

Start Right - Haltering a Foal without Trauma

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Anyone that has ever worked with an unhandled foal knows how rewarding and beneficial the initial sessions are. They'd also know how much these first impressions dictate a foal's reaction to handling later in life. For decades, the Tellington TTouch Method has gently, easily, and effectively given foals their first education, setting them up for a lifetime of successful interactions with humans. By keeping a few basic principles in mind, you can easily, safely, and effectively give a foal the start it needs to become a well adjusted, willing partner.

In the Tellington TTouch the link between posture and behaviour has always been incredibly important. While posture can be helped or hindered by human contact, there is also an element of the animal's natural tendency. This tendency can certainly be affected by positive human interaction for the better. This possibility for change was evident at the 20th Annual Starting Young Horse Clinic in June of 2010 in Wyoming.

The Bitterroot Ranch has been home to this workshop for over two decades. Over this time Arabian horses that have been bred at the ranch are started and initially prepared for their future job as dude horses. This year, Linda Tellington-Jones' sister Robyn Hood, used one of their 3 week old, unhandled foals to demonstrate how we go about making first contact with foals.

The Spanish Arabian filly came into the enclosed area very apprehensive about the large group of people and unfamiliar surroundings. Her head was high, and the muscles along the underside of her neck were bulging, while her back was dropped. A tendency for high headedness and a tightening of the back is already a very strong tension pattern for this filly. We quietly guided the filly into an 8x8 catch pen along with her



Photo 1: As the filly comes into the yard you can see she already has a posture that is high-headed creating tightness through the base of the neck and along her back. This is a great time to start to change this pattern.

dam. Having a small, safe space is incredibly important when initially working with a foal. The ideal space is a square or rectangle and is not so big that the foal can get moving quickly and mindlessly. How you position yourself in the enclosure is very important. Always try to give the foal a way to leave, rather than try and corner them. This will help them feel safe and have some semblance of choice in the matter.



Photo above: Once the mare and foal have had a moment to settle in the pen, Robyn makes initial contact with the foal. To do this, Robyn uses one or two of the four foot dressage whips we call "wands". The "wands" are stiff but flexible and create an extension of the handler's arm, providing a safer feeling of distance for the unhandled animal. With the "wands" Robyn gently, but firmly, strokes the filly down the front of her chest, along her back, and her rear end. The wand helps to connect and ground the filly to her body, be familiarized to being touched, and become comfortable with Robyn's proximity without feeling threatened. Robyn is careful to stroke the filly a few times and then stop, pausing to give the filly a chance to integrate and acknowledge what she is experiencing, rather than just putting up with it.



Photo 3: After letting the filly become comfortable with the flexible end of the wand, Robyn starts to do small circles with the button end of the wand, all along the filly's body. This brings Robyn closer to the filly without becoming threatening

and gives the filly the feeling of the mindful TTouch circles. As with the stroking, Robyn is sure to pause and check in with the filly as she works along her body.

Robyn backs off and gives the filly a chance to move away, nurse, and look around at all of the surrounding spectators. She quietly nurses and explores the catch pen.



Photo 4: After a few minutes Robyn approaches her again, this time with her hand. Allowing the filly to be right next to her dam, Robyn uses the back of her hand to gently make contact. The back of the hand is much less threatening than the palm of the hand, and is a good way to start when approaching any animal that you do not know or when touching areas that may be sensitive to the animal. As with the wands, Robyn is sure to stop what she is doing and pause every so often, letting the filly know that the contact will stop. It does not take long before the filly is very accepting of Robyn's touch all along her body and neck.



Photo 5: The filly moved to the other side of her mother & then Robyn does a few TTouches on her rear end.



Photo 6: With the filly relatively comfortable with being touched, Robyn moves onto the next step of handling foals, the use of the "Body Rope". The "Body Rope" is a variation of a figure eight rope, with a light snap on one end, and a ring tied into the line 1/3 of the way down. The snap and ring allow for easy application and ensures that the loop around the neck will not tighten. To apply the rope, Robyn simply slides the snap end over the filly's withers, and quietly picks it up from underneath her neck. She snaps the end to the ring, making a loop around the neck, not too tight, not too loose. The rope should sit just above the point of the shoulder with the ring and snap sitting on one side of the withers.

With this loop Robyn can contain the filly with a slight steady at the base of her neck, without putting pressure on her head, which would panic a horse unfamiliar with containment. It is important to note that Robyn thinks of "containing" the filly rather than "restraining" her. This front loop will be how Robyn will teach the filly to halt and steady herself through her entire body, shifting her weight off of the forehead. A light signal at the base of the neck can also activate the "seeking reflex" which encourages the base of the neck to release, lengthening the top-line.



Photo 7: For the second part of the "Body Rope", Robyn takes the tail end of the rope and loops it around the hindquarters of the filly, tying the end through the ring in a quick release knot. The rope should sit in the gaskin and be loose enough so when

the foal walks it does not put back ward pressure on the neck. This second part to the “Body Rope” is an excellent tool to help move a foal quietly, through their body, back to front. It is also an invaluable tool to connect a horse to their entire body, as well as teach them to be very comfortable with ropes and movement around their hindquarters.



Photo 8: Now that the filly is wearing the complete “Body Rope”, Robyn can use a signal on the back loop to help her move forward, and then steady her to halt with a signal at the base of her neck, with the front loop. Doing just a few steps at a time, quietly, helps to teach the filly how to move in balance, without dropping her back or raising her head and falling on the forehead.

Once again, after a few minutes of guiding the filly around the catch pen, Robyn leaves her to have a moment to integrate. Obviously content about the situation, the filly goes back to her dam and nurses for a few moments. When she has had enough she looks to Robyn and seems interested in her without being fearful.

Were this not a demonstration, or if the filly seemed distressed, Robyn would have probably stopped there. With our own foals we prefer to do several 10 minutes sessions over a day rather than one long one. This filly did not seem stressed by the process and the entire session lasted just over 20 minutes so Robyn proceeded in demonstrating several handling steps.



Photo 9: Once the filly starts looking at Robyn she seems much more relaxed and accepting about the interaction.

Robyn places the “Catch Rope” around her neck. The “Catch Rope” looks like a mini version of the “Body Rope” in a lighter material, with a smaller snap and ring. Again the snap and ring are meant for ease of use and to avoid any tightening effect around the head. (In addition to haltering foals for the first time, “Catch Ropes” can be invaluable to use with hard to catch horses, horses that are difficult to bridle, or in situations that require a swap of tack out in the open.) With the “Catch Rope” around the neck, along with the “Body Rope”, Robyn once again guides the filly around the enclosure. The loop around her neck starts to familiarize her with a light signal around her poll and neck, without it being uncomfortable or feeling like a restraint.

Before Robyn attempts to put anything on the filly’s head, she wanted to be sure that the filly was comfortable with being touched all around her face.

When Robyn made initial contact with her hand, and touched the filly’s body and neck, she did not proceed to touch her head as small signs told her that it would be too much for the filly at that moment. Her eye changed slightly, her ears tensed, and her respiration quickened. By reading these very subtle signs and not pushing the filly’s comfort zone at that time, Robyn actually increased the filly’s trust by respecting these small signals. For any horse it can be incredibly beneficial to recognize and respect their “whispers” of anxiety or apprehension rather than waiting for them to “shout” at us when they have had enough or are uncomfortable with something. This does not mean that Robyn will simply skirt around the apprehension or ignore it; it simply means that she takes a different tact, and is sure to break the process into small steps.



Photo 10: Robyn begins at the shoulder and works up the filly’s neck, finding the places she most enjoys being touched or scratched. As she works slowly towards the head, the filly closes her eyes and lowers her head. Now that the filly has had more interaction with Robyn, she is not so concerned about having her head and face touched. Robyn strokes her ears, a great way to release tension in the poll, an area typically sensitive in high headed horses. The filly responds with signs of relaxation and seems to enjoy herself. Robyn then moves all around her face and head, touching both the left and right sides, working her way down to the mouth.



Photo 11: Using the Chimp TTTouch (back of knuckles) is less invasive, the rope around her neck is loose and the filly is acknowledging Robyn.



Photo 12 & 13: Continuing to use TTTouches around the poll and around the ears the filly's eyes have softened and her eyes start to close as her ears are stroked.



Photo 14: Stroking the nostrils helps the filly get familiar with being handled everywhere. It is done gently, just a few times. Our aim is to teach acceptance because it is a pleasant experience rather than to desensitize



Photo 15: Robyn is starting mouthwork using her thumb to gently move the filly's lower lip and make small circles on the inside of the lip. She then moved to her upper lip.

The mouth is very closely linked to the Limbic system, the controller of emotion in the brain. Horses that are hard to catch, disinterested in people, aloof, and fractious, can all benefit from several intermittent sessions of mouth work. If a horse is emotional or tense, they will often be apprehensive about being touched around the mouth. To be able to touch the filly's mouth, Robyn uses the back of her hand all around the muzzle, stopping to pause and breathe consistently. In no time Robyn is able to touch her all around and in her mouth, gently rubbing the front of her gums with her fingers. When haltering foals for the first time it is extremely important to have them comfortable with contact all around their nose, muzzle, and mouth. Many foals are hyper sensitive to touch in these areas, and if haltered without this preparation, can become habituated to throwing their heads up when their nose touches the halter.



Photo 16 : Since so many young horses are initially unbalanced for the farrier, Robyn wanted to start to give the filly an idea of what would be expected of her. While quietly wearing the "Body Rope", Robyn worked with the filly's feet. Robyn began by gently squeezing the tendon sheath, right below the knee, on the filly's right fore. She squeezes once and waits, giving the filly the chance to respond, instead of berating her with mindless signals.



Photo 17: Robyn asks for the leg on the opposite side that she is standing so that she does not accidentally pull the filly towards her. In addition, asking for the leg on the opposite side that you are standing helps to teach horses to shift their weight laterally. The filly responds perfectly to Robyn's signal and she quietly picks up her leg. Initially Robyn does not ask for her to keep her leg up, just to pick it up and put it down. Once the filly seems balanced,

Robyn will ask her to hold it up for a moment, never holding the foot. This is repeated with all 4 feet, and the filly is completely quiet (there is no one at her head) and responsive. Putting a “Body Rope” on a horse the first few times they are trimmed is an excellent way to help horses stay in balance and have a positive experience with their feet.



Photo 18: Asking for a hind foot - with no pressure on her head she is able to stand in balance. Robyn just asks for a foot, so the filly will learn to shift her weight to pick it up, and then put it back down.

Photo 19 & 20: Now that the filly was comfortable with being touched



all around her muzzle area Robyn can add the second piece of the “Catch Rope”, Robyn loops the tail end through the ring, making a nose band. This second loop can be made as large as possible so that foals can get used to the idea of something going over their nose, without it being too constrictive or small. Because she was so prepared to touch around her muzzle, the filly hardly blinks an eye when Robyn places the second loop over her nose. Robyn removes, and replaces the “Catch Rope” several times to be sure that the filly is actually okay with the process. Horses are often “okay” with a new experience or stimuli the first time, just because they did not know what to expect, and were taken by surprise. The level of acceptance the second, third, or fourth time you do something is a much more telling indicator about how the experience really was for the horse.

With the filly comfortable with the “Catch Rope” Robyn is ready to add the actual foal halter. The only halter available in the moment was too large for the foal’s size however it worked

for getting her used to wearing something of substance on her head. It is important to recognize how much weight there actually is in a halter and lead, especially one with a heavy lead shank. When choosing a set up for your foal, it is useful to place the halter around the back of your neck with the lead rope attached, so you can get a clear idea what it will feel like for your foal. This question of weight is the reason we always use very light snaps, for all of our horses. With a heavy snap you cannot lessen the pressure on the poll, only add to it, which often triggers the opposition reflex.



Photo 21 & 22: Robyn mindfully slides the halter over the filly’s nose and buckles the crown piece. She repeats this a few times, again to be sure that the filly is comfortable with the process. The filly does not react to being haltered but she is not shut down or frozen either. Her acceptance of the process is largely due to the fact that Robyn took the time to prepare her for having something on her head. Too often foals have halters slapped or wrestled on because they are small and can be easily over powered. Giving a foal this first impression teaches them acceptance rather than resignation in regards to human interactions.

As a final lesson, Robyn takes the tail end of the “Catch Rope” and loops it through the side hardware of the halter. The sliding loop of the rope means that there is not a “fixed” line. This creates a more supple and subtle feel for the horse and help to reduce any opposition. Attaching the line to the side of the hardware, rather than the bottom, means that there is less downward pressure on the poll, reducing the horse’s reflexive instinct to raise the head and drop the back. Additionally it is easier to make a clear lateral signal, with the line attached from the side, without inadvertently tipping the horse’s head.

Robyn still uses the “Body Rope” for most of the signal at this point, and is simply allowing the filly to get used to having the weight of the halter and lines on her head. Throughout this entire process, Robyn has been extremely aware of using her entire body to influence the filly, rather than just her arms or hands. This creates a much clearer, smoothly cue, and practi-



Photo 23: Attaching a light lead line to the side ring on the halter will make it easier to encourage the filly to come forward without raising her head. Instead it will encourage her to come forward with her head down.

cally compels the filly to move with her.

Satisfied that the filly has happily had enough input, Robyn removes the halter, “Catch Rope”, and “Body Rope”, giving the filly full freedom to leave. The filly’s reaction is to engage with Robyn, sniffing her, with a genuine curiosity and interest. The horse’s reaction is always the best gauge of how a session really went. A horse that wants to stay with you and engage with you, even when they have the complete choice to leave, is usually a horse that enjoyed the lesson.

The catch pen was opened and the filly’s dam was lead out.



The filly sniffed around the pen, and then quietly walked out, with a noticeably lower, softer neck, that looked inches longer. She confidently looked around at the 2 dozen spectators and walked past un-fazed. Following her dam at some distance, the filly calmly walked along side her breeder, back to the open pastures. This was a striking contrast to the skittish, high-headed filly that had entered the enclosure less than 30 minutes prior.

The ease and progress made in this one short session clearly demonstrated how a little goes and long way, and how slowing down the process, and chunking down the steps, actually gets you a lot further, in less time.

You can see a picture video of Haltering A Foal without Trauma www.youtube.com/TellingtonTTouch