

HORSE CARE

How To Create A Perfectly Pulled Mane

Top braider Nancy Henson shows you how to make even the most difficult mane braidable.

Molly Sorge

CREATING A PERFECT row of braids is hard enough in the most perfect mane; when it seems like there's a toothbrush sprouting out of your horse's crest, or he has a wispy, thin mane, it's even harder.

The key to putting beautiful braids into thick or thin manes isn't in the braiding but in the pulling of the mane.

"The main thing you want to do in pulling a mane is to make it possible to braid it," said professional braider Nancy Henson. "Some people say, 'My horse's mane should be 4 inches long or 6 inches long,' but if you're just measuring the hair without taking into account its thickness, it's wrong."

Theoretically, said Henson, any mane can be braided. "It's just whether it's going to look good or not. You want the braids to be proportional, width versus length," she said. "You don't want long, skinny braids or short, fat ones. What I want to do is to have the mane the same thickness and the same length all the way down the neck."

As a general rule, Henson keeps her thick manes longer than she would a mane of ideal thickness and her thin manes shorter.

While there are some tips for manes at the extreme ends of the thickness spectrum, there are also some

general principles about mane-pulling that hold true regardless of how thick your horse's mane may be.

"If you're not experienced at pulling manes, you should stop before you think you're done. You can always pull

more later, but you can't put the hair back in," Henson said. "What I generally do is find the thickest portion of the mane, which is usually about a third the way down the neck, and I pull that to the length I want. Then, I match up the other portions of the mane through a combination of pulling and cutting."

Henson recommends pulling just a little bit of mane at a time but doing so frequently. "The bad thing about pulling it all at once is that it'll all grow back at once, and then you end up with a mane with two levels," she said.

Pulling a little bit a few days a week helps keep your horse's mane at its best all the time. If you have to tackle a mane that hasn't been pulled and has grown to the bottom of the horse's neck, devote a number of mane-pulling sessions to the task rather than pulling all the hair out at once.

Above all, remember that it always grows back! "So, if you screw it up, it'll come back in a few weeks and you can try it again," said Henson.



(Molly Sorge Photo)

Nancy Henson has been braiding hunters and jumpers professionally on the A circuit for 22 years. She lives in Raeford, N.C., just outside Southern Pines, and braids for clients such as Geoff Teall, Danny Robertshaw, Harold Chopping and Patty Heukeroth.

"You're not ever going to turn a horse with a big thick crest and a big mane into a thin-maned horse. You just want to create enough control that you can braid it properly."

—Nancy Henson



(Molly Sarge Photos)

If your horse has a thick mane, avoid the temptation to pull too much.

against their neck. Your braid needs to lock down onto something, and if the first thing it locks down on is hair halfway up the crest, the braids are going to lay on top of the crest, not down along the neck.”

Henson takes the scissors to certain portions of even the thickest manes. (See Thin Manes section below on the appropriate technique for cutting a mane.)

“The top and the bottom of the mane, 90 percent of the time, have thinner hair, especially by the withers. Often, there are 4 or 5 inches of mane by the poll and by the withers that I never pull—I

cut that part. You’re really striving to have the same length and the same thickness all the way down the neck, and cutting the mane there will help the thickness match up with the middle of the mane.”

Thick Manes

If your horse has coarse, bristly hair that grows on a thick crest, creating a thick toothbrush of a mane, Henson advises avoiding the temptation of pulling too much.

“You need thickness in relation to the length. You should keep a thick mane a little bit longer, so you need to be cautious when you pull it,” Henson said. “In order to make a good hunter braid, you have to cross the hair a certain number of times. If the mane is too short, you end up with a little ball that’s stuck up against their neck. Your braids should have some structure and length to them. They should be narrower than they are long. “Where you get into trouble is when you say, ‘Oh, there’s a lot of hair here.’ Once you pull out enough to make it the appropriate thickness, it’s way too short. You’re not ever going to turn a horse with a big thick crest and a big mane into a thin-maned horse. You just want to create enough control that you can braid it properly.”

Henson advises to pull a thick mane gradually and from the middle of the crest and lower.

“I generally try not to pull off the top of the mane, because you want that to be smooth across the top,” she said. “The danger of pulling all from the underside of the mane is that you’ll pull out the part of the hair that holds the braid in place

“I want to have the mane the same thickness and the same length all the way down the neck.”

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Pull a thick mane from the middle of the crest and lower.



(Molly Sorge-Photos)

Thin manes present their own challenges and generally can't look their best with pulling alone.



When preparing to cut a thin mane, tease the hair just as you would before pulling it.

Thin Manes

"If you're a die-hard, never-ever-cut-the-mane person, you're going to be sorry. You can't shorten a thin mane enough by pulling it to leave any hair at all," Henson said. "You don't want to cut the mane straight off, but the only way you'll get the appropriate length to width ratio will be to cut."

That doesn't mean to never pull any hair out, however. If there is a place on your horse's neck with a thicker portion of hair—usually in the middle of the neck—pull that section until it's the thickness of the other sections of mane. Remember that the goal is to have the mane the same thickness for its entire length. You don't want two or three significantly thicker braids in the middle of the mane.

Even though Henson has given you license to whip out the scissors, don't go crazy and commit the cardinal sin of mane grooming—cutting a straight line across the bottom of your horse's mane.

"The hair has to taper down so that you can have a knot at the bottom that you can pull up into the crest," she said. "I basically use the same technique as when I pull hair. I tease the hair up so I have a small amount of the longest portion in my hand."

"Then, instead of wrapping it around the comb and pulling it, I take my scissors and I cut it. Even then, I try not to cut straight across. I try to cut in an up-and-down motion so it's almost more like razoring than cutting."

Another tool that works well at shortening a mane without creating blunt ends is a top body clipper blade. Use the clipper blade to tease the shorter hairs upward, then drag the sharp teeth of the blade down to cut the ends of the longer strands.

"If you have very sharp scissors, you can drag them against the hair in a downward motion and it will act like a clipper blade as well," Henson said.



After teasing a thin mane, cut in an up-and-down motion.



A top body clipper blade helps to shorten a mane without creating a blunt end.

What If Your Horse Objects To Having His Mane Pulled?

Many horses just don't like the sensation of having their mane pulled.

Pulling a mane after the horse has exercised and is hot, so that the pores are open and the hair comes out more easily, helps ease the process. You can also numb the crest with a little bit of Listerine.

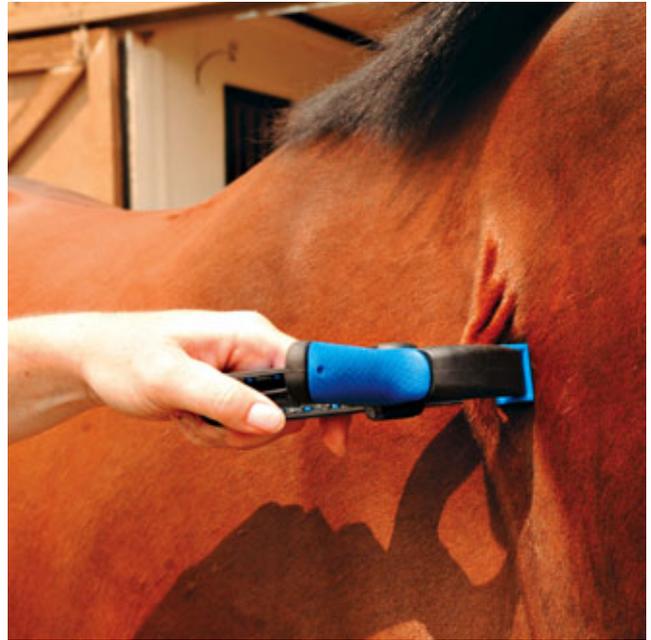
But knowing how to restrain your horse appropriately is also an essential skill. Ideally, there will be someone assisting you who can hold a twitch for you. But, if you're on your own, there are some ways you can not only get the job done but also stay safe.

"There are a couple of things that are going on when horses object to having their manes pulled," braider Nancy Henson said. "A lot of times, some horses are naughty about it because perhaps someone's tried to pull their manes, and they shook their head, and the person stopped. So they've learned that shaking their head means they can avoid the pulling. Sometimes, all you have to do is impress upon them that you are going to pull their mane. You might give a little jerk on the halter to say, 'You're going to stand here.' They suddenly realize that if they're not going to get away with the protests, they give up."

But for some horses, having a mane pulled is actually painful. "I used to braid a horse that bled when I pulled his mane," said Henson. "He was a white pony with pink skin. For him, I would only pull his mane when he was tranquilized because I didn't think it was fair to him."

Henson prefers to pull the mane of a difficult horse in a stall, rather than on crossties. She likes having a wall behind them and believes they have less range of motion than when crosstied.

"If I know them well enough to know that if they stop when they hit the rope, I'll just tie them up [with a quick-



A neck twitch can also help distract a horse who isn't enjoying a mane pulling session.

release knot]," she said. "If I'm worried about them panicking at the end of the rope, I'll run the rope through the bars of the stall, then stand on the end of the rope on my ladder so that I can release them if they back up and get panicked about being tied."

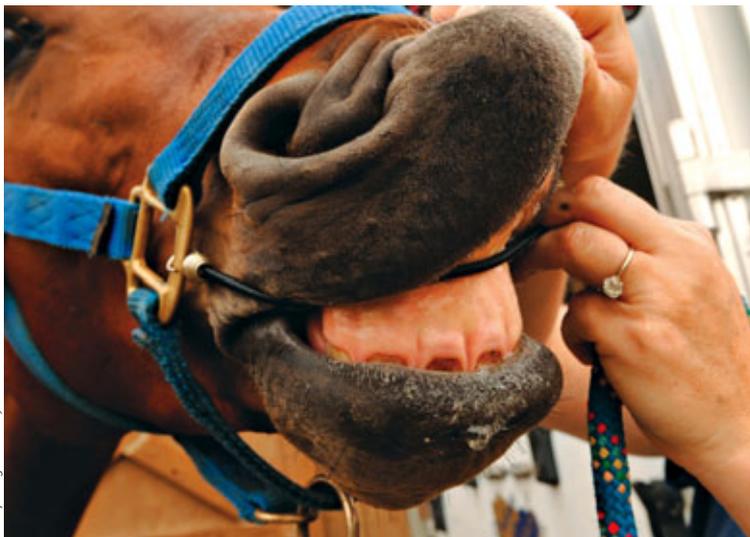
But sometimes you might need a little help. "I use a self-holding twitch," said Henson. "Different things work better on different horses, so experiment with what works on your horse."

Her self twitch involves running a little bungee cord, hooked to one side of the halter, under the lip, and hooked to the other side.

Another method she'd found helps is a skin twitch on the neck, with a clamp. "That seems to work well because it just puts their concentration on their neck, but in a different place, so they don't notice that up above you're yanking out their hair.

"If I can't use something that non-invasive and they're hysterical, it's too dangerous for me and it obviously hurts them more than I'm willing to do, so I'd want them medicated."

A self twitch with a small bungee cord may help control a horse who doesn't like having his mane pulled.



(Molly Sorge Photos)