

Will Not Stay Tied

By Marie Hoffman

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I was contacted by Bud to find out if there was any way he could get his horse to tie. The horse was a Paint yearling gelding. Bud said that he was very gentle in all other ways but could not be tied up. If he was tied, he pulled back violently until he broke loose. Bud had a buyer for the gelding if he could get him to tie. They had tried butt ropes and belly ropes. He still became violent until he was loose.

We arranged to have the gelding, Sundance, brought to my farm to see if I could help. Upon meeting the prospective owner and Sundance I agreed that the colt was very calm and good natured. Sundance had been handled a lot and was quiet to be around.

I started Sundance's first lesson by asking him to lower his head from pressure. A horse that pulls back is pushing into the pressure of his halter on his poll. This is an instinctive reaction for a horse.

I threaded a 30" chain through his halter going through the left ring from right to left as you are facing the horse. The snap is threaded down through the halter ring over the noseband of the halter and then down through the off side ring of the halter. The chain is then clipped on the upper side ring on the horses off or right side of his halter. The chain attached in this manner will not slide down his nose when there is no pressure on it.

Sundance was not difficult to get to lower his head from the pressure on the chain on his halter. He lowered it within a few minutes of me putting a give and take pressure on the chain. I moved his head side to side slowly to encourage him to release his neck and poll.

When I asked him to lower his head from pressure on his poll with my hand, he was much more resistant to lower his head. As soon as he released his head even a little, I let up my signals of pressure on his noseband of his halter with my hand and the pressure of my other hand squeezing and releasing on his poll. I repeated my signals to ask him to lower it again. After about 10 minutes he would lower his head until it was below his withers.

The next part of this lesson was to teach him to move forward from a signal on his croup from the wand (a four foot stiff non-stinging whip). I held his lead and stroked his back withers to croup several times and then tapped on the top of his croup while asking him to lead forward with the lead. It only took a couple of times before he understood to go forward from the tap on the croup alone.

The next day I started his lesson by reviewing his previous lesson. Then I put him in Taming the Tiger. This is where I looped a lunge line or long rope around a post and held the other end in my hand. The snap is attached to the lower side ring of his halter. If he wanted to pull back I would let the rope slide until he backed into the wall of his stall. I always do this in a stall so there is a solid boundary behind the horse.

He did as I expected and became very stiff and quickly backed up expecting the rope to tighten. He backed right up to the corner of his stall. I used a tug and release signal on the rope but he was in his instinctive state of freeze and unable to respond. When a horse is in this state he is not thinking and not responding to cues given by the handler.

I quickly realized he was not ready to come forward from signal on the halter. I quietly stroked his back and tapped his croup lightly. He did nothing at first. So I quietly repeated the cues. I did not cue harder, I only repeated them. This time he threw himself up and backwards. He was against the corner so he reared up and fell on his side. I let the lunge line slide enough so he did not feel it trap him in any way. When he got up I quietly repeated the cue on his croup to move forward again. This time he leaned forward a little. I praised him. This was the key to him learning to tie. The key is to move forward from pressure of the halter of which I was still giving soft vibrating signals and from the signal on the croup.

The reason he threw himself back with such force is that he was expecting the halter to restrain him. When he felt no solid pull on the lead when he threw himself backwards it was the start of him having new expectations when he was tied. In a few minutes he was standing where we had started. Sundance was thinking, I knew this because he was able to chew when I put my fingers in his mouth.

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The next session was done in the same manner. I had to stand outside the stall to hold the rope. When I stood next to him he did not realize he was contained. I did not wrap the lunge line around anything I only held it. When Sundance would go back against the rope I would let it go with him. Then I would give vibrating tug and release signals on the line to ask him to come forward. If he did not come forward I would keep holding the lunge line without pulling, but keeping a light pressure on it. I then walk into his stall and quietly signal him to go forward with the same signal on his croup I had used earlier. I had to do this several times this second tying session. Each time Sundance quietly walked forward after he thought a few seconds about the cue.

I repeated this same scenario wrapping the line around a post while I groomed Sundance. Then I would stand outside his stall for about ten minutes just holding the lunge line. By the fourth day Sundance would come forward by the tug and release signals on the rope. I no longer needed to go in to signal him on his croup to move forward. He was starting to understand how to come forward to halter pressure.

On the fifth day Sundance stood perfectly and did not test the limits I had set with Taming the Tiger. I was able to run the extra line through the lower ring on his halter, still holding on the end. This gave him a little greater feeling of restraint, because the rope did not release a quickly. Yet he was not tied hard so he still had nothing to fight against.

On the sixth day I moved him to a new stall and repeated the same exercise. Sundance tested the limits of how I had him restrained in Taming the Tiger. He did not pull back beyond the length of rope I had allowed him. He did move forward, side to side and walked back. But at no time did he pull back enough that I needed to give him more rope. This told me he was well on his way to learning to tie well. He understood to relieve the pressure of the halter all he has to do is move toward where he is tied.

I repeated the same lesson on the seventh day and Sundance did equally well.

On the eighth day I took him out to the round pen where I could tie him outside. I repeated the use of Taming the Tiger. Sundance came back against the pressure and walked back a step then he moved forward quietly and stood. He did not test the line again.

By the ninth day he was ready to tie on the side ring of his halter to an elastic tie. This is where the pressure is when I used Taming the Tiger. A horse is much less likely to pull back if the pressure is on the side of his halter, than if it is attached to the bottom.

In a stall I have a rope tied to a fat bicycle inner tube and the snap is a panic snap. I stayed in the stall with the wand in hand while I groomed him. I was very aware of where I was in case he should panic and flip backwards against the rope. Sundance was fine. He never even tested the rope enough to find out if it was stretchy.

On the tenth day I repeated tying him on the side of his halter. I then left the stall and stood outside to watch. He stood fine. At NO time did I want to scare him to make sure he would not pull back. This would only break his confidence in being restrained. He had memories of being restrained as a frightening experience. His first tying session was in the trailer as he was brought to his new home as a weanling. Needless to say it was not a good experience; he totally panicked and broke loose. He had never been trailered or tied before.

On the eleventh day I was able to tie him in this same stall for a half an hour while I did other things around the barn. He stood great. He never tested the limits. He just stood quietly.

Bud's prospective buyer decided to buy Sundance now that he could learn to tie I taught the new owner how to use the techniques I had used to teach Sundance his new skill. I instructed her to only use Taming the Tiger when she tied him for the next 30 times. After that, if he was still progressing well, to tie him with an elastic type tie. If she thought he would become frightened at his surrounding or something that was going on that was unusual, she was to go back to tying him in Taming the Tiger.

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I explained that when a horse's first experience in tying and so many after were as frightening as they were to Sundance, it will take a long time to make sure that his new learned skill is solid. It is important not put these new skill to the test too quickly if it can be avoided. If he is given the chance he will build enough confidence to stand even when something unusual happens to make him want to leave. Sundance will have learned to come forward even in a scary situation from halter pressure.