

W

HEN I TALK ABOUT

teaching a horse to bow, the two comments I get most frequently are “I have always wanted to!” and “Why?”

When I was younger, I tried to teach my horses to bow using a carrot as bait. I had some success with my mare, depending on her mood, and the method worked even better on my food-motivated gelding. Still, I never could get any consistency, and I always needed food ... and a hungry horse.

A few years ago, I once again became motivated to teach a horse to bow, but now my motivation was not “just for fun” any more. I was riding my horse bareback, and I seem to have lost the ability to jump as I have aged. I wanted to be able to mount anytime, anywhere. My answer was teaching my horse to bow.

Bowing is just advanced groundwork. I always recommend that horses have a solid understanding of respecting your space and giving to pressure, and that they have been thoroughly sacked out to many objects. To learn to bow, your horse needs to be particularly comfortable with ropes around his body and legs, and must back willingly with either halter or bridle pressure.

I practice bowing at the end of a workout while I am cooling the horse down – usually for about five to 10 minutes each day. The amount of progress is largely determined by consistency and a horse’s

HOLLY CLANAHAN PHOTOS



Take a Bow

level of trust.

Teaching the bow is a two-step process: 1. Bow With the Rope, and 2. Hold Up Your Foot. While I am teaching my horses, I practice a little of each step every day, but you can also teach Bow With the Rope thoroughly and then move to Hold Up Your Foot.

This month, we’ll discuss Bow With the Rope, and you can practice it. Next month, you’ll learn how to ask for Hold Up Your Foot and put it all together for a bow.

Bow With the Rope

TO TEACH THE HORSE TO GO DOWN ON ONE knee to bow, I use a saddle, bridle and a long rope. Mine are 15 feet. You need to either tie a non-slip knot, such as a bowline, or use a single hobble strap around the pastern of the left front leg. *Never tie a slip knot!*

By Stacy Westfall

First in a two-part series on teaching your horse to bow.





Pressure on the rope will over-tighten the loop and, at the very least, become uncomfortable to your horse. The rope must be long enough to go from the horse's pastern, up over the saddle horn and back down to your hand.

Never tie the horse's leg up! We are using the rope to reduce back strain, *not* to tie the leg up or to force the horse down. You can use your hand, but it is hard on your back and an awkward position. We want this to be a positive learning experience.

Outfit your horse as shown in Photo 1. Accustom your horse to having a rope around his leg by wrapping a simple loop around the pastern and, while holding the rope off the ground, lead the horse around with the halter and let him experience moving with the rope on his leg.

When the horse is comfortable with this, use the rope to pick up the horse's hoof and then release it. Do this until the horse is relaxed while you hold his leg up with the rope. He may experiment with swinging his leg or attempting to put it down. This is where having the rope over the horn (as in the photo) is helpful. Don't take a second wrap on the horn or your ability to release won't be immediate and the horse may feel overly constrained. If he ever panics or seems stressed, go back a step and slow down.

Once he is comfortable with having his foot held up with the rope, introduce the idea of leaning backward. While the foot is up, pick up on the reins and ask the horse to begin to back up. The horse should lean ever so slightly back, as seen in Photo 2. When he does, release the leg and let it come down while giving him your end cue.

An end cue is key. I use an audible "kiss" or cluck. This is the cue for the horse to stop doing whatever it is that you have asked him to begin doing – in this case leaning back with the foot up. Teaching an end cue is part of the secret to keeping the horse in the bow until you decide it is time for him to get up. Without the end cue, it is his decision when he ends.

Two important tips during this stage: First, by using the bridle, you can put your right rein on the other side of the horn and keep the horse's head straight in front of him, and second, don't rush here. This is the most tempting time to ask for more and more and more. If you do, you will set your horse back, because instead of trusting more, he is likely to panic and think you are laying him down to serve him for a meal!

Over several sessions, progress to where the horse is comfortably and willingly leaning back farther and farther (photos 3 and 4). You will notice that during the process of the horse leaning farther back, he will begin to compensate by moving his hind legs back into a stretched-out stance. It is important that you take your time because the horse needs repetition to figure this out.

One of the best signs that your horse is figuring out what you want and is considering lying down (that is another lesson) is that when you pick up the leg, he spontaneously sticks his nose on the ground (Photo 5). This shows that he is thinking about "down." ■

Stacy Westfall is an AQHA life member from Mount Gilead, Ohio. For more information, or for a DVD on teaching the bow, visit www.westfallhorsemanship.com.

