

Why We Put To in the Open

(an educational editorial)

When we harness our horses at home, they are tied in crossties in the barn alley. When we are away from home, they are either tied to the trailer or tied (or loose) in a stall. However, once we are ready to hitch (or put to) the vehicle, we move them to another area. In any location, they are ALWAYS required to stand square for grooming, harnessing, and putting to, and *moving a foot is not allowed*. This training process starts very early for the horse, and the techniques used are another article.

At home, we put to the vehicle in our indoor arena. It is a contained location, and also where we store our practice vehicles. The horses are faced away from the door, but with plenty of room to go forward. Once we are hitched, we can either continue to drive in the indoor or drive the horse to our outdoor arena or trail.

When we are away from home, we also put to in a location where they can just move off forward once put to. We feel that when their muscles are cold, they don't need to be pushing the vehicle around sideways or back to be able to move off. That being said, *we don't put to facing a wall or a trailer*.

Depending on the individual horse, amount of training, and other circumstances, we may either use a header to put to or not, but again we require the horse to stand. Our less experienced horses may require a header, but they are still expected to stand on their own with minimal holding. We are working towards being able to put to without requiring a header clinging onto them. If they do happen to move, while not abusive, we are very serious about the infraction they have just committed. The response to that infraction may take on different forms depending on the personality and training level of the horse. Some horses only need to be "growled" at, while others may require a bump of the bridle (caveson or reins) with a strong verbal "STAND". Rarely does the infraction require a smack on the neck, as the idea is to keep the hitching process smooth and timely without creating stress and escalating the situation. Dancing around is definitely not tolerated.



Major's first put to...standing quietly with a header.

Once the horse is put to the vehicle, the driver immediately mounts the vehicle and sits on the box. A hitched horse without a driver on the box in any circumstance is a dangerous scenario. We do not lead the hitched horse from the ground, or have them stand for an inordinate amount of time while put to without someone on the box. Our helmet has already been put on before we start the hitching process. Once on the box, we take our time. We might put on our gloves, arrange our reins, pick up our whip, take a deep breath, etc. before asking the horse to move off. We want the horse to understand that just because he is put to, he doesn't get to move right away, and has to wait for the driver to ask him to move forward. As the horse's training progresses, the header works his way to the side, behind the blinder, so that the horse also learns that he can't just move forward when the header moves over. Again, we are working towards the horse holding himself and responding only to the driver.

When we ask the horse to move off, it is calm and quiet. We want the horse to walk and warm his muscles. Horses that have been Amish-trained tend to want to immediately break into a trot and go eight miles down the road. These horses have to be retrained to understand that it is ok to move off at a calm walk. That behavior might take a while to undo.

At home, once we are finished with our driving, we go back to our indoor to unhitch. We unhitch in the same place that we put to, and our horses come to know this location. We might actually drive the horse around the indoor for a couple of rounds just so they don't get into the habit of stopping in the unhitch location on their own. Again, they need to be responsive to the driver at all times. Once stopped, this again means that they are not allowed to move, but usually this is less of an issue with unhitching than putting to, both because they are tired and they know the vehicle is coming off.

When we are away from home, we always unhitch again in the open. We take the vehicle off the horse, and then walk them to the trailer or stall. We never unhitch facing or tied to the trailer anymore. Why? When you unhitch in the open, you are *more likely* to remember to remove the vehicle before the bridle. Many instances of the bridle being removed while the horse is still put to the vehicle are a result of driving up to the trailer, getting out, maybe tying the horse, and then pulling the bridle, much like if you were riding instead of driving. The driver's "home" is the trailer, and as a result, that is where they go. The driver is usually in a public location with other people and busy talking to others. The driver is relaxed and possibly tired from the drive, and are out of their home routine. I have seen it happen, even in our own family. Luckily for us, it wasn't disastrous.



Teaching kids the putting to process at Young Drivers Camp. Horse has a halter and lead around the neck, and is standing square with no one at his head (header is behind the blinder).

Some people feel that they need to have their horse face something in order to remain still during the putting to and unhitching process. That is a training issue, not a hitching issue. The horse has to learn not to rely on that wall, trailer, or header to stand absolutely still during putting to. Again, he has to learn to *hold himself* and respond only to the driver. I have heard from some people that their horse just can't stand still. However, that same horse can stand all day under a shade tree in their paddock. We have

saying in our family, "Cutting horses can make decisions, driving horses do not." I also had to learn this the hard way with a difficult horse I was training. That horse is now a multi-champion after we had to go back and find all the times he was making decisions on behalf of us. When we undid those decisions and required him to do everything we asked, he gave up control and relaxed to listen for the next directive. When you are the "Alpha-horse", you allow your horse to not have to make decisions on his own behalf. He trusts you to make them for him, just like the Alpha mare takes on a lot of responsibility for the herd. The rest of the herd then follows her lead.

Be the Alpha, require your horse to stand, and get to the point where you can put to in the open, with or without a header. You will be safer for it.