

# Handling & Haltering Your Foal Without Trauma

By Robyn Hood

*Editor's note: Six years ago we printed an article about the steps we use to halter foals - this is an updated version.*

There have been many articles written about 'imprinting' as described by Dr. Robert Miller which he based on Conrad Lorenz's research with birds. It is interesting to note that the intent of Austrian naturalist Conrad Lorenz's work was to study nurturing and bonding when birds were hand-raised. The intention was to bond the bird to the human who does the imprinting – the human became the bird's 'mother'. I have heard that as soon as an imprinted bird lays eggs, it reverts to wild bird behaviour and loses the connection to the human.

Robert M. Miller, DVM had noticed foals that received medical intervention at birth were easier to handle and treat as they got older. It should be remembered that most of these observations were of foals from large Thoroughbred breeding farms where the handling of their foals was quite limited.

While many people tell us that the "imprinted" their foals; on questioning what they really did was handle the foal either at birth or shortly after as opposed to true imprinting. "Imprinting" as defined by Dr. Miller, means that the foal is handled all over the body, repeatedly touching each part 30 to 60 times until the foal no longer reacts. The repetition is intended to "flood" the nervous system until it is "desensitized". In my opinion this could also be described 'learned helplessness' which occurs when an animal simply learns to submit as the only option. The horse world is divided on whether imprinting makes horses easier to train as they grow up.



Photo 1: This three-week old colt has never been haltered. Linda began by stroking him with two wands. Most foals react to the wands, but if you stroke a few times, give them a few minute break and stroke again, they begin to accept the contact. This was a more difficult situation because the space was so large. You want the foal to be able to move but not to run around.

With many horse owners breeding a single mare to raise a foal, the dynamics are quite different from the situation on large commercial farms. These "only" foals are not just handled at birth but continued to be handled, and often over-handled in my opinion. They may not have the chance to really learn about being a horse the way they would if they lived in a herd with horses of many ages. These only foals start out life playing with humans, and suddenly behaviour that was acceptable as a foal – sucking on a person's fingers or playfully nipping – is not acceptable from an older animal. The rules are changed in the middle of the game.

The question is often asked: "How does the TTouch compare to imprinting when used on a newborn foal"? One of the basic premises of TTEAM philosophy is that when a foal resists or struggles, he is responding from fear. If we work with a foal in a way that overcomes that fear and teaches him to stop and think instead of react, we will have a more cooperative partner in that foal, and a much more intelligent and physically and mentally sound adult horse. We don't fight fear and we don't fight resistance, nor do we touch the foal repeatedly in the same place. We wait until the foal is well bonded with his/her mother and then use the TTouch all over the foal to give it a clearer sense of his body, creating a better self-image, which increases self-confidence and self-control.

## More Than Just Haltering

The use of TTouch is more than just halter breaking and gentling. It is not about making a pet out of the foal. We're educating his nervous system and activating the part of the brain that will help override instinctive response and teaches him how to learn. The intention of TTouch is to activate neural impulses and cellular function



Photo 2: The foal has scooted back to his mother and Linda is stroking him by reaching across the mare.

in the animal's body. The intent of TTTouch goes far beyond gentling and petting the colt and is not about desensitizing the body.

By using this method, we prepare the colt to be a better athlete and to realize that humans are trustworthy. We start by making a connection with the animal and then bring awareness to his body by the use of specific touches and with gentle cues from the wand. The foal learns to respond to the TTTouch, signals from the wand, lead, and voice commands – this can be done at a young age or with an older horse with similar results.

The Playground of higher learning can be started when they are quite young, although these exercises are equally effective with older foals who have had little handling.

### Hereditary Tension?

Many young horses are born with tension and at birth are afraid of being restrained or touched. It's absolutely hereditary. We've seen many horses that were ticklish or cinchy when first started under saddle that had been like that since birth. This over-sensitivity could have been released if they had been worked when they were young. Eliminate that tension in the young horse, and it will translate into more freedom of movement and improved coordination and balance in the adult. If a youngster develops a high head carriage and ewe-neck as a foal, it creates restriction of shoulder movement and a limitation in length of stride as an adult. Tightness in the neck also restricts movement of the pelvis, limiting the driving power from the hindquarters.

TTEAM training gives youngsters confidence and trust in both themselves and the handler, and certainly makes later training much easier. Our interest is to teach them how to learn.



Photo 3: The colt has come around to Linda's side of his dam. After using the button end of the wand to do a few circles, she scratches him on the neck. If he was unsure about the hand, Linda would have done more work with the wand or used the back of her fingers to make the initial contact.

### Getting Started

A positive attitude and quiet, direct, mind-to-mind connection with the foal is essential. Visualize the optimum result you desire from a calm, instructive lesson for the foal. Observe your own body language, posture and breathing pattern. Take a deep breath, exhale and start this exercise with your foal as a partner you are leading in a dance, not as an animal to be dominated or 'broke'.

Begin in an enclosed area such as a small pen or large stall. You'll need a pair of four-foot stiff whips or 'wands', which will serve as extensions of your arms. With the wands, you can reach out and touch the foal so that he feels contact without being restrained. If the foal has not been weaned, the mare should be with the foal when you work with him but you may want to have someone hold the mare during the first few sessions.

Stroke the foal on the underside of the neck and down the chest a couple of times with firm strokes and then pause and back off. Be sure you are standing well-balanced and if you are tense start the stroke as you exhale, rather than inhale, as it will keep you more grounded. Continue stroking with the wand using long sweeping motions, down the underside of neck down the front legs and across the back with long sweeping strokes, firm enough not to 'tickle' but having a slight flex in the wand against his body. The wands give you an opportunity to make a connection with the foal, without invading his personal space or thrusting a rope around him that may force him into a terrifying situation. Even with the wand, you often see the flight instinct activated and the adrenaline flowing the first few minutes of contact.

It is important to pause, step back, take a breath and exhale to give the foal a chance to integrate what just happened rather than just keep stroking until they stop. As you step back bring the wands down, quarter turn away, or just look away from the foal. Softening your posture and angling



Photo 4: Linda puts a 'catch rope' around the foal's neck and snaps it to the ring. We like 7 mm marine rope that has a light snap spliced into the end and a ring tied into the rope (the ring can be easily moved to fit around any size neck). You can use a 7mm rope with a bowline in place of the snap and ring just be sure that nothing will tighten around the foal's neck.

Notice the mare looking back to reassure the foal as Linda starts TTTouching along his neck.

your body so you are not facing the foal leaves a space open allowing him to move. These 'calming signals' will help the foal understand you are non-threatening and give you both a moment to catch your breath. You are giving the foal some choices in the situation so that he learns to cooperate and think about the lesson, rather than just react.

Even before you halter the foal, you can teach him to move forward and stop from voice commands, your body language and gentle signals from the wand. Your foal can quickly learn to listen without fear. This isn't a case of 'cute foal follows you and plays' the youngster is learning to respond to direction and understand that you are leading the dance.

Once the foal is comfortable being touched and stroked with the wands, turn one wand around and make small zig-zags and then circles with the button end of the wand to give the foal a different feel of being TTouched. Next, slide your hand up the wand and begin touching the foal on his neck and shoulders. For many young horses, it is less threatening to lead with your knuckles as you approach him. You may find that light scratching in a zig-zag or circular motion is very acceptable to nervous young horses. Soon you'll be able to do TTouched all over the body. Tail work will help the foal gain confidence and release tightness through the back and hindquarters.

The next step is usually the body rope. A rope with a light-weight snap at one end and a metal ring tied about two feet into it works very smoothly. Drop the end with the snap over the foal's shoulder and snap it to the ring. You now have a loop around the foal's neck and can easily slide the rest of the rope around his hindquarters and tie it back to the ring. The rope should lie comfortably around the foal's chest and around the hindquarters so it is just about six inches above the hocks. Loose enough that he can move without it tightening but not so low that it could go below the hocks.

You might want to practice putting it on an older horse first,



Photo 5: The foal is not being restrained as Linda does ear slides to further establish contact.



Photo 6: Linda works down the foal's face and around the outside of his muzzle - she started with the back of her fingers. Foals are usually sensitive around the muzzle, so this is great preparation for the halter coming over his nose.

so you are not fumbling with the mechanics of it when working with your foal. If you don't have a long enough rope with a snap and ring you could make your own by tying a light snap onto the end of a 12' rope (depending on the size of your foal) and then tie a ring into the rope. The snap and the rings remove the need to be able to tie a bow-line knot around the foal's neck. We would never use a knot that could tighten around the neck like with a lasso.

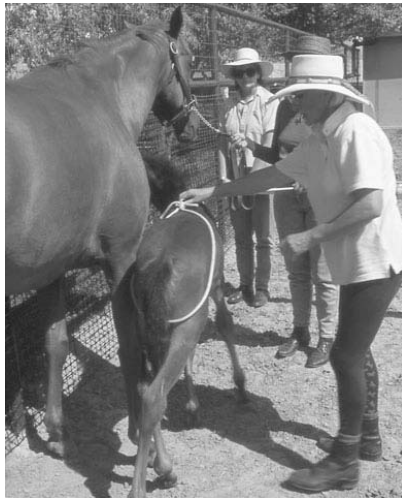
You can teach your foal to walk and stop by giving gentle tug-and-release signals from the middle of the body rope, at the withers, to come forward and signaling back on the chest piece of the body rope to stop. Make sure to always release after the forward signal, rather than applying pressure until the foal responds, as the foal will come forward and stop on the release rather than the 'ask'. Avoid resisting and stiffening in your own body. If he doesn't move try moving your feet and torso in a rotating motion and look where you want to go, let your hands move the rope from your feet moving rather than by pulling on the rope. If the foal reacts and gets away from you simply treat it as an exercise to once again get close to the foal.



Photo 7: Linda works back to the tail. Working the extremities helps give the colt a clear sense of self-image & reduce tension in the hindquarters and back.

Photo 8: Linda has made the neck loop of the catch rope bigger so it sits around the base of the foal's neck. She then slides the end of the rope around the hindquarters and ties it back to the ring.

Now there is a "figure 8" body rope around the colt.



Now you can teach your youngster to pick up his feet. Keep the body rope on, since it will help contain and balance him. Stroke his legs with the wand first to help him stay grounded and prepare him by making connected circles with the back of your fingers down the leg. In the beginning, just ask for the leg and let him put it down without holding it. This gives him a chance to learn balance along with the confidence that we are going to be reasonable with our requests.

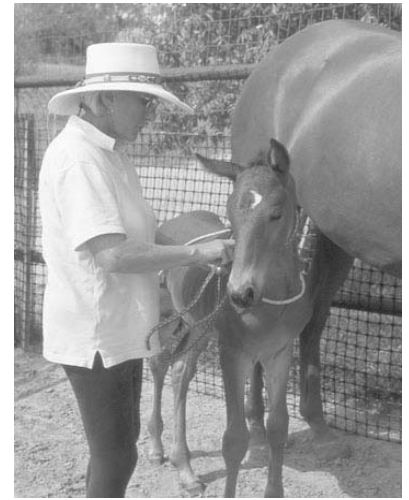
Look at all you've accomplished – and we haven't even put a halter on the foal yet. Now that the foal is more confident about being handled, we can proceed to the next step of haltering him.

Before haltering the foal we want the young horse to be comfortable about having his face and mouth touched. Many foals are reluctant to allow people near their muzzle, as it is their lifeline to survival. They need their mouth for nursing and are very sensitive in that area. Most foals enjoy having



Photo 9 & 10: Linda is just asking the colt to pick up his feet and then put them down. She started stroking down each leg with the back of her fingers before asking for the foot. In these photos she has already put on the halter and is loosely holding the rope so she does not interfere with his balance.. You can also do this when the foal is just wearing the body rope.

Photo 11: Linda has the body wrap around his body and the a catch rope around his neck. She is using the Chimp Touch to start making contact around his face before putting the loop over his nose.



their neck worked and will allow you to work your way towards the head. Soon you can do circles all over the face and work the ears, lips and nostrils – remember using the back of the fingers is less threatening and therefore more acceptable to many horses.

It should now be easy to lay the catch rope over the foal's neck, close to the head and snap it under his throatlatch. To make a loop for the nose slide the rope though the ring under the chin. There are three ways to get the loop over the foal's nose. If you can work the foal's mouth you can probably just slide the nose loop over the foal's nose from the bottom with one hand while the other hand is working the foal's mouth. Make sure not to apply any pressure, which might trigger the foal to struggle. Remember, it takes two to fight; when there is no pressure, the foal will not resist.

If you foal is still reluctant to have his face handled comfortably, but will eat grain, place some oats in a shallow pan and

Photo 12: Linda has now put the catch rope loop around the colt's nose. The loop should be made large enough to enable you to easily slip it onto the nose and then make it smaller by pulling on the end of the rope.



Photo 13: The halter is put on for the first time and is put over the catch rope. When a foal is prepared using the catch rope, haltering takes place without any fuss.



Photo 14: Linda attached a light lead to the side ring of the halter. She then stepped away from the colt and stroked him with the wand. The lead attached to the side of the halter encourages the foal to come forward without raising his head or pulling back.

You'll find you have much more influence with a lighter signal.



lay a large loop in the bottom of the pan. As the foal eats the grain, it becomes easy to slide the loop up his nose. The third way to get a loop onto the foal's nose is to take the extra rope and, instead of having a loop that needs to go around the foal's nose, bring the rope from the outside across the foal's nose and then thread it through the ring under the foal's throat. It should now be easy to slip the halter over the catch rope.

To lead your foal, leave the body rope on, and snap a light lead rope to the side ring of the halter instead of underneath the chin. This encourages the foal to come forward with his head lowered and back relaxed, instead of head raised and back dropped. The side ring also gives you more influence and makes turning easier. Avoid using heavy bullsnares with foals because they add a lot of weight.

Leading the foal beside the mare makes the lesson easier. If the foal is older or weaned, have him follow a small pan of grain in the beginning to make the leading lesson easy and uneventful.

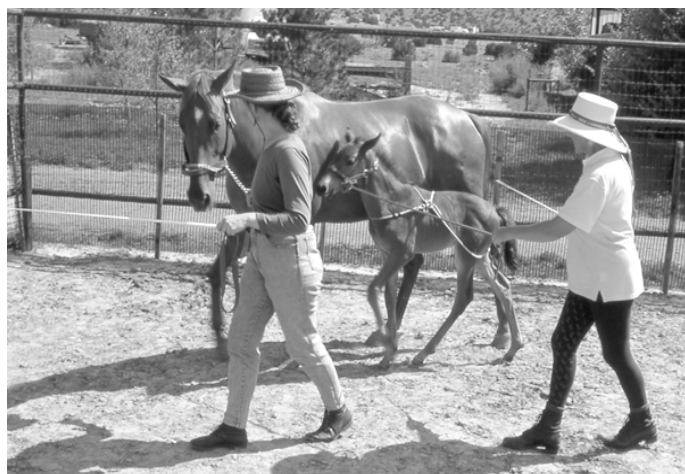


Photo 15: Linda asks her helper to walk the mare forward and lets the foal walk alongside. Notice how the mare has stepped away which gives her foal a chance to get used to the new feeling of wearing the halter, lead rope and body rope.



Photo 16: Linda comes closer and starts giving him signals to come forward and stop using the body rope in combination with the lead.

When working with a foal, remember that you are setting behaviour patterns and teaching the young horse not only to be haltered and led, but also how to relate to people and how to learn. Avoid using steady pressure as foals can react and flip over in a flash. This can potentially cause trauma to the poll, neck and back and in some cases cause facial paralysis from halter pressure.

During all of these steps remember that tension and holding in your body will transfer through to the foal's body. If you feel any resistance in his body, check into your own. Are you holding your breath or tight through the back or shoulders? Take a breath, exhale and soften your body. If he is 'stuck' try stroking the rope, hand over hand, as you rotate your torso and look in the direction you want him to step. This avoids creating a pull on the rope because the movement is really coming through your body and prevents the handler from getting stuck through their pelvis.

NOTE: You may find that the order in which you do these steps varies with the foal. Some foals are very afraid of the wand but will accept an initial approach with light scratching and accept the wand later. Others will be easier to touch if the body rope is put on first. Be open that if one part of the approach is not working you have several choices, you can take a break or use a different 'tool'.

### Clicker Training:

For those familiar with the clicker this is great time to use it. Instead of using food, most people find that using a favourite scratching spot as the 'treat' keeps foals from getting too pushy about food.