to the signal. It should be done AFTER the other steps have been used so the horse is totally comfortable with having his legs touched.



Photo 1: An 8-10' cotton rope works well placed just below the fetlock joint—the ends of the rope are open. Stroke your horse with the wand and then the rope before putting it around his leg.



Photo 4: As the horse picks up his foot keep yourself well balanced over you feet, just have him lift it slightly and then put it down.

Repeat this step a couple of times. If your horse should kick at the rope allow it to follow the horse's movement rather than trying to fight it.



Photo 5: In order to do small leg circles, slide your inside hand down the rope to the fetlock joint. Pick up the hoof and just make a few circles in each direction.

This method of picking up the hind legs can be helpful with horses that are stiff in the hindquarters and have trouble doing the leg exercises. When done with the rope the circles will be very small and the handler's balance is not as involved with the exercise.

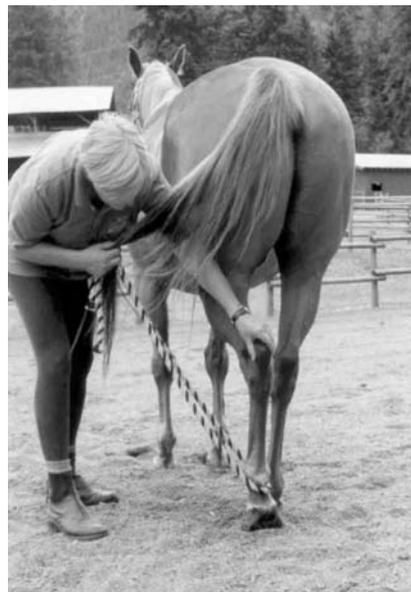


Photo 6: If possible teaching your horse to rest a toe so you can gently 'wiggle' the hock helps to relax the leg all the way up to the hindquarters.



If a horse has a tendency to cow kick the rope seems to give some parameters and if he does try to kick it is generally because he is trying to get rid of the rope and it is rare that the horse would kick out to the side.

Be sure to have someone hold your horse and stroke his chest with the wand to encourage him to stay relaxed. It could be easier to do this in a stall, small pen or barn aisle.

If kicking is your horse's problem be sure and have an experienced horse person as your helper.

With a vibrating signal and release with the rope, ask for him to lift his foot and, if possible, just rest his toe.



## HoofJack:

Several years ago I came across a great product that makes it easier for both horse and human to hold the feet. This hoof holder has a light but stable plastic base with a 'cradle' for the hoof. They are gaining popularity with farriers who want to save their backs, horse owners with bad backs, children who lack the strength to hold the foot for cleaning or older horses who have problems holding the foot up. It can make a huge difference. Look at their website [www.hoofjack.com](http://www.hoofjack.com)



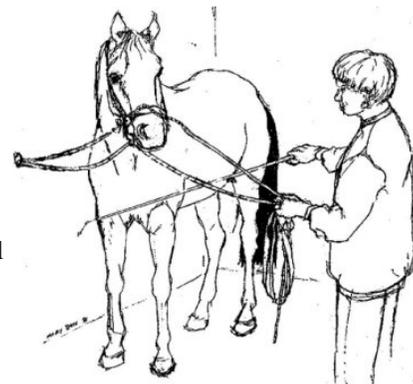
With the Hoof Jack the horse and person are able to each maintain their own balance. They take a little getting used to for farriers but they now come with a CD which shows how to use them.



Hoof Jacks come in two sizes of base with interchangeable hoof cradle and rubber toe rest. The cradle sizes are mini, regular are draft size.

## Taming The Tiger:

This technique gives horses a parameter which contains rather than restrains. Put a chain or soft lead over the noseband of the halter. Take a 15-18' rope through the bottom ring on the halter, through a ring on the wall or post, and bring it back and tie it to the opposite side of the horse from where you are standing.



This provides a sliding cross-tie so the horse has room to balance. You can use your wand to stroke the chest and front legs to help keep a horse settled when handling his feet.

## The Dance

By Robyn Hood

One of the basic principles of TTEAM is the way we consider balance. In our experience, physical, mental and emotional balance are all connected. For example, a nervous or reactive horse is often physically out of balance. Likewise, a horse who habitually stands out of balance—such as with one foreleg extended or a hind leg pointed—will generally be less confident and more reactive.

An exercise we call “The Dance” can dramatically improve your horse’s physical balance—and therefore his emotional attentiveness—while refining your ability to give light, precise signals from two key TTEAM tools, the wand and chain. I’ll lead you through each step of The Dance, but first I want to give you a clear picture of some of its other benefits.

The Dance teaches your horse

- to be coordinated, focused, cooperative, obedient and self-controlled.
- to give softly in the poll, both in hand and under saddle.
- to become “lighter” and more responsive to the reins and aids when ridden.
- to vary the length of his stride.
- to back up from a specific signal, rather than by reflex.

The Dance can also help your horse overcome a variety of behavioral problems, simply by teaching his body to stand balanced and develop a new self-image. For example, work

with The Dance will teach your horse to balance comfortably while holding up his feet for the farrier, for hoof cleaning or for leg exercises. The Dance also can help horses

- who are difficult to load or unload or who have trouble riding in a trailer.
- who have difficulty backing under saddle.
- who habitually stand out of balance—i.e., are base wide or narrow—or with front or hind legs “out of square.”
- who have a disunited canter
- who are on the forehand and heavy in the rider’s hands

To perform The Dance, you’re going to ask your horse to back up, in diagonal pairs, one step at a time. For example, you want your horse to move his left fore and right hind legs simultaneously. Pause briefly, then ask your horse to take a step back with the other pair. After several steps in this way, ask the horse to come forward, again using diagonal pairs. I’ll show you how to use your wand during this exercise to signal your horse in four places:

- the chest
- the front of the forearm
- the cannon bone
- the pastern.

Each requires a slight change of balance on your horse’s part as it brings awareness to different parts of his body.