

Catch Me If You Can **By Lynn Acton**

A horse who is hard to catch is beyond annoying. He's unsafe. A broken fence, a forgotten gate, or a fallen rider can mean a loose horse who's excited, frightened, and hardest to catch just when he's in the most danger. Rattling grain in a bucket often works, but a bucket of grain is not always available. Used routinely, such bribery teaches the horse to evade capture until he sees the goods. A horse in the habit of making himself easy to catch is more likely to be "catchable" in a crisis.

There are two horse-catching methods that I have found consistently successful. Both have the advantage of encouraging future cooperation. Before I describe them, let's observe a common misunderstanding: Human strides purposefully toward horse; horse moves just as human gets within reach. Human follows with greater determination; horse moves sooner and quicker. Is the horse misbehaving? No, he is respectfully getting out of the person's way, just as he would move for a higher ranking horse who walked straight at him with an air of authority.

I avoid such misunderstandings by inviting the horse to catch me instead. First I mosey obliquely into his line of sight, walking with a casual slouch, head down, unthreatening. When he looks at me, I stop. Horses can perceive our approach as pressure, so I've just rewarded him for looking at me by taking the pressure off. If he even leans in my direction, I back up a step, inviting him closer. If he approaches me, I continue backward in tiny steps, allowing him to catch up to me.

If the horse does not move toward me, I resume moseying, approaching on an angle, weaving little serpentines. If he moves away, I alter my angle just enough to avoid chasing him, but I continue moving. Each time he looks at me or moves my way, I reward him by stopping or backing up. It's an intricate dance where each step is meant to reassure the horse that I am trustworthy, and do not intend to chase, harass, or scare him. The more skittish the horse is, the slower my approach.

Once the horse is standing in front of me, I don't want to blow it by grabbing the halter. Instead, I chat quietly, do a casual about-face so I'm facing the same way the horse is, and gently stroke his neck or shoulder. Then I slowly work my hand up to the halter. If he's not wearing one, I reach the leadline *under* his neck, not over, before pulling on the halter.

I always start with this Mosey Method. Always. It reassures the horse that I am not a threat, clarifies that I am not asking him to move, and actually invites him to come to me, making the horse easier to catch each time. My current foster pony was, with good reason, very wary of people. It

took her 20 minutes to catch me the first day. Since then she has consistently met me at the gate, even in a big, grassy pasture.

If the Mosey Method isn't working, I think carefully about why the horse is avoiding me, because the solution depends entirely on the reason behind the behavior. If a horse is afraid, any pressure or show of authority will only make him more fearful and evasive. Horses are good at hiding anxiety, leading people to misinterpret their behavior as "disobedience", so when in doubt, the solution is to back off further yet. Just hang out in his pasture or paddock, let him watch you do something else (pull weeds, check fence, read a book, it doesn't matter), and get curious enough to approach you. The goal is a relationship where you represent comfort and security. Food is a tangible promise of comfort and security, and treat rewards are an effective training tool provided they are offered after the halter's on, not shown as an enticement ahead of time.

The second cause for reluctance to be caught is that the horse does not expect good things to happen next. I offer an immediate reward, taking a moment to greet the horse warmly, with a friendly rub or scratch, and maybe a treat. Sometimes I just visit, then turn him loose and walk away. Or take him to the barn for a nice massage grooming. People shouldn't always mean work, and no catching technique will make a horse happy to be with us if he dreads what's coming next. One can hardly blame a horse for evasive maneuvers if he's dreading an ill-fitting saddle, an inconsiderate rider, a job he hates, or a rerun of boring training exercises.

Occasionally a horse calmly and deliberately evades me, like my husband's food-obsessed mare who resents leaving her pasture for any reason. Then I shift from Mosey Mode to the "Move'm Method". I stride toward her with authority. Staying out of the kick zone at all times, I swing my lead rope, cluck, or clap my hands, being just lively enough to get her walking or jogging, not a speck more. I don't want to punish or tire her, just remind her that I make the decisions. The direction she goes is not important. What's important is keeping her calm, because an excited horse is harder to catch. As soon as she stops, I walk her down and move her a second time, and a third. Each time, she's more reluctant to move. Then I switch back to Mosey Mode, acting as if I really don't care if I catch her or not because she will naturally evade me if I act annoyed with her.

Any time the horse starts to move faster or further, I stop. Whether he is frightened or just excitable, speed is counterproductive. This is why I start with the Mosey Method. It's a lot easier to escalate than to calm a horse down. I do not use the "Move'm Method" with my excitable Arab, who would turn it into a high speed game, and I'd never do it to my foster pony,

whose trust I have worked so hard to earn. You must know your horse before you use this method. I cannot emphasize that enough. The Move'm Method is also my last resort because encouraging the horse to move toward me shows stronger, more reliable leadership than driving him away.

The most exciting way to retrieve your horse is not to catch him at all. Teach him to come when you call instead. I never thought to try it till I read instructions written by Vanessa Bee, founder of the International Horse Agility Club (www.thehorseagilityclub.com). The foundation of Horse Agility is trust and communication so that ultimately the horse works at liberty; the obstacles are secondary. If you understand the "Mosey Method" of catching a horse, you've got a head start on teaching him to come when called. Since I cannot improve on Vanessa's instructions, I will instead recommend her excellent book, "The Horse Agility Handbook". (Chapter 3 covers "Catching and Releasing".)

I confess I was unconvinced until the first time my foster pony responded to my signal from 90 feet away. She turned and cantered across the arena to halt a respectful arm's length away from me, ears up, proudly awaiting the lavish praise she knew she had earned.

A horse who feels safe and comfortable with us can readily learn to be caught, but why stop there? It's even more fun when they want to catch us!