

# Clipping Your Horse: for You or for the Judge? (Is There a Natural Clip?)

by *Thomas N. Tweeten, Ph.D.*

Clipping the horse can be a traumatic experience for many horses and their owners. Too little preparatory training of the horse to be familiar with the clippers, poor planning, inadequate equipment and a filthy horse can lead to a rambunctious horse and potential injury to the handlers.

I think a very important question to ask a person that wants to sell a horse to me is: "Has this horse been trained to be clipped?" More specifically, will the horse accept clipping around its face, ears or fetlocks? Will it stand still while the bridle path is being trimmed? If the answer is yes, asked for a demonstration. If the owner even hints at a need for a twitch or drugs, be prepared for some potential behavior problems while attempting to clip that horse.

## THE TRAINING

Training a horse to accept clipping takes time, be it a young horse or an older, more experience horse. Some people, including Dr. Robert Miller, introduce foals to the sound and feel of clippers as part of desensitizing training immediately after the horse is born. I would suggest talking to a qualified trainer or reading one of Dr. Miller's books before you attempt this type of training on your own.

I like to include clipper training when I begin halter training a weanling or groundwork with a yearling. This same approach can be done with an older horse as well. I begin by introducing the clippers to the horse. Hold them so the horse can see them; show them to both sides of the horse. Then, carefully touch them to the side of the neck, moving them much like a soft brush. Do not have the clippers powered up the first couple of times you introduce the clippers to the horse.

I would not have the horse in cross ties or tied to anything immobile. If the horse bolts or rears, the horse or handler could get hurt. I like to have someone hold the halter lead as I touch the clippers to the horse, and then move them over the front part of the horse's body. Once the horse is comfortable to the touch of the clipper, stop. Remember, it is always enjoyable for both you and the horse to end a training session on a positive note.

The next time, repeat the process. If the touch of the clippers is immediately accepted, move them away from the horse and turn them on. Be sure the handler is always aware of your actions so he or she can anticipate any apprehensive responses from the horse. Again, if the sound does not bother the horse, stop and pick up with the training on another day.

The next lesson is to touch the horse, usually in the neck area, with the clippers on. Stand in a position where the horse cannot step on you or kick at you. Depending on the horse, you may want to again touch it with the clippers, and then turn the clippers on. Try not to touch the horse with the clipper blade, just the body of the clipper. Here you want to assure the horse that

the vibration of the clipper is not threatening. Move the vibrating clipper over the body of the horse slowly. Again, stop once the horse seems calm, accepting the feel and sound of the clipper.

The horse should now be ready to have the clipper introduced to its head area. Again, I suggest having someone hold the halter lead line. As before, touch the neck and body of the horse, then gently move the clipper up to the head area. This may take several lessons, depending on the trusting nature of your horse. I have had some horses accept this immediately; other horses took several days (or multiple lessons) to accept the clipper near its bridle path and ear areas. Much like training a horse to load into a trailer, clipping is something that you need to plan and train the horse to accept.

The final step to ensure the horse will accept clipping is to trim the bridle path area. This should be done only after the horse is comfortable with the clippers around its face and ear area.

Clipping the face area also takes extreme care. The blade is sharp and pointed. It can easily damage the eye or cut sensitive facial tissue. I encourage you to have someone holding the horse; do not use cross ties or any type of tie restraint when working the face area. I like to use my free hand to guide the clipper and protect the sensitive regions of the face or ears.

If you are trimming the fetlock area, be careful where you place your free hand. There have been a groom or two who have lost fingers because the frightened horse jumped to the side unexpectedly and stepped on a hand.

## THE EQUIPMENT

My second point deals with having good equipment. This includes having sufficient lubricant for the clipper and blades. Carefully read the directions that come with the clipper and blades. Blade washes are key to keeping the blade clean from filth and cool to the touch. You must constantly check to be sure the blade is not heating up.

Several years ago we were training our little 2-year-old Morgan filly to accept clipping. A trusting filly, she quickly accepted the clippers around face, bridle path and ears. After completing her bridle path, we started on her ears. She actually dropped her head as we started her first ear. It went well. Without thinking, my son and I switched places and started on the second ear. With little warning, she threw her head up and lunged backward. While both of us were OK, we could not understand the filly's sudden expression of fear. As I turned off the clipper, I touched the clipper head. It was extremely hot. I looked closer at the filly's ear, observing what appeared to be a small blister forming. Our confidence in getting the job done, along with the filly's calmness, had resulted in us forgetting to stop and cool the blade before continuing the clipping project.

It took us over a year of continuous training to regain the

trust of that filly to accept the clipper blade in the ear that we injured. We chose not to use forceful tactics like a twitch or calming drugs to force her to accept the clipper. Those techniques are used by individuals who do not take the time to work with their horses to develop a trusting relationship that allows the owner to clip in sensitive areas when need be.

## CLEANLINESS

The third point I mention is filth. The fastest way to dull a clipper is to run it through hair that contains dust and dirt. I like to thoroughly groom my horses before clipping them. This is especially true if we need to body clip them. I go over the horse's coat several days in advance using my groom technique that incorporates a curry comb, a jelly curry and a natural dandy brush. The curry comb can get down onto the horse's skin and lift the filth to the surface where the dandy brush can easily carry it away. I like to use a non-oil-based coat enhancer (EquiScentials from ATH Science) to soften the hair and reduce static electricity. This also aids the use of the curry comb, jelly curry and dandy brush in lifting and removing filth. Often coats are too thick and the weather too cold to do a complete body wash before body clipping. Removing filth increases blade life and reduces heat buildup.

## THE RATIONALE

Well, after all this discussion on how to prepare a horse to be clipped, why do we want to clip them in the first place? If we

show our horses, it has become a fact of life. The Foundation Quarter Horse Association is one of the few breeds that do not penalize show participants for not having completely clipped horses. A little touch up to remove stray hairs is at most all that is done.

Some people clip the front quarter, if not all their horse, in the spring so that they can work their horse without excessive sweat buildup. We prefer to use artificial light in our barn starting in late December or early January to increase light exposure and stimulate the shedding process. Coats are close to summer form in early March when show workouts begin with intensity.

If showing is not a consideration, clipping most likely is not a requirement. Horses need their hair to protect themselves from insects and to sense danger too close to see. I still believe these recreation horses should be exposed to clippers. If for no other reason, hair may need to be clipped away to address the wound when a horse is injured in some way. One would not want to compound the anxiety of a wound with the threat of clipping.

Conditioning a horse to accept clipping takes time. Here, like so much we do with horses, the care and training will contribute to comfort of the horse. A horse that is comfortable will be more trusting and more easily collected when ridden or driven. 🐾

*Excerpted from "Grooming for Horse and Rider, Importance of Groundwork" clinics presented by Dr. Tom Tweeten, ATH Science, Inc., Minneapolis, Minn. For more information, go to [www.equiscentials.com](http://www.equiscentials.com).*

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