

Part I

General Clinical Examinations and Routine Procedures

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Principles of Horse Handling for Veterinarians: Horse Handling Versus Horse Restraint

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We should recognize and think of good handling as psychological restraint, in contrast to our tendency to think of the term “restraint” as a means of physical application of force or chemicals to control the horse. Without question, restraint in order to accomplish a procedure, as well as for the safety of the veterinarian and the person holding the horse, is of utmost importance. However, the very least amount of physical restraint required is always the best level of physical restraint, and this will vary from no restraint to full chemical restraint.

Think of physical and chemical restraint as your second option. Good horse handling and psychological restraint starts before we even touch the horse. Start with things in your favor. Make it easy for the horse to do the right thing. For example, select an examination site where the horse will not be tempted by grass and other distractions.

Realize that we reach out to the world with our hands, that we may examine and evaluate what we see. The horse reaches out to the world with its nose and sense of smell to evaluate and check out its world. With this in mind, stand near the horse while taking the history and let it check you out. Pause periodically to give the horse a gentle scratch or stroke on its forehead or in the hollow behind the withers. When turning your attention to the horse, maintain a soft eye, do not stare it in the eye with a hard-focused look.

There is a contrasting principle for humans vs. horses in their behavior when they come very close to each other. If you walk up to a

person and place your face about six inches from them, he or she becomes very tense or embarrassed and wants to back away from you. The horse has just the opposite, hard-wired, behavior. For the horse, your, or the handler’s, closeness, or the closeness of another horse, is an invitation to examine and nuzzle or play.

Use this to your advantage, but also realize its disadvantages. When your handler stands right at the horse’s face and is trying to help you by having a short and tight hold on the halter, the horse wants to push, be mouthy and play with the handler, or may attempt to free itself of the tight restraint. This can certainly make your examination more difficult. You want the horse be focused so that you can see its responses to palpation and handling.

Horses are very in tune with the body language of predators (humans are often seen as predators by the horse) and so they are in tune with the body language of the person holding the horse for you. This means that powerful signals and behavioral control can best be created while the handler is about three or four feet from the horse. Encourage your clients to learn appropriate techniques to teach the horse to stand quietly for examination by using appropriate body language and signals while standing back from the horse. With that, both you and the person holding the horse will be much happier and your examination will progress much more easily. You need to recognize when to have the handler hold onto the halter and when to control only with the lead rope.

At this point, the handler is the alpha animal. There are very few horses that are truly “alpha” and that want to be in charge. They would far rather follow than lead. However, they commonly sense a threat when they are approached by multiple persons. Thus, with a tense or fearful horse it helps if you take the lead rope from the client and move the horse around by yourself. Walk in straight lines and ask the horse to turn in both directions and stop when asked. A few moments spent doing this will often let the horse accept you as being in charge.

If, in the process of your examination you need to move the horse’s head via the halter, use a gentle “give and take” motion, avoiding force. There is value in turning the head and asking at the same time for a lower head position. The flight reaction is partially dependent on the horse markedly elevating its head and keeping it pointed straight ahead. The simple act of gently bringing the head around and downward using a gentle “give and take” pull on the halter will help extinguish the flight posture and reactivity. To get the horse to lower its head, it can be very helpful to place your free hand on the muscles overlying the first to third cervical vertebrae, that is, C-1 through C-3, called the cranialis group. The hand is simply laying on the muscle area - *no weight or pushing action is applied*. Give the horse a couple of minutes to respond. It will likely prove to be worth the time spent.

Next, move rearward to a position just at the back of the horse’s shoulder. Good trainers often refer to this position as being in the “heart space.” It tends to be a position of comfort and trust for the horse. You can evoke a beneficial parasympathetic calming effect by gently rubbing or scratching in the wither pocket area that the saddle would occupy. You can do this, for example, while listening to heart and lung sounds.

Do not start your physical examination with an area that you expect to be sore. Touch and palpate areas where you do *not* expect to elicit pain. This is a good general rule, but is particularly valuable when palpating the limb structures, that is, tendons, ligaments, and joints. If the horse has become accustomed to your handling of its normal limb(s), it gains confidence and becomes more accepting.

Prior to picking up a leg for examination, be sure the horse is balanced in such a way that it will be easy for it to stand on three legs. Lean your body slightly into the shoulder to encourage the horse to balance on its opposite side. This applies to both front and rear limbs. Next, on the front limbs, if you touch the horse lightly on the palmar aspect just distal to the accessory carpal bone, over 90% of horses will give you the leg. Sometimes a light touch is most effective (think of the horse’s response to a fly on its leg). If the horse is still reluctant to lift the leg, squeeze moderately on the chestnut while asking for the leg.

In summary, remember that there are very few horses who are actually “mean.” They have pain, tension or fear. They are flight animals who when not able to flee may try to fight back. Listen to the message that the horse is sending and forgive the action it takes.

A final point: our favorite saying is “if at first you don’t succeed, the hell with it.” That sounds facetious, but what it really means is you may have to abandon the process that you are using and select another way of achieving your goal. That will save both you and the horse a lot of time and frustration, or even a battle. Good horse handling is a good way to build up your practice. No one wants to see his or her horse “roughed up.” If good horse handling is not sufficient to accomplish the examination or procedure, the client will probably accept that other restraint techniques need to be employed. Many of these techniques are described in Chapter 2.