

Getting to Know Your Horse Through Lunging

In the last issue we discussed the benefits of teaching obedience and attentiveness to your horse on the ground through showmanship training.

We talked about how you can use body language to communicate with your horse because this is the system he uses to communicate with other horse in a herd situation. In this issue we'll continue to develop this idea through the use of lunging and we'll also ask "What can I learn about my horse by observing him on the lunge line? How can I use this knowledge to improve my riding?"

I lunge most of my training horses each day before riding. This enables me to observe a horse and assess him. Is he feeling fresh and playful? If so he won't be able to concentrate until he gets the "bugs" out. Is he stiff or sore? For a newcomer I will analyze the quality of his movement and identify weak points that will need to be addressed in the session.

I teach all of my students to lunge their horses because I feel lunging is a training tool and much of what I know about horse movement and behaviour I gained from lunging. I experimented with how my body language can influence a horse, how to anticipate a horse's actions, and how to use my cues with the timing and intensity to produce smooth gaits and transitions on the lunge line. These skills make my students better riders because they learn what the things they feel happening in the saddle look like from the ground. What does a two-beat trot look like?

What does it look like for a horse to be cantering on a disunited lead or when a horse nuts into the circle and drops his shoulder? I will often compare two horses being lunged for my students and let them observe the qualities of what we call good movers and how this contributes to the ease with which they carry a slow, smooth rhythm on a circle.

Let me take you through a very basic lunging session with your horse and suggest things that you can look for and work on to get to know your horse better, and improve his concentration and under-saddle skills.

The How-To's of Lunging

We will assume that you will use this lunging session as a preliminary warm-up to your regular riding time; therefore your horse will be outfitted with a saddle bridle and halter over top. I often tie one or both reins to the saddle in lieu of side reins to work the horse in a frame and keep his body aligned, after the horse has loosened up.

For our purposes, as a novice lunger, you will tie the reins loosely to the saddle to keep them up out of the way.

Going to the left or counter-clockwise, stand facing your horse's side with your lunge line in your left hand and your whip and extra coils in your right hand. In order to keep your shoulders facing your horse's side as you face him, you will need to walk your own circle nearly crossing your right leg over your left leg (and you thought you'd never put those line-dancing lessons to practical use!)

Keep your horse on your chosen track, within an imaginary round pen; don't let him lean out on your line. When he hits the boundary of your chosen circle, a smooth tug followed by a softening in your arm will bring him toward you. A tug of war is never necessary. Also, don't allow your line to drag on the ground for your horse to get his foot over, or wrap it around your hand. Keep him away from you by gesturing toward his shoulder with your whip.

I "cluck" when I want to accelerate and "kiss" when asking to canter, and for a downward transition I say "walk" or "trot" in a low "singing" voice ie. "waaaalk". "Whoa" means stop and do not move. Any other chatting to your horse will confuse him, and, like the boy who cried "wolf", will desensitize him to cues that you wish him to heed. Voice commands, as with other aids, should start at a level two on a scale from one to ten, and escalate quickly followed by a light flick with the whip until you get the reaction you want. Your whip should support your voice by making contact with your horse – no threatening and "stage coach cracking" allowed!

To keep the pace constant, keep an imaginary metronome counting in your head and when your horse's pace drops below your count, cluck and raise your whip towards his back end. Don't keep clucking and nagging your horse with your whip to maintain the pace. Riders tend to fall into this trap when mounted and as soon as they stop pumping and squeezing their lazy horse "fizzles" out. When the onus is on you to keep your horse moving, your ride will quickly become an aerobic workout! Learn to recognize when your horse is losing energy BEFORE he breaks gait – it's like pushing a piano – once you let it stop it's hard to get it rolling again. Every stride should have the same amount of energy. Move your whip smoothly with a quiet cluck when you detect a slowdown. If your horse doesn't respond immediately, cluck louder and tap his back end with the tassel of your whip. When your horse steps more energetically, reward him by relaxing your body position, and remaining silent. In rhythm control, as with all aspects of horsemanship, you are either saying "yes" or "no" – request, demand, reward. Horses learn more quickly when we remember to communicate "yes" to them.

The benefits of studying your horse from the ground before you climb aboard, and learning to anticipate his movements by lunging him will be enjoyed when you ride, and also when you are beside him on the ground. He'll be more attentive to your body language and therefore safer and more pleasant to be around. After all, horses communicate by reading each other's body language, and thus determining their hierarchy. Lunging provides a warm up and a chance for you to assess your horse before beginning your ride.