

LEAVE NO TRACE

Tying the Trail Horse

Most of us trail ride for the experience of being connected with a horse in a place where the scenery is always changing. Often we are looking for a human-horse-land harmony that can be found only in open spaces, and preferably in wild places. The beauty of it all stimulates and invigorates our senses. The shadowy silhouette of horse-and-rider gliding over the ground inspires our imagination. Our need for a private smile and soft laugh cannot be denied.

But this living dream can change from the beauty of it all to embarrassment, fatigue, anguish, and disgust. These four responses may be attributed to each of two causes:

1) Your horse has run away and left you either at the trailhead or on the trail; and

2) You are noticing that trail horses have degraded the environment that you came to the trail to enjoy.

Fortunately, there are steps that can be taken that will minimize the likelihood of each of these situations. The first rule of Leave No Trace (LNT) is: "Plan ahead and prepare before you go." One thing that this means for the trail rider is that he/she must plan and prepare to tie the trail horse. Preparation of the horse for tying requires training to stand tied at home. Standing tied means that the horse is not leaning on the halter rope to find weak spots for a quick and naughty escape. It should also mean that he

stands in one place for brushing and saddling unless asked to move over.

The very first thing that the trail horse must be trained to believe is that if when tied he strains on the rope, his body might leave but his head will remain at the tying spot. When he believes this, he will make the right decision. The reason for getting this preparation done is that while there likely will be an adequate supply of large rope and strong points to tie to at home, this may not be the case at the trailhead or on the trail. This is particularly true on the trail where carrying large bulky ropes is somewhere between inconvenient and impracticable.

TYING AT THE TRAILHEAD

When arriving at the trailhead, the horse will need to be tied for brushing and saddling or to have the tack adjusted if it has been traveling with tack on. This can be a problem for young and inexperienced horses. Sometimes they have never been in a situation where people, trailers, and horses were coming and going – sometimes with a great deal of commotion. If he has been properly prepared, he will stand. If not, a wreck followed by a lot of horse chasing may be in the offing.

Trailheads vary widely in accommodations for tying horses. In the best of all worlds, there will be lots of room for tying to the trailer. In such situations the horse can be tied without interfering with

any activities taking place at a nearby trailer, and not being in the way of human, horse, or vehicular traffic.

If room does not exist for tying the horse to his trailer, a hitching rail might be available. In my view, a well-designed hitching rail will be made of heavy timbers with posts set in concrete to a depth of 30-36 inches. The rail height should be 4 to 4 1/2 feet. Utility poles that are in good condition, i.e., not splintered and 6"x 6" timbers with beveled edges work very well. I like the heavy timbers for two main reasons. First, inevitably, they are going to be chewed. Large timbers can stand more chewing than can small ones before they are critically weakened. And second, if a fractious horse tries to go over or under the rail, a large timber is less likely to break and result in a horse running down the road trying to get away from a piece of wood that is tied to the end of his halter rope.

Beveled edges on sawn timbers are important because square edges can be sharp enough to cut a horse, and they splinter more easily than do beveled edges. This is particularly true for pressure treated wood.

I discourage the use of eyebolts in the timbers because they are easily snagged by tack and clothing. Tie-plates are not necessary, but if they are used, they should be on the sides of the rail – never on top. When on top they offer the potential to cause dangerous cuts to a horse that might get over the rail.

When tying to a rail, the horse should be tied short. In this condition, he is less likely to get himself into trouble with the rail or with another horse. Also, if the horse is still in the early stages of experience, he is going to have less room for moving around while being brushed and saddled.

Sometimes trailheads have posts available for cross-tying, picket lines, or high lines. Cross-tying the horse for brushing and saddling is ideal when the facilities are available. Whether to use a picket line or a high line may be a matter of preference. I recently changed my thinking about the choices. When the horse is either under saddle or being saddled or unsaddled, I now prefer the picket line placed at a height of about 4



Horses under saddle tied to a picket line at about 4 1/2 feet above ground.

feet. In this situation, the horse has very limited ability to move forward or backward. He can move in a 180 degree arc, which I may want him to do. Furthermore, he cannot entangle the saddle in the line as he might on a high-line that might be placed at 6 feet or higher but that has sagged. If the horse is being tied for rest without the saddle on, and particularly if he is to be tied for a long time, such as overnight, I prefer the high line so that he can try various zones of comfort.

The second of the Back Country Horsemen of America Commandments is: "The horseman shall not tie his stock directly to a tree for more than a short period of time." The LNT principle says *never* tie a horse to a tree. Well, "never" covers an infinite length of time and situations. What BCHA is trying to get at is to tie a horse to a tree only as a last resort and then get him away from it as soon as possible. Proper planning and preparing will minimize these "last resort" situations.

Horses damage trees in two ways – chewing and pawing. It is an unusual horse that will not take a bite out of tree to which it is tied. The more tired the horse is, the less likely that tree-chewing is going to be chosen as a way to pass the time. However, tired or not, some are going to do it regardless of the need for rest.

Trail horses chew trees for a variety of reasons, the least likely of which is hunger. I think that they will chew out of aggravation (probably not very different from mouthing the bit), out of boredom, restlessness, and, sometimes, because the bark actually tastes good. Horses chewing in response to the first three of these causes will chew on any type of bark. I have seen horses chew on thick barked pines and loose, flaky barked white oaks that by all reason must have been unpalatable at best and highly distasteful at worst. Never the less, the trees were chewed, and most of the non-equestrians that later passed these points remarked on what those insensitive horse people had done.

If the horse finds a tree with a bark that tastes good, a wreck really happens. Some horses have a particular bent for these wrecks. In my experience, yellow poplar (also called tulip poplar) is an eastern species that horses truly love to chew. They prefer young, thin bark, but old, thick bark will do. Some years ago when I was creating a new pasture lot, I

left eight yellow poplars standing that averaged about 14 inches in diameter for my bees to work. Today, only one is left with only minor damage. One is left that might make it another two years. The rest are dead from being completely girdled by my horses – one horse in particular.

Beech, red maple and dogwood are some other trees that horses seem to love to chew. In the eastern forests, dogwoods at trailheads and along trails seem to really take a beating, I think first, because they are just the right size to tie to, and second, once tied to it, almost any horse is going to chew it. The flowering dogwood, prominent symbol of Appalachian spring and fall, girdled by a trail rider's horse is not much of a legacy to be passed on.

A trailhead or trail rest stop with damaged, dying and dead trees that are the result of horse chewing and pawing looks like a biological junk yard. There may be other beautiful trees and places nearby, but this place is ugly to anyone who really looks at it. The trail horsemen

will be when you go back to him; b) so that he will not hurt himself, and c) so that he will have minimal impact on the land. To accomplish this, the rider must pack two basic items – halter and rope.

Two of my horses are trail veterans, and I ride them each in a halter-bridle combination. Therefore, for them, I only need to pack some rope. My third horse is still learning, and on the advice of a highly respected horse expert (old Butch Kennedy – my friend and ever-ready critic on numerous things), I ride him in a bridle with a full-cheek snaffle, but a halter-bridle is in his future. For him, I carry a 1/4 inch, hard-braided, polyethylene halter. It has adequate strength, and it is light and easy to pack. It is my choice not to ride with a halter over or under the bridle even though I know that numerous horsemen far superior to me do so.

When riding alone, or if the horse, for whatever reasons, may need to be tied away from his ride companions, cross-tying is a good way to handle the situation. Based on experience and



Single rope cross-tie with panic snap braided into the middle of the rope.

did not just leave a trace; they created a mess that could have been prevented by appropriate planning and preparation.

TYING ON THE TRAIL

Any good trail horseman will make an earnest endeavor to abide by LNT and BCHA principles to protect the aesthetic and ecological integrity of trails and the lands in which those trails are embedded. Planning and preparing for tying the horse while on the trail are processes essential to good trail stewardship.

Assuming that the horse will stand tied, it does not take a lot of rope and gear to put him in a place: a) where he

advice, if I am going to tie a lone horse, I carry a 30-foot length of 3/8-inch soft polyethylene, hollow-braid. At the center of this rope, I have spliced in a 1 inch x 4 1/2 inch panic snap. At the point of the splice, I leave 4 – 6 inches of spliced rope length so that the horse can move his head laterally 8-10 inches in each direction. If I want to stop on the trail, I simply snap the cross-tie on to the halter and tie him midway between two trees.

With this particular cross-tie, I will have about 14 feet of rope to either side of the center of the horse. To minimize the likelihood of root damage, I need to tie the horse at least 6 feet away from

any tree, but the farther the better. It will take about 4 feet of rope to go around and tie to a tree that is 12 inches in diameter. If I use trees that are no greater than this in size, I will have the potential to keep the horse at least 10 feet from the nearest tree. However, trees less than 4 inches in diameter at 4 1/2 feet above the ground should never be used for tying. And, of course, dead and dying trees, and trees with large limbs or tops that are dead and decaying should always be avoided.

The cross-tie rope described above can be tied to the saddle (like a lariat) or easily packed in a cantele or horn bag. Of course, two halter ropes can be used to cross-tie the horse, but this gives the rider one additional item to pack. In either case, the newly popular "tree saver" web belts can be placed around the trees and the rope(s) can be tied to the rings on the belt. In my opinion, this is not an absolute requirement, particularly when tying for only a short period of time.

When a number of horses need to be tied for a short time on the trail, and assuming that the horses either get along or can be positioned so that they get along, I really like the picket line approach. I recently attended a seminar in Sacramento that was given by Ken Graves, a veteran packer for the USDA-Forest Service in California. He routinely uses the picket line for his saddle horses and packstock on the trail and in camp. He is a highly skilled horseman, and his reasoning makes good sense to me.

First, because it is lower to the ground, the picket line is easier to set up and take down than is a high-line. And second the picket line itself creates a semi-barrier so horses can be tied on either side of it, thus lessening the length

of the line and minimizing the amount of area impacted by tied horses. While I will likely continue the high line method for overnight tying, when on the trail, the picket line is my preference.

The standard recommendation made by land management agencies, as well as LNT and BCHA, for tying trail horses and stock is the use of the high line. When properly set up, the high line should be secured at points that are at least 7 feet above the ground. Points higher than this may be desirable as the line will inevitably sag with time. As I mentioned earlier, I personally prefer the high line for tying overnight, even though the set up process is somewhat more demanding than is the picket line.

I like picket lines and high lines that are 3/8 inch nylon or polyethylene rope and 50 feet in length. They can be of any size that fits your needs. The 3/8 inch synthetics provide adequate strength for horses that are trained to stand tied, they do not absorb water, they are light, and they are easy to pack. However, they do stretch and sag so plans must be made to periodically tighten them to prevent entanglements.

Horses that are tied on the same picket line or high line need to be well acquainted before being placed near each other, and particularly if they are to be adjacent. This requires planning and preparation. Even with horses that are pasture mates, plans need to be made so that the ones that get along best are positioned accordingly.

Tying points along the high line should be at least 10 feet apart. The halter rope should have no more than 3 feet of play, 2 feet or less may be advisable if the horse insists on moving around a lot. On a picket line, tying horses opposite each other at a spacing of about 6 feet

can be an option if the horses positioned adjacent and opposite each other are getting along. More planning and preparation is required here and, to the extent possible, should be tried at home.

Tying the halter rope to the picket line or high line again requires planning and



The Prussik knot is placed on the line after it has been secured and tightened.

preparation. Four options for attachment are available. First, before securing the line, lineman's knots may be tied in it at appropriate spacing. In my view, this method is not desirable because it uses up a lot of the line length. Also, this knot will seize under strain and be difficult to untie.

The highly advertised Knot Eliminator™ is an excellent device. It is easy to pack and use, and it barely affects available line length. It is also expensive. The Clemson Easy Tie (CET) is also easy to pack and use. It, too, barely affects available line length, and it is inexpensive. Anyone can make their own CET at home for a couple of dollars.

Each of the three methods described requires that the knots be tied or the devices attached to the line before it is secured to the anchor points and tightened. However, the fourth device, the Prussik knot is placed on the line after it has been secured and tightened. To make the Prussik knot, I use 1/4 inch hard-braided polyethylene or nylon rope. I tie the two ends of a 3-foot section together. Lay the loop over the picket line or high line with the end of the loop without the knot dropping down about 6 inches. Run the other end of the loop through the dropped end and around the line three times. Pull the dropped end



The Clemson Easy Tie (left) and the Knot Eliminator (right) are both easy to pack and use a minimum amount of line length.

through what is left of the end that has been used for wrapping and tighten the knot. This knot will slide laterally on the line for easy positioning, but when pulled at an angle it will bite the line and stay in place. The knot also can be untied easily.

Any one of these methods will work. It is really a matter of personal choice. But choose one.

Anchoring the picket line or high line to two trees that are each at least 4 inches in diameter at chest height, preferably greater than 6 inches, and that are totally sound with no likelihood that a dead limb is going to fall on the horses is the next consideration. The front feet of the horse should not get closer than 6 feet from the base of the anchor trees. This means that the first tie point on the line should not be closer than 10 feet from the tree.

As mentioned earlier, LNT, BCHA, and the land management agencies are all recommending "tree saver" devices for attaching picket lines and high lines to trees. The idea is to prevent damage to the tree as a result of directly wrapping a rope around it. I personally and professionally disagree with the assertion that a 3/8 inch or larger rope wrapped twice around a tree will injure it even if a fractious horse is tied to the middle of the line. However, wrapping the rope twice around the tree is important to my argument.

On the other hand, the tree saver devices can simplify the line set up and maintenance process. The web belt is simply thrown around the first tree and the line secured to its rings by an appropriate knot. A bowline is normally recommended. At the other end of the line, the second anchor tree also gets a belt, but this time an arrangement is made for initial and periodic tightening of the line. BCHA recommends a dutchman's knot here. I normally use a cargo tie-down strap with an attached ratchet between the line and the belt rings.

The tree saver belts can be purchased or easily made at home. Medium weight cargo tie-downs can be purchased at any hardware. All of these materials are lightweight and easy to pack and use. I do not use belts and ratchets for tightening lines unless I plan to tie my horses for a lengthy period such as overnight.

We must address the LNT principle: "Minimize horse impact," and the BCHA commandment: "The horseman shall



Horses without tack tied to a high line for an overnight stay. Hobbling (inset) is done as necessary for the individual horse to prevent excessive site disturbance. Note that the tying site has been raked free of forest litter (leaves, sticks, etc.) that will be raked back into place after breaking camp.

properly dispose of all manure, bailing twine, wire, and waste hay in camp areas, trailheads, or loading areas." First, the picket line or high line area should be 200 feet from the edge of a stream or lake to minimize the likelihood of adverse effects on water quality. Second, where horses are tied for moderate to lengthy periods of time, they are going to cause significant disturbance to the surface layers of the soil. In forested areas, the surface layer of the soil is composed of decomposing organic materials – leaves, twigs, etc. The first two sub-layers of this organic layer are the litter layer and the fermentation layer. Below that is the humus layer.

In the best of all worlds, before tying horses to a picket line or high line for a lengthy period of time, the litter and fermentation layers should be raked away from the zone in which the horses will be standing. In stands of pine trees this is usually not a big problem. Under hardwoods, the size of the problem increases. If there is a significant amount of low shrub growth, it is impossible. We can only do our best to meet the standard.

The advantage to raking before the horses are tied is that there will be a ready source of material to cover the trodden ground when you break camp and prepare to leave. Remember, you are attempting to leave no trace. When camping at a single sight for multiple

nights, the manure and waste hay should be removed and scattered on a daily basis. This helps keep down flies, hastens drying of the manure and urine-wet waste hay, and minimizes the size of the task on the day that you break camp.

Finally, I personally like to align my sleeping quarters and the high line for the horses so that if there is a disturbance during the night, I can just flash a light across the way and see that nobody is in real trouble. My respected friend, Butch Kennedy, says that he does not worry about such things, but he has so many calls of nature during the night he's up and out any how. As for me, unless there is an emergency, could be the horse or could be mine, I prefer to stay in the sack!

— Gene Wood

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Leave No Trace educational materials may be obtained from the National Outdoor Leadership School, 288 Main St., Lander WY 82520, phone (307) 332-8800, e-mail lnt@nols.edu, website <http://www.nols.edu>.