

Horses Pulling Back - June 17, 2006 Horses All
By Keith Stewart

Horses pulling back can be a real problem, not only for the horses, but also for the people around them. This problem is quite common and relates to the horse being tied to a solid fence before they have been properly prepared.

When a horse is tied to a solid fence the only place he can go is back. As he steps back, the halter catches him under the jaw scaring him. The horse pulls further back and panics because he can't move his feet and can't escape.

His next reaction, quite often, is to jump ahead. Considering that a horse has a blind spot directly in front of him he jumps ahead onto the fence, which sends him back again.

The horse now stands "rocked back" on the end of the halter because he feels it is the only place he can go without being hurt again. Some horses will figure this out and learn to stay between the two extremes, between the end of the rope and the fence. Some never do.

In the days of the vaquero, the ranches of California had an abundance of great oak trees with massive, outstretched branches. The California vaquero had a method of teaching young horses to accept being tied in a relaxed, content manner by tying them to one of these high branches.

The "mecate line" used by the vaquero (our halter rope) was short enough so that the horse was not able to step over it, but it was still able to move in any direction. The vaquero would tie young horses in this manner and would not turn them loose until they were standing contently.

Forward motion is the key to allowing your horse to learn to accept the confinement of being tied. The horse, being a prey animal, must be able to move its feet for self-preservation. Tying to an overhead branch or a modern day high line allows the horse motion because the branch or high line has some natural give.

The horse also learns to bend to the pressure, step his hind end over, disengage his hind quarters, and use up excess energy while learning to be tied. In addition, the feel the horse has with the rope coming from above is very similar to what he feels when being ridden: giving to pressure from above and bending the right and the left.

Most people don't have the luxury of having giant oak trees to tie their horses to, but a high line can provide the same benefits.

Our high line is made with two iron anchor posts set 30 ft. apart with a heavy gauge cable running between the two posts. The anchor posts are cemented 4 ft. into the ground. At 5-ft. intervals are tie chains attached to the overhead cable. An o-ring at the end of each tie chain is used to secure the lead rope.

Four horses can be tied comfortably and safely to a high line of this size. While tied, they are learning to give to pressure, are able to move their feet and use excess energy, and are not developing undesirable pulling habits. Only after the horse has learned to stand tied quietly to the high line do I tie them to a solid object such as a hitch rail or horse trailer tie.

Keith Stewart operates a training facility southwest of High River, Alberta, where he offers colt starting, horsemanship, ranch roping, and new horse owner workshops. To learn more, Keith can be contacted at (403) 601-7370.