

LONGEING

There are two good reasons to longe a horse. One is for exercise, and the second is for training. Many riders are not aware that longeing is a productive and useful training tool. However, the key to successful longeing is that it must be done in a logical and correct manner. Otherwise it is a waste of time for both handler and horse, and can not only cause the horse physical damage but also scare him.

I want to tell you how I teach a horse to longe, as well as how I use longeing as a training tool, but first I would like to make some general comments.

Whether you are using longeing for exercise only, or for training, it is most important that the commands and expectations are consistent. Each command should have one specific meaning and nothing else. For instance, it does not make sense to the horse to say “whoa” when you want him to make a halt, and also when you want him to slow down (such as, when he is moving too fast, or when you would like him to change gaits from trot to walk). So choose a word for each thing you want your horse to do and stay with that word. Also, when giving a command, say it only once and do not repeat it. If the horse does not obey your command, take action to get the horse to do what you asked. For example, if you say “walk” to a trotting horse and he ignores you, approach him as close as necessary while taking and giving on the longe line until he walks. It is not a good idea to repeat your command (for example, consistently saying “walk” three or four times before the horse finally does what you ask), because, as a result, you will have taught him that he should execute the command only after you have repeated it a number of times. Then the horse will wonder how many times he is supposed to hear the command before he should respond. In this situation, it would be unfair to expect the horse to walk immediately the next time you say “walk”.

Choose your command words carefully and stick with them. Say “walk” when asking the horse to change gaits to a walk. Use the commands “trot” and “canter” similarly. If your horse is trotting and breaks into canter on his own, say “trot” to bring him back to the trot, not “whoa” (since you did not want him to come to a halt) or some other word such as “uh-uh” or “quit” (how is he to know what action to take from those commands?). And don’t say “no” when the horse does something you haven’t asked him to do. First, it doesn’t help him in any way to know what he should do, and second, “no” sounds a lot like “whoa” which of course means to make a halt. I prefer to use the “ptrrrrrrrrr” sound for my halt command, as it cannot be confused with any other command!

I teach my horses that clucking means “more energy”, and consequently use it not only in

conjunction with changing gaits upward (remember always to give the command word for the gait you want first), but more often to create more energy. Once the horse associates the clucking sound with increased energy, it is quite useful when the horse is under saddle too, not only when you want to go forward and cover more ground, but also when you want to activate and energize the horse for downward transitions, ask for more collection, or any time the horse needs to think forward while he shortens his strides.

Another important point is that your horse must understand that when he is on the longe line he is at work. This applies when you are longeing him for exercise only, perhaps just in a halter, as well as to when you are using longeing as part of your training, using a bridle and side reins. This means that the horse may not play, buck, run, or make his own decisions regarding the gait and speed. If you want to give your horse an opportunity to do that, turn him free in a pasture or free longe in an arena. If you stick to this system, your horse will become much easier to work with both from the ground and under saddle, as he will develop a habit of listening to you and doing as you say, and nothing else. This is also much safer for both of you and helps prevent unnecessary accidents and injuries.

Another important concept to understand is how the size of the circle influences the horse. The size of the circle will of course depend on the work at hand, but there are two very important things you must understand:

If you pull your horse in towards you, making the circle smaller when he is accelerating or moving at a high speed, you will make it more difficult for him to keep his balance. At the same time, his instinct tells him that the way to keep his balance is to speed up. Think of riding a bicycle – you know that when you start pedaling you must accelerate to a certain speed to be able to stay upright. So by making the circle smaller you may think you are doing something that will slow your horse down, but quite to the contrary, your action will make him speed up instead. So now you have a scenario where the smaller the circle becomes, the faster the horse goes.

Another consequence of pulling the horse in is that it makes him feel progressively more claustrophobic. His psyche knows he is a prey animal, and that the way to stay safe is to be able to run away quickly in case of danger. This means if you force him into a smaller and smaller circle when he is unsure, nervous or excited, his instinct will once again tell him he'd better speed up and try to free himself of that situation. Once again, the smaller the circle becomes, the faster the horse goes.

So if your horse becomes excited and speeds up, a better way to help him feel that it is a good idea to slow down is to make the circle larger instead!

When asking the horse to make a halt on the longe line, it's important that he is not allowed to turn in to face you. This habit makes it very difficult to practice transitions into and out of halt,

where he is to continue again around the circle. And most importantly, letting the horse turn in to face you puts him in a position of command where it is no longer you who has control over the situation. Teaching the horse to think out of the circle to the outside rein (see Step 2 below) will solve this problem.

EQUIPMENT

Using the correct equipment is essential. I will cover specific equipment in more detail when I discuss teaching the horse to longe, but there are some general principles to keep in mind. First, always use equipment that is in good repair, so that it will hold up under any circumstances. Use only a cotton longe line and always wear gloves (yes, you can get a bad rope burn from a nylon line even if you wear gloves!). Do not longe your horse on a halter unless you are sure you are in a situation where you can control him. If you have any doubts, put a bridle and side reins on. A horse running free with the longe line trailing behind him is not a pretty picture under any circumstance.

Always carry a longe whip so you will be in a position of control by driving your horse forward. This applies both under normal conditions or if he tries any of a variety of evasions. Make sure your horse is wearing boots or leg wraps. If you are longeing for exercise only, using just a halter, hook the longe line to the inside ring of the halter (not underneath where the lead rope normally goes). This prevents the halter from being pulled around and potentially cutting into the horse's outside eye. If you have a nice lightweight lunging cavesson that fits your horse well, it can be used instead of a halter.

HOW TO TEACH A HORSE TO LONGE

These principles apply to youngsters as well as old timers. Normally, I teach the rudiments of longeing at as young an age as just after weaning. This is the easiest time to do it and doesn't take long if it is done in a calm and logical manner. However, when I work with such a young horse I keep the work session to an absolute maximum of 5 to 10 minutes, and work only in walk and trot and on as large a circle as possible. Once the youngster has learned to go in a circle around me and understands the commands, I will work with him a couple of times per month until he is a full yearling or more, at which time I will continue his education slowly so that by the time he is 3 years old he can longe competently and calmly in all three gaits. At this age, I still work for short times and not too many days in a row, while staying on a large circle so it is easier for the horse to keep his balance as well as to avoid injuries.

STEP 1: THE HORSE LEARNS TO GO ON A CIRCLE

To help the horse understand he is to go in a circle around the handler, the first step is to have a helper lead the horse around that circle while the handler holds the longe line and whip. This can

be done in a halter or snaffle bridle. If you use a bridle, attach the longe line by running it through the near side of the bit over the poll and hooking it to the off side of the bit. Before starting this work, make sure your horse is familiar with the whip and is not afraid of it.

The handler should give the command “walk” and “halt” while the helper leads the horse around and helps it move on, or stop, according to the handler’s commands. This should be done in both directions. Make sure that you are in a position to move the horse forward with your driving aids (voice, body language, longe whip). At this stage this means that you should be prepared to walk in a small circle yourself. Always be sure you continue to turn as the horse goes around you, so that your chest always faces the side of the horse. See Figure 1. Once this works, the helper can step away and let the handler work alone. This initial process usually takes only a few minutes, especially if the horse has had no previous experience and trusts his handler. What the horse learns at this stage will apply for the rest of his life, and he will remember it well if you remain consistent each time you work with him.

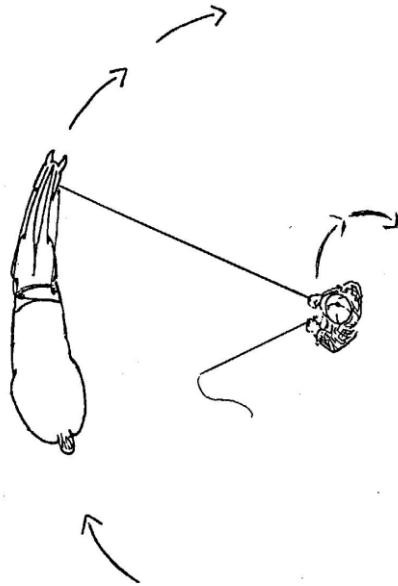


Fig. 1

STEP 2: THE HORSE LEARNS WALK AND TROT COMMANDS AND TO STAY OUT ON THE CIRCLE

This section also applies to a horse that knows how to longe but does not stay out on the circle well.

Teaching the horse how to respond correctly to the command for walk and trot (and later, when the horse is better balanced, canter) is simply a matter of logic and consistency. Say “walk” and point the whip approximately at his tail or a little further back. Cluck at him if necessary, move

the whip a little in the direction you want him to go, and if that is not enough, walk in that direction yourself, driving him forward and slightly out. The same applies when you want your horse to move up into trot and eventually, canter.

One of the most important things the horse must learn is to think out of the circle to some degree. Your ultimate goal is for him to seek the same kind of contact with your hand through the longe line as he does when he is under saddle and correctly on the bit. He should be on the aids on the longe line, in a similar manner as under saddle (moving forward from the driving aids to the contact). The contact should **not** be created by you stepping back or pulling the horse in toward you, or by continually shortening the longe line.

If you adhere to this system, longeing work is an excellent training tool that carries over from the longe line to the saddle.

In order to teach your horse to think out of the circle and to take contact with your hand, you must first be able to energize him and encourage him to think forward. For this reason it is often easiest to start in trot. At first you will need to put yourself in a position where you can drive the horse forward, which means you should be in a position a little further back and across from his hip. See Figure 2.

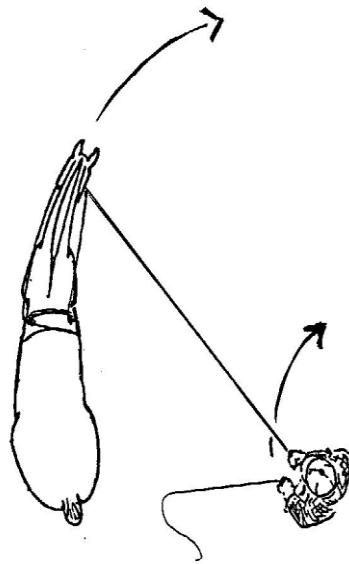


Fig. 2

Now ask the horse to travel in a straight line for a few strides. You yourself will also need to go straight, while driving the horse forward. Most likely at this starting point you will have some slack in the line. Don't worry about that, but gradually begin to work toward reducing the slack using the following method. After the horse takes a few steps straight ahead (while you travel in

a straight line also), continue to drive him forward but slow your own strides and stop walking after a few strides. At this point if the horse continues to think forward he will step out to the contact and then start to curve around you in a circle since you are now standing still (but turning as the horse goes around you). You have now caused the horse to step out to the contact and to

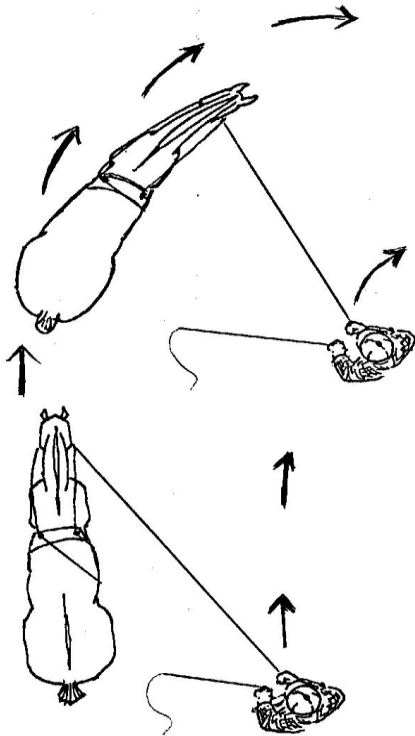


Fig. 3

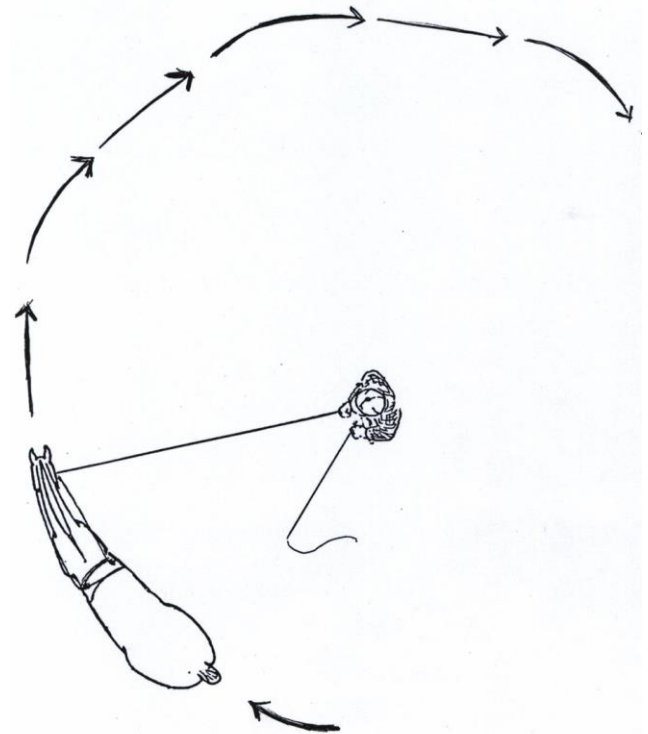


Fig.4

think out of the circle into the outside rein for a few strides. See Figure 3.

In the beginning, before the horse really understands and makes a habit of this concept, you will lose the correct feeling after a few steps. Don't get frustrated and give up! This takes patience and a lot of practice both for you and your horse. Typically you will need to use this method of "going straight and then curving around" quite often. You should think of the circle as many straight sections connected with curved parts. See Figure 4. Eventually there will be fewer and fewer straight sections and more and more curved parts, until it becomes a continuous curve – and finally a circle with your horse thinking "out" just enough to maintain a steady contact with your hand! See Figure 4.

Always remember, if your horse is a little bit on his way out of the circle, he can't be falling in at the same time!

STEP 3: INTRODUCING SIDE REINS

Up to this point side reins have not been necessary. Either you have been working with a youngster or focusing on teaching the basics to an older horse. But now it is time to start differentiating between longeing strictly for exercise and longeing as a training tool. In general it makes more sense to longe the horse with side reins than without. This is because the side reins invite the horse to work in a similar frame to the one you ask him to be in when you ride. And this is much more productive than when the horse spends the training sessions with his neck up and his back hollow. ***Remember, every moment you work with your horse you are training him to do whatever he is doing at that moment.***

The best side reins have a rubber doughnut for elasticity. This works better than the elastic band style, since sooner or later one side will stretch more than the other. The side reins can be attached to the saddle or to a longeing surcingle. In either case, they should be attached so they make more or less a horizontal line from the bit to the point of attachment. The longe line can be attached as described earlier—through the bit and over the poll—or directly to the inside bit ring. It is not a good idea to run the longe line through the inside bit ring and under the horse's chin to the other side. This can cause the bit to painfully pinch the jaw.

Always start by first allowing the horse to walk for a few minutes without the side reins so he can warm up his muscles without restriction.

The first time you put side reins on your horse, do it on a day when your horse is calm and relaxed. Start by attaching only the outside rein, at the longest length. The side rein should hang loose no matter where the horse puts his head. Be prepared to instantly drive him forward should he become frightened of the situation. A side rein that is attached abruptly or is too short can invite the horse to run backwards and possibly rear, so be very careful!

Once the horse is used to the outside side rein, work for 5 to 10 minutes while making transitions between halt, walk and trot. Then reverse direction and work again with only the outside side rein, still at its longest setting. When the horse accepts this, attach the other side rein and work a short while in each direction.

Repeat this procedure over the next few training sessions, until you see that there are no problems. At this point you are ready to start shortening the side reins. Do so very gradually, 1 or 2 holes at the most for each session, until the horse is working in a frame appropriate for his level. The side reins should be of equal length on both sides. The number of holes you shorten them will also depend on the distance between the holes in your side reins, and your horse's conformation and confidence level. The horse should learn to reach forward to the bit, so do not make the side reins so short that they compress his neck. If in doubt, it is better for the side reins to be too long than too short.

STEP 4: MAKING TRANSITIONS THAT LEAD TO IMPROVED BALANCE AND INCREASED ENGAGEMENT

This is basically a very simple procedure, since your horse now understands how to think out of the circle to the outside rein while at the same time maintaining a steady contact to the bit.

A good way to help your horse stay in balance during transitions is to make sure he thinks a little extra out of the circle to the outside rein at the moment of the transition. Encourage your horse to do this by asking him to clearly yield out of the circle a few steps before, during and a few steps after he makes the transition. Once again, if he is on his way out, he is not falling in... Also, the process of clearly yielding out creates a need in the horse to move his inside hind leg over and across in front of his outside hind leg. In order to do this, he must bring that inside hind leg further forward in under his body (engage it more). By teaching him to do this each time he makes a transitions on the longe line, he will begin to move his hind leg more forward as soon as he senses a transition coming up. And as a consequence of moving his inside hind leg forward more, he will tend to do the same with his outside hind leg. You have now taught your horse that it is a good idea to increase the engagement in the hind legs for transitions. Consistent work like this leads to the horse lowering his haunches and elevating his forehead.

Transitions like these can be done between all gaits as well as within the gaits.

STEP 5: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

You are now able to longe your horse on a balanced circle in all three gaits. Transitions are no problem, and benefit the horse in many ways. It is also a good idea to sometimes move him in longer straight lines along the long side of the arena when you ask for lengthened strides. Alternating between long straight lines in long strides and transitions into and out of smaller circles is a good way to supple the horse both longitudinally and laterally. Remember that the horse must still think out to the outside rein all the while. Practice longeing the horse on a square instead of a circle to reinforce this idea of moving out to the outside rein. The possibilities are endless. Remain logical and consistent but also use your imagination!

By using longeing as a training tool, you have now improved your horse's lateral and longitudinal balance. At the same time you have taught him a good work ethic and improved his ability to answer your signals and stay focused. You will find that good longeing sessions will improve his work under saddle. This means each time you longe him, it will be a productive session whether it is work at home or as preparation for riding at a show or clinic.