

# HOW DO HORSES FEEL ABOUT HAVING THEIR MANES PULLED?

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A recent study by MSc (Master of Science) student Louise Nicholls found that horses are pretty-stressed by the process of mane pulling. Louise compared the heart rates and behavior of 20 horses having their manes pulled or touched. The results are very interesting. The results showed that the horses mean heart rates were significantly higher when they had their manes pulled than when their manes were touched. The horses also had higher mean heart rates when the mane pulling was started at the poll working down, than at the withers working up.

The horses also moved far more when their manes were pulled compared to mane touching e.g. ears back, standing alert, licking and chewing, a high neck position, head tossing, mouth tight and tail swishing and clamping - indicating they experienced discomfort or pain at the process being performed.

Speaking about the study Louise said "The increased heart rates measured during the mane pulling were combined with behavioral indicators of stress such as rearing, pulling back, a tight mouth etc. The horses used in the study were privately owned horses that were not naive. Each horse was observed during mane pulling 8 times over many weeks. Finally, one standard person pulled each of the horses manes during the study."

Louise went on to say "I would definitely advise horse owners to measure their horse's heart rate during mane pulling - even if they are not showing obvious physical behavioral signs of stress. As horses are prey animals and may be passive copers they will not always try to flee away from painful or stressful situations and could go into a state of learned helplessness and not show any behavioral signs of stress but have a notably increased heart rate."

While the horse's stress and discomfort may seem obvious to many horse owners, this appears to be the first time the effects of mane pulling have been studied - so a huge well done to Louise for raising awareness on this subject. I certainly wouldn't like to have my hair pulled out forcibly either. Time to find another way to keep manes tidy - or just leave them as nature intended.

## To Pull or Not to Pull?

### A NOTE FROM YOUR BRAIDER

by: Kristen M. Wertz



Kristen with her 2012 bay mare Swank Dezign by Tzigane \*Pb\* out of Swain Song xx

The long debate concerning mane pulling was answered last year by Louise Nicholls (see above) an MSc (Master of Science) student's study where she measured the heart rate of 20 horses during mane pulling. The results were undeniable that of her study group all 20 horses were stressed by the process.

I grew up pulling my horses manes and have always loved a crisp sporty looking fresh pull. I have pulled the manes of horses who would stand still but I have

am writing this article to debunk that thought process.

Due to the changing trends of competition braid type from small buttons to fat Euro cobra style braids I no longer pull my horses' manes. Fatter buttons require a thicker, longer mane and during the off season I am able to yield a tidy everyday look with a quick trim using mane scissors.



The photos above demonstrate trimming the mane, illustrating a before and after look, brush the mane upward withers to ears to trim and tidy longer pieces

also worked on my fair share of horses who needed sedation or twitching to endure the process. Why do we put ourselves and our horses through the process? Is it for competition braiding? Well, I



*Trimming and brushing tools*

As a braider, I discourage my clients from doing any maintenance on their horse's manes because most everyone uses mane pulling combs. I label mane pulling comb's "the devil's tool" because they usually break hairs instead of pulling from the root. Short broken manes create a difficult braiding job for my hard working arthritic hands.

Thickness of mane directly corresponds to length of mane when concerning all disciplines' show braids. The thicker the mane the longer it needs to be. I need at least 5 cross overs to complete a tidy American style button braid and even more length for Euro Cobra braids. Another consideration is that the a horse's mane should not be the exact same thickness throughout when concerning button braids. The mane naturally starts thin at the poll, thickens towards the middle of the neck and finishes thin. Button braids should have the same natural increase and taper in size which creates a very round natural bascule to the look of the horse's neck.



*Cobra style*



*American Style*

Type of braid and number of braids should be determined by your horse's conformation. Horses with necks which tie in low at the shoulder, are short, stocky or are thick at the throat latch require more smaller braids to give the illusion of a longer neck. Therefore, I need a decent thickness of mane allowing me to detail the neck with about 20 American style buttons. (These horses should not be outfitted with Cobra braids as the style will only add to a thick stockier look.)

Horses who have long, thin or hollow necks require fewer braids to give the look of a rounder top-line. These horses benefit from Cobra braids or fatter American style buttons. Both require a mane that is thick as well as quite long allowing me to sculpt the hood (for Cobras). I also prefer larger buttons on horses/ponies who are a bit flat in their way of going because fatter braids can add a roundness illusion to the equine's neck. Once top-line is assessed and type of button is determined, I can then tie up each button as needed to properly sculpt the neck for each horse's best turnout.

Horses who require hunter style braids also need a decent thickness of mane in order to yield as many braids as possible. However, I work dominantly with Dressage and Event horses therefore my discussion is directly related to button styles.



*This very fit Eventer would benefit from a thicker mane and fewer but much larger buttons to enhance the look of his topline*



*Here is a mare with a beautifully pulled mane. However, this picture would look even more lovely with 10-12 larger braids*



*This mare had an untouched thick shoulder length mane. The owners did not want to sacrifice the mane for braids. I was easily able to braid it up with no trimming or thinning*



*This is an Irish mare with a full shoulder length mane. Her owners preferred the long mane. Though her buttons were large, I did not shorten or thin her mane for this look*

As you can see most horses will not need their manes pulled for competition. There is always an odd ball crazy maned horse who grows an insane amount of hair leaving us no choice but to pull. The most humane way to thin the manes on these types is to do it after riding when the horse is warm allowing the hairs to let go easier. Also substitute your fingers for pulling combs to avoid breaking hairs mid shaft.



*Pictured here is my mother's 15.2h stock type ranch horse. His neck is short and thick, therefore, he expertly sports many small braids.*

So give your fingers a break and throw those pesky mane pulling combs to the curb. Just a little trim during the off season is all you need for a champion worthy turnout.

Happy Showing!

