



Teaching Your Horse to Lay Down

Why would you do this? Teaching a horse to lay down goes a long way toward teaching him to accept restraint, and to relax in your presence. Accepting restraint will be a great help if veterinary care is needed, and to make the horse less likely to panic and thrash if he gets caught in a fence. And you may think your horse is relaxed with you, but if we won't let you approach him while he is laying down, then he could probably use some help in that area. A horse has to let go of a lot of tension to be able to lay down; it just happens. You need to build trust between you to accomplish this, and this is a good way to do it.

Don't make the mistake of believing that you can build trust with your horse by petting him and feeding him treats and singing him little songs. You will need to push the boundaries of his comfort zone in order to create a place for trust.

Also, if I happen to be riding in the wilderness with someone who gets hurt, I can lay my horse down and get the person up on her. Who knows? It might be useful some day.

Please keep in mind that I am talking about teaching the horse to lay down over a period of time, not laying the horse down against his will, or what I call "throwing a horse." That has a few emergency uses, but does not much at all to inspire trust and partnership in a horse. When prey animals are forced down, their brains flood with endorphins and they sort of go into a trance state. I can only surmise that God made them that way to grant them a little mercy when they are killed and eaten by predators. Anyone who shears sheep or doctors cattle uses this trance state to their advantage.

Also bear in mind that this is an exercise for experienced horse people. There is some danger involved to horse, human, and property. You need to have feel and timing, and be able to recognize when the horse is trying and when he is not. Be quick to release and reward the tries, but try not to release when the horse is struggling. If you have to for safety sake, then do and go on like nothing happened, but try not to let that happen more than once. If the horse is released and rewarded for struggling, he will struggle always and this could be disastrous if he gets caught in a fence or something. As John Lyons says, it is of utmost importance in any horse training session that neither horse or handler get hurt, and both end the session calmer than when they started.

A little history: John Rarey, famed Horse Tamer of the 19th Century, often laid troubled and troublesome horses down as part of his program. In 1862, the U.S. Army officially adopted his horse training techniques and used them until the advent of the Jeep made Cavalry obsolete. All Cavalry horses were taught to lay down for several reasons. First was to create a horse who was submissive to restraint. Second was so the horse could be laid down to make him a smaller target. And third was so that he could provide cover for his rider. That was a last resort, as any Cavalry soldier who became horseless instantly became a foot soldier.

How to begin: Your horse does not need to be broke to ride, but he does need to be comfortable in a saddle, protective leg boots, and long ropes. Your horse also needs to be able to back up softly and willingly if you grasp the lead rope under his chin and pull it back toward his chest. He should just drop his nose and slide backwards. Also practice leading the horse by his foot, and getting him to accept you holding up his foot with the rope. If you've got those things, you are ready to start. Also, it is best to work on laying down last thing after a long work session. The horse will be tired, relaxed, and the muscles will be warmed up and supple. This technique puts some stress on the body, especially the right front leg.

Take your horse to a safe area of decent size (not a stall) with soft footing. The softer the footing, the more your horse will want to lay down on it. Avoid using a grassy area, as the horse will just graze. You may want gloves, and a helmet is never a bad idea, as some horses will try to rear to get away from the constraint during this first part. Outfit the horse in a saddle with a horn, (preferably with a breast collar and rear cinch, which will help keep the saddle in place), protective leg boots at least on the front legs, and a halter and lead. Have the lead rope looped over the neck on the right side, as you will need to turn his head to the right later. Attach a rope to his left front pastern, either with a single hobble (which I like to use) or a non-slip knot.

Pass the leg rope around the saddle horn and ask the horse to pick up his foot. You can do this by nudging it with your toe, then pull it up with the rope and hold it. Most horses will jerk their leg back and forth to free it, and may hit their other leg with it, which is why you use protective boots. Keep his foot up snug under his belly to minimize this danger. Stay calm, and try to stay with the horse if he hops around, and try not to release the foot. When he stands calmly, you can release the foot and pet him for a few seconds, then start again. Do this until he performs calmly and smoothly.

Next, with the horse's leg drawn up, take hold of his lead rope under his jaw and ask him to back up. This may precipitate more resistance, but just keep the leg drawn up until he calms, and ask for the back-up again. If he leans backwards or drops his head, release the leg and pet him. You want the horse to start looking at the ground and thinking about going down. That is enough for the first couple of sessions.

Keep your sessions short, no more than 10-15 minutes if the horse is calm and accepting. Go longer if the horse is resistant, but do not release the horse until he is accepting what you ask. Releasing him when he is fighting the restraint (unless he is getting into a dangerous situation) will teach him to fight restraint. DO release him when you get the slightest try from him and do it often.

When the horse is fully accepting of having his leg held up, and is willing to lean back when you ask without hopping around, he is ready to put his knee down. Keep the backwards pull on the halter, but slowly feed slack to the leg as the horse goes to put it down, so that the cannon bone is coming down parallel to the ground. Keeping the foot pulled up to the belly at this point will make him have to put just his knee down, and will cause undue stress to the leg. Even letting the front of the fetlock joint touch down slightly before the knee is OK, because this is more like what a horse would do if he were laying himself down. Try to get the horse to stay down on his knee for several seconds, and try to get him to stay there longer and longer. If you can pet the horse while he is down on his knee, that is really helpful, but keep in mind that he can rear up and hurt you.

Again, keep your sessions short, because the horse is going to be using and stretching muscles and tendons that are unaccustomed to this kind of use. When a horse lays himself down, he drops onto both knees at once, then rolls down onto his belly.

OK. Once the horse is willing to put his knee on the ground and stay there for 10 seconds or longer, the next step is to actually lay him down. At this point I like to do away with the saddle for a couple of reasons. I don't really want the horse to lay on my expensive saddle, plus I want him to understand that when he is saddled, he is working, and he is not allowed to roll or lay down. However, both the guys I learned this from lay the horse down in his saddle, just tying the left stirrup up over the seat so the horse doesn't bruise his ribs on it.

I like to put my saddle away and put a bareback pad on my horse. I then run the leg rope (now at least 14 feet long) from the foot, over the back and around under the belly to me. The bareback pad will keep the rope from bruising the horse's back. For the horse to lay down, he will need to have his nose to the right of his right leg, turned away from you. Not too much pull to the right, or he will just turn his head and not sink down.

When everything is right, keep holding the backwards pressure on the lead rope, even when the horse tries to stand up again, and he will try. Keep the pressure on so that he gets the idea that it only releases when he's down. If he gets away from you, just fix it up and try again. **DO NOT** lose your patience and get cranky, because the horse will know that it is not safe to lay down with you near. Just keep thinking about how nice and restful and safe it is to lay down. If your horse likes belly scratches as much as mine does, then visualize him stretching out luxuriously on his side for the mother of all belly scratches. Keep yourself relaxed and even yawn and swallow and smack your lips, which approximates what a horse does when he licks his lips in acceptance of what you ask.

Eventually, the horse will roll down onto his left shoulder and lay down. When he does that, continue to pull the lead rope across his neck to lay him over on his side, which will allow his right leg to fold into its natural position. It is also prime for good belly scratches if you and your horse feel safe with that. You are fairly safe since you are away from his legs. Keep his nose tipped up to keep him laying down. Pet him as much as you can, keeping your mind relaxed and thinking of how wonderful it is to let go of fear and just rest there. Try to pull some slack in the leg rope (which he will be laying on) so that he can straighten out his leg when it is time to get up.

When the horse is relaxed, give his lead rope some slack and let him roll up on his chest. Keep petting him and telling him how wonderful and safe he is. Let him get up when he's ready, then call it a day. When you practice the next time, do not expect him to lay right down; it will take him a few tries to get into the routine of it. When he gets fairly well-practiced at it, you can dispense with the leg rope going around the horse's belly, and just hold the foot up yourself, first with a lead rope looped around it, and then eventually with your hand.

If you plan to mount your horse while he is laying down, and have him stand up with you on (something I don't regularly do but do practice occasionally), it is probably best to lay him down at least 20 times before doing that. It takes a lot more muscle to hoist you and him up, than just himself.

Congratulations! You have just gone a long way toward building a more trusting partnership with your horse.