

# Toe the line

Having trouble picking up your horse's feet? Michael explains why it's a big ask for a horse, and shows you how to teach him to accept it

## About Michael

Michael Peace is based in Oxfordshire and he uses his unique

'Think Equus' philosophy to help horses and riders of all levels to achieve their ultimate goals.

To book your horse in for training or a home visit with Michael, call ☎ 01865 842806 or visit [www.michaelpeace.co.uk](http://www.michaelpeace.co.uk)



Asking a young or unhandled horse to pick up his feet is a big thing for him. After all, horses rely on their legs to take flight and flee from danger should they need to, so if he thinks his mobility has been impaired in any way, then he feels more vulnerable. If you're having trouble, then it's important to first understand why your horse won't let you pick up his feet. That way, you'll be more sympathetic in your approach and more likely to help him gain trust in you, rather than get frustrated by it.

It's much easier if you are able to teach your horse to pick up his feet and allow you to handle his legs when he is very young, but many of us have horses who came into our lives as adults and sadly, not all of them will have had these invaluable early lessons. However, you can still teach your horse to accept this process, no matter what age he is, but you'll need to allow plenty of time and be patient.

## Why bother?

Your horse needs to learn to lift his feet up, and allow them to be held up for a period of time, because as well as allowing you to pick out his feet daily, he will need to be shod or trimmed by a farrier regularly. Plus, in the unfortunate event of your horse injuring himself, your vet will find it easier and be able to diagnose and treat the problem better, if your horse is co-operative.





Only ask your horse to pick his feet up when he is comfortable with you touching them

### Presentation matters

Training horses to do anything should always be broken down into stages. After all, top dressage riders don't teach their horses to do canter pirouettes before they have perfected balance, rhythm and straightness! It's no different with feet. While your ultimate aim might be to pick up your horse's feet while he stands still for the required length of time, your first step

**Top tip**  
When you let go of your horse's foot, give him the responsibility of putting it back down on the ground – don't do it for him.

### Training horses to do anything should be broken down into stages

may be teaching him to accept you approaching him or touching his legs. How you go up to a horse is very important. If you approach him aggressively or threateningly, then don't be surprised if he backs away. Instead, walk towards him slowly but confidently and if he

moves away, resist the temptation to hold him tighter or pull him back towards you. It's a better idea to allow him to move, but only in a small circle around you, and keep moving with him, so he starts to learn that moving away doesn't achieve anything. He'll also soon learn that you're not going to hurt him, hence you've taken some more steps towards building a trusting relationship with each other.



### Feet first

Once your horse is comfortable about you approaching him, you can start to ask for the next step. Remember that some horses will find it hard to balance on three legs, so be considerate about how high you lift his legs, what positions you put them in and the length of time you expect him to hold it up for. Also consider that horses use their

neck to balance, so leave him some slack in the lead rope so that he can move if he needs to. For this reason, Michael prefers not to tie horses up. He adds: "Horses with short legs may not physically be able to lift their legs up very high, so be considerate and never try and force a leg to go higher than the horse is comfortable with."



### Up front

To pick up a horse's front foot, position yourself at his shoulder and place the hand nearest to the horse on his withers, slowly sliding it down towards his foot, keeping your hand in contact with your horse at all times.

You may find that your horse naturally lifts his foot up as you get close to it. Be aware that some young horses may strike forward, in an attempt to get rid of you.

At this stage, reward the horse for lifting his hoof, allow him to put it back down and repeat, being sure to reward him each time. Whether you are picking up a hind leg or a front, never try to hold on to your horse's



foot if he doesn't want you to, as this feels a bit carnivorous to horses. Asking your horse to take a step backwards (pictured above) before you lift a front leg will help him to balance on three legs better.



### Case study

Anita owns Miller, a seven-year-old Irish-bred gelding. She hasn't had Miller very long and is still getting to know him, which is taking longer due to lots of injuries he's had. Miller doesn't like having his hind feet picked up and often kicks out at Anita when she tries to do this. On the day of our shoot, Miller was quite well behaved, but Michael watched how Anita was handling him and gave her some good tips.

"I can see from his expression that he's not worried about having his feet picked up at all, he just doesn't see why he should," said Mike. However, he noticed that Anita was running her hand down the inside of Miller's leg to pick it up instead of the outside. "Going down the inside of the leg is really irritating – threatening even – for horses," he explained, "so always run your hand down the outside."

"Also, when you pick up a hind leg, bring it forwards underneath him more. This is not only safer for you, but it will help your horse to balance better and it's generally more comfortable for him, too."



### Back up plan

To pick up a hind foot:

1. Position yourself level with your horse's hindquarters and rest the hand nearest to him on top of his quarters.
- 2, 3 and 4. Slide your hand down the outside of his leg towards his foot. You're likely to find that young horses will snatch their feet up quickly, so don't try to grab the foot, just let the horse put it back on the ground, reward him and ask him again.
5. Your horse should soon start to lift his hind feet more slowly without snatching, and soon he should allow you to hold on to them. When you do get to this stage, hold the hind foot forward rather than dragging it out behind you, because this helps the horse to balance better, and will also help to prevent him kicking out at you.

### Foot for thought

Sometimes with an issue like this it is better to go back a stage," said Michael. "Make sure your horse will lead politely (see April 2009 *Horse&Rider*), teach him to go backwards (see my books) and

desensitise him to lots of different things (September 2009 *Horse&Rider*). The more things he does and sees in his early life, the easier things will be later on – both under saddle and on the ground."

**Top tip**  
Once your horse is happy for you to pick his feet up, start to gently tap around them so you prepare him for the farrier.

"Whether you are loading, handling, leading etc, follow the same rules. If the horse needs to 'escape', ie back out of the lorry, then let him. Just bring him straight back to where he was so he thinks, what's the point?"

**More information** If you want to give your young horse the best start in life or if you've got a problem horse who needs help, call ☎ 01865 842806 or visit [www.michaelpeace.co.uk](http://www.michaelpeace.co.uk)  
To buy Michael Peace's new Semi-Flex saddle and have it fitted by expert saddler, Barry Swain, while Michael Peace rides and assesses your horse, call ☎ 01865 842806.

# A place for your horse at Michael's clinic on 19 November 2009

# WIN!

**D**o you have a horse who won't load, naps, barges, rears, bucks or perhaps does all of these things? We're looking for four readers' horses to take part in Michael's clinic in Oxfordshire this November. Michael will work with your horse for free (usual charge £280 for a consultation).

All you need to do to be in with a chance of winning this prize is answer the question below, then send the answer along with a photo of your horse and details about why he or she needs Michael's help, to Michael Peace competition, *Horse&Rider* Magazine, Headley House, Headley Road, Grayshott, Surrey GU26 6TU. Remember to include an SAE if you would like your photograph returned.

To book tickets for the clinic, call the Think Equus office on ☎ 01865 842806. Limited number available, so book early to avoid disappointment.



**Q** What is the name of Michael Peace's saddle?

### TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Winners must be available on 19 November, 2009. Winners agree to be featured in a future issue of *Horse&Rider* Magazine. The clinic will be held in Oxfordshire. Insurance and travel to and from, and any accommodation (where applicable) will be the winners' responsibility. Neither Michael nor *Horse&Rider* Magazine can be held liable for any loss or damage incurred whilst taking part in this competition. For Rules of Entry, please turn to page 160. No purchase necessary.