

Peaceful Mane Pulling

By Ruthann Smith



No matter what your riding discipline, everyone knows a horse that hates to have his mane pulled. Yet, this need not be the case. Professional braiders only have trouble with about 3% of the horses, mostly for the horses having had bad experiences in the past. When done properly, pulling does not hurt.

Picture two stallions fighting in the wild. One wins because he pulled the other's hair? Horses do not have nerve endings like people do. People inadvertently teach horses to hate having their manes pulled, largely because pulling does not work like other training principles. Here are some tips to shortening and pulling manes to instill confidence.

1. Shortening vs. Pulling

I use the term "pulling" as a blanket term. Sometimes we actually pull the hair out. Other times it just needs to be shortened. If the mane or part of it is too thick, then pulling from the roots is best. If the mane or part of it needs to be shortened, then there is still a trick to it.

You don't want the mane blunt or falling in unnatural-looking clumps. So, scissors do not suit our purposes. To shorten, I use a large clipper blade (Oster 84 AU) to comb, tease and cut the mane. This tool, even if it needs to be sharpened, works far better than any other. The bottom of the mane needs to be tapered to fall, band or braid well. I taper the last couple inches of the mane so it falls to create a clean bottom line.

To shorten, grab a few pieces across a broad area, tease above the desired bottom of the mane and push the large clipper blade toward the floor to cut the mane. It is very straight-forward.

2. Keep it simple

The most efficient pulling technique is to hold your hand parallel to the crest to grab a few hairs along the bottom of the mane. Tease the people comb right up to the crest. Grab the hair by pressing your thumb against the comb's spine. Keep your thumb against the spine as you pull the comb and hair as one unit. In this way, your thumb uses the comb to leverage the hair to pull from the roots.

3. Decondition

If your horse shakes his neck when you comb the mane, the problem is in his head. He is resisting his idea of what you might do. So, comb his mane all the time to build confidence. Once he does not anticipate trouble, periodically pull out one or two hairs as you are grooming. No big deal: just do it once and move on. This will also help desensitize him.

4. Not too much

The solution may be as simple as pulling less hair. I pull about 15 pieces across a broad area at a time. If you are wrapping the hair around the comb to pull, you are teaching the horse to hate it.

5. Spread it out

I use a people comb as pulling ones are only problematic. They are hard to hold, cut my fingers and sound terrible when they drop. Plus, a thicker spine to the comb helps you leverage the hair so it takes less effort and does not break the hair.

I do not recommend starting at one end. Pull from here and there to both reduce the horse's anticipation and keep from making a mess. If you get half way done and the horse has had enough, you want to stop. In such a case, if you pull in an irregular pattern, you would not stop with the mane looking worse than when you started.

6. Schedule

Sometimes the answer is to pull the mane after the horse works. Then, the crest's pores are open and the animal's resistance is low. Pulling when the horse is tired is often enough to keep the horse relaxed. If you pull too much at once, you are only teaching your horse it pulling is a problem, which it need not be. Plus, if half the hair is short, neither the loose mane nor braids will sit well on the neck. The short hair will be pushing the rest out of place. If your horse has a thick section of the crest or mane, you want to pull it a little bit all the time so it is not all growing in at once.

Pulling should happen at home. The horse show poses enough stresses. If you know how to pull well, prepare the mane at home so the horse has less to deal with at the show. If you can't do a good job and you have a great braider, it may be better to leave pulling to a professional. However, do your horse the favor of telling the braider ahead of time so he or she may be able to pull the mane long before the horse needs to be braided.

7. Decrease Anticipation

If your horse lifts his head as you reach up, the horse is head-shy. He is afraid of what you might do. Out of sight, out of mind. A simple blindfold can be just the answer. Find a towel larger than a hand towel. Wrap it around the halter so it is taught and covers the eye on the side of the mane. I suggest a longer towel so you can wrap it around the halter well. You don't want the horse to shake it loose and have it hit him in the face. That would not be constructive. Our objective is to establish confidence. Secure the towel well.

8. Position for Success

The first thing a horse usually does to resist is run backwards. If the horse is on the crossties, the best case scenario is that he'll break the ties (instead of his neck) and slip on the floor. Then, he learns pulling is a problem.

A better option is to back the horse into the corner of a stall. That way, if he questions what you are doing, it does not snowball. You can avoid problems by simply backing the horse into a corner. Sometimes this positioning is enough to make the horse feel comfortable with the process.

Please, please be sure that if you work in a stall, that you always have the out. You should always be closest to the door. Leave the door closed (not latched) or open. If you leave it ajar, the horse may think to go through it without realizing it can't fit. Then, he'll hurt himself and always charge through doors. That will be very dangerous. So, always have a safe out.

The other reason you never want to go to the back of a horse's stall is that you can get pinned. Crazy things happen. If a horse scoots and pins you against the wall, you can get crushed in seconds. A horse's natural instinct is to move into pressure. If he panics and spins, you won't be able to get him off you. It is a terrible way to go and **TOTALLY AVOIDABLE**: never go into the back of a horse's stall. Always have a direct route out.

9. Forget your riding principles

If you are riding and your horse resists, you bend, bend and he gives. If you are pulling and the horse resists, you stop. His resistance is fear-based. By stopping and coming back to it another time, you are teaching the horse it need not be a problem. By pulling a little bit once in a while, you are desensitizing the horse and building his confidence for pulling.

Pulling is largely a handling issue. Make it easy for your horse to have a good experience with careful positioning, timing and technique.

Enjoy all!
~Ruthann