

## **Handling and Restraint of Foals**

Our topics for this week are:

- **Capturing a foal**
- **Leading a foal**
- **Restraining a foal**
- **Transporting a foal**

Excessive handling of foals and not correctly handling weanlings, yearlings, and 2-year-olds can eventually endanger handlers. Socializing newborn foals immediately after birth (so-called “imprinting”) is believed to beneficially affect the behavior of horses for the rest of their lives, but handling foals can be overdone. True imprinting is between the mare and the foal.

Excellent, docile horses also come from farms and ranches that do minimal handling in the first 2 years of a foal’s life. Excessive petting and scratching of horses between weaning and 2 years of age can teach a horse to move toward pressure while the basis of training is to teach horses to move away from pressure, i.e., a rein, rider’s leg, or spur.

If imprint training is done, sessions should be short, less than 5 minutes and should be done in the presence of the mare. The mare should be caught first and held by an assistant with the mare against a wall or strong fence. The mare is rubbed and groomed for 10 to 15 minutes, followed by rubbing and handling all parts of the foal’s body. Exposure to clipper noise and other stimuli it will encounter later in life has also been recommended.

The effectiveness of foal handling can be negated if the mare is distressed and becomes agitated. Her actions will supersede the benefits of any rubbing of the foal by the handler. If mares with nursing foals must be restrained in stocks, the stock should have a small pen attached to the front of the stocks, so the mare and foal can be face to face until the mare can rejoin the foal.

### **Halters on Foals**

Halters should not be left on any aged horse in a pen or pasture because they can catch it on objects, leading to injury to the horse, and sometimes death. Foals, weanlings, and yearlings like to scratch their heads with a hind foot and may catch their foot in a halter or they will box with each other and can catch a foot in another’s halter. Leather or webbed halters will also lead to skin problems if left on for days in warm weather. If a halter is an absolute necessity on a pastured horse, a breakaway halter should be used.

### **Leading Foals**

Foals that have not been trained to lead should be moved by following its mare while it is being led. A halter and lead rope assisted by a rope loop over the foal's rump can be tried if the mare is not available to be led.

A handler should never stand in front of a foal and pull on a lead rope. The foal may balk and then jump forward into the handler.

### **Capture of Foals**

The foal handler should NOT try to pet the foal prior to getting it restrained. Capture of a foal requires two handlers. It is imperative to catch and control a nursing mare before attempting to capture its foal. After catching the mare, it should be backed into a flat paneled corner that is strongly built. The handler of the mare should position the mare so that the foal can go between the mare and the wall to hide its face but not escape behind her.

After the mare is restrained and quiet, the foal handler should move at normal walking speed toward the foal and confine the foal with an arm in front of its chest and the other arm behind its rump. Whenever walking behind a foal, the handler should keep his side toward it to protect his abdomen and kneecaps from a kick. A foal should never be held just around its neck. It will rapidly back up and either escape or cause injury. The handler should hold the foal as lightly as possible, and position it so that the foal is next to the mare in nursing position. The handler should never be between the foal and mare. The handler's arms should be used as barrier to excessive movement and not squeeze the foal. When holding a foal, the handler should turn his head toward its rump to protect the handler's face in case the foal struggles and rears suddenly. A gate should not be used as a squeeze panel for restraint on foals or small horses if the gate does not have a solid panel on the lower half. Twitches should never be used on a foal due to the risk of inflicting pain and injury.

Large foals may need to be held by two people. The front handler holds under the neck with a knee behind the foal's elbow and the back handler stands on the same side as the front handler and holds the base of the tail with a knee in its flank. The foal should not be lifted off its feet as this will add to fear and struggling. If needed, a small foal can be laid down on its side by a handler standing by its side, bending its head away from the handler and toward its withers. The outside flank should be grasped and the foal gently slid down the handler's legs. Large foals or weanlings should be chemically restrained for lateral restraint. Lateral restraint can be maintained by a handler squatting with knee pressure on the foal's neck and reaching between the hind legs and pulling the tail through the hind legs and holding it. Placing a towel over its head and humming to it will increase its relaxation while down.

### **Trailing**

When trailing a foal, if it has not been halter-broke, it should not be tied. Nursing foals should always travel with their dam. If other horses will travel with a mare and foal, the mare and foal should be in a compartment separated from other horses. If there is a possibility of a foal going under a stall divider or being thrown underneath a divider, the bottom of the divider should be blocked.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects contact us at [CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com](mailto:CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com)

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Foals should not be separated from their dam when handled.**
- 2. Restraint of standing foals should be blocking movement with a handler's arms without squeezing it.**
- 3. Foals should not be tied in trailers when transported.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources. My new spiral-bound handbook, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling* was recently published and available from all major science book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com) . This website has more than 150 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.