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# Going to extremes

*Your horse's extremities – his legs, ears and nose – are very sensitive. Warwick Schiller explains how to handle them safely and introduce boots and clippers*

**H**andling your horse's legs is something you do on a daily basis, whether it's to pick out his feet, check for lumps and bumps, or put on boots or bandages. However, if he doesn't like you doing this then not only can it make these day-to-day tasks difficult, but it can also compromise your safety, too.

Horses aren't deliberately difficult with their legs – you have to appreciate that they're flight animals, so they need to protect their legs at all costs to be able to outrun predators. The ability to hear or smell danger is also key for horses, which explains why he may not feel comfortable with you touching his ears or nose, either. When you then introduce foreign objects such as boots or clippers it can make the problem even worse. However, a bit of simple groundwork training can help him feel much more comfortable and improve safety for both of you, too.



## Touchy-feely

If your horse is sensitive to being touched in a certain area, such as his ears or muzzle, start by rubbing in him a place where he is comfortable – for most horses, this is around their back, shoulders and sides – and gradually move closer to the area where he's not so happy. If he gets a little tense or worried, stay in that place but keep rubbing until he settles. Then, go back to where you started and repeat the exercise – you should be able to get closer to where you were aiming for because you've shown your horse that you're sympathetic to his worries. ➔



## Our expert



Originally from Australia, but now based in California, **Warwick Schiller** is a former World Equestrian Games Australian team member. He makes online videos and holds clinics around the world, demonstrating the principles of horse training for any discipline.

## Introducing leg handling

Your horse's legs are one of his main weapons, so they require a little bit more caution to handle. If he's not happy with you touching them, the first thing to do is make sure that he's okay to have something else in contact with them, such as the end of a long leadrope.

Horses kick at things to make them go away, so if he tries this, keep whatever tool you're using in contact with his leg until he stops, then take it away. If you take the rope away when he starts kicking, he'll learn that he can do this every time he doesn't want you touching his legs. Once he's happy to have his legs touched, it's time to teach him to pick them up...



Use the end of a rope to make sure he's happy having his legs touched



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**1** Loop a long rope around his leg, starting by his elbow or stifle, and run it over his leg, gradually working your way down towards his hoof. If he starts to react, leave the rope in place until he settles, then start again.

**2** Once he's okay with the rope, keep it looped around his fetlock and gently pull on it to encourage him to lift his foot so his toe is still resting on the ground.

**3** Now it's safe to start using your hands. Whenever you handle your horse's legs, start by putting your hand on his shoulder or hindquarters and running it all the way down the leg to his hoof, so you don't startle him.

**4** Squeezing his hock or chestnut gently will encourage him to lift his toe. At first, you aren't trying to pick his foot up, you're just asking him to take the weight off it of his own volition, which helps him learn to balance on three legs.

**5** Only once he's learned to do that should you try to actually hold his hoof – if he's learnt to balance his weight on three legs, you'll be able to hold it up with very little effort.

**!** If your horse doesn't like you touching his legs or holding them, you need to ask yourself why this might be. Often this behaviour is caused by a more fundamental problem and if you can solve that, you'll probably be on the way to solving the leg problem, too. For

example, it may be because he doesn't trust you or understand the dynamics of your relationship. Returning to your groundwork and practising it will help with both these issues, and if he has more trust in you, then he'll be more likely to accept you touching his legs.

## Suited and booted

Travel boots, particularly on their hindlegs, can be a real problem for some horses, even if they're fine with brushing or overreach boots. They're also something that we don't tend to train our horses to be good with, we just put them on in the stable or when he's tied up, then load him straight onto the trailer, which adds another potentially stressful situation to the problem of the boots. If your horse then starts shaking his leg to try to get the boots off, he's going to be doing it in a wobbly and unstable trailer, which could cause an accident.

One of my golden rules of training is that if your horse isn't comfortable with a situation, ask yourself what you can do to make it easier or less of an issue. In the case of helping him wear travel boots, or any kind of boot for that matter, if one boot bothers him then two is going to make the situation twice as bad, and all four will make it four times as bad – always make the problem as small as you can to make it easier to solve. Here's my process for introducing your horse to any kind of boot...



### TOP TIP

Ask a friend to hold your horse while you're handling his legs.



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### TOP TIP

It's important for the safety of both you and your horse that you're in control of the situation. Break down what you're trying to achieve into small, achievable steps and carry them out in an enclosed space such as an arena.

**1** First, it's important to make sure your horse is happy having his legs handled. If he isn't okay with you touching him, he's probably not going to be okay wearing boots, so go back to your groundwork and work on this.

**2** Once you know he's comfortable having his legs touched everywhere the boot will cover him, put one boot on and lead him around to see how he responds.

**3** Often, it isn't until he starts to move around in the boots that he has a problem with them. If he starts to kick out or shake his leg, just keep walking him until he settles down.

**4** Now he's happy with one boot on, add the second and repeat the process. Then do the same again with the third and fourth boots until he's wearing the full set.

**5** Repetition is a key part of training, so once you've got all the boots on and your horse is fine with them, it isn't the end of the process. Take the boots off and start again, one at a time, until you can put them all on, walk him around and he doesn't react at all. Practise a little bit every day.

**!** If, for example, your horse takes 30 seconds to adjust to wearing boots, that doesn't mean he's okay with wearing them. He's only okay if he shows no reaction from the moment you put them on. Think of it like your aids – if you put

your leg on and your horse doesn't move forwards instantly, he's not good off your leg. If he isn't immediately comfortable wearing boots, he isn't good with them. You shouldn't settle for less than perfect for anything you do with your horse.

## Clipping

Clippers can be a cause for concern for many horses – after all, they're loud and not something they'd encounter in their natural environment. However, they're something that almost every horse will come across at least once in his life, whether for grooming or veterinary purposes, so it's important for both his safety and yours that he can accept them calmly. Here's how I introduce my horses to clippers...

- 1 As with introducing boots, it's important that your horse is happy to be touched everywhere that you're planning to clip. If he isn't comfortable with you handling his ears or jawline, for example, he's highly unlikely to be okay with something that whirs and vibrates touching him there.
- 2 To introduce clippers for the first time, start by standing several steps away from your horse while he's being held by a friend, then turn the clippers on.
- 3 Slowly walk towards him holding the clippers. If he gets tense or worried at any point, stop but don't turn them off.
- 4 When he's calmed down, go back to where you started and repeat the process – you should find you can get slightly closer before he becomes worried again. If you keep doing this, you'll get to the stage where you're close enough to hold the clippers right next to his body.
- 5 When you're this close, it's important to stay with him if he moves away so he doesn't learn that running makes the clippers go away. Don't try to restrain him or he'll feel trapped, but holding onto his headcollar will allow you to move with him. As soon as he's still, turn the clippers off and take them away.
- 6 Even once he's able to accept the clippers, it's important to continue practising regularly until you're able to put them straight on him.

### TOP TIP

Always wear an up-to-standard riding hat and sturdy boots when handling your horse's legs. Full-length, tough trousers, such as jeans, will also help to protect your legs.

*It's important that you stay with him if he moves away so he doesn't learn that running makes the clippers go away*



Last issue: Part 2  
Teach him to respect your space

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