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Longe Line Training

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Longeing is a procedure in which the horse travels in a large circle around the handler on a long strap or line.

It is useful in training young horses and in exercising others. Longeing affords the horse an opportunity to improve balance and develop stride and action. It is also a good way to reduce energy in overactive horses before they are ridden. Longeing can be started after weaning, but be careful not to let a young horse hurt itself by being jerked off-balance on a longe line.

Equipment needed

You will need a halter (or longeing cavesson), whip, longe line and halter shank.

The cavesson has various places where the longe line can be attached. It is well padded for protection over the nose and under the chin. Longeing cavessons may be expensive, but cost can be justified if they are used on several horses.

If you have only a few horses, you may use a good fitting halter to which the longe line can be attached on either side. Use web or nylon longe lines as they are lighter and stronger than rope and leather lines.

Preliminary preparation

Before horses are longed, they should be taught to lead from either side, and to stop, stand, and back. They should be gentle and reasonably obedient or easy to control.

Groom a horse at the site of training the first time it is longed. This removes some anxiety and puts it at ease. Protect the horse from flies with repellent so you can have its undivided attention for the lesson.

Start the horse in a small pen from which it can't escape. Begin by walking in circles with the new equipment on its head. Be sure it is adjusted so it is not rubbing or detracting attention from the lesson.

Get an assistant before starting

Although some trainers prefer to work alone, most beginners find an experienced person helpful in starting the horse in training. The assistant works from the opposite side of the trainer with a halter shank to help start and control the young horse. Most trainers prefer to start circling to the left, which allows them to handle the whip in the right hand. The assistant should eventually release the shank and drop back from the horse while the trainer urges the horse ahead into a large circle. This maneuver is accomplished by keeping the horse positioned between the longeing line in front and the whip behind.

After the horse has circled the ring a few times, the trainer should start to drop away from the shoulder, keeping the horse moving forward by tapping the ground lightly with the whip. The trainer should drop toward the rear of the horse while the assistant falls back toward its shoulder. The assistant should then release the halter shank and gradually drop backward as the horse continues walking forward.

To keep the horse moving forward, the trainer should stand by the horse's left leg and hip as the circle is gradually made larger. Hold the whip near the hind leg of the horse. If the horse stops, ask it to move forward and hit the ground lightly at its heels with the whip. If it panics and faces the trainer, the process should start over again.

The trainer should still make a small circle as the line feeds out. The whip will keep the horse from stopping or closing the size of the circle.

The horse should learn to stop and stay on the perimeter of the circle. At the command of "whoa," it may turn and face the trainer. In later lessons, the horse should stop in place on the perimeter until commanded to face inward and come to the trainer. Don't allow a horse to anticipate commands and make its own decisions. When the horse is stopped in the center of the circle or at the perimeter, it should be taught to stand in place. Don't allow the horse to stop briefly and come into the circle. If it is stopped on the perimeter, make it stay there. Vary the amount of time it stands so it will not anticipate and move out too soon.

As soon as possible, work without an assistant. It is a good idea, however, not to dismiss the assistant too soon, because you may need emergency help.

Enlarging the circle

It sometimes helps to use the butt of a whip as you circle the horse and drop away from its shoulder. If the horse tries to follow you as you move back, move it to the perimeter with the butt of the whip against its shoulder (don't jab the horse in the ribs or flanks). Continue intimidating the horse as the size of the circle increases.

This procedure should continue, with the horse increasing the perimeter of the circle and you decreasing it, until you are standing in one spot and the horse is moving in a large circle around you.

Some horses keep a longe line tighter than others. It is undesirable to keep a tight line on a horse. Short pulls and releases will restrain it. A soft nylon or leather halter, compared to a longeing cavesson, may encourage tight line pulling. When the horse is going in a large circle around the trainer with the right tension on the line, the trainer can stand in one position and give the lesson with minimum effort.

Changing direction

Change direction of the horse and use the same procedure. Many horses are definitely one-sided in their preference in longeing. Work the weaker side more than the stronger side until the horse will longe in both directions in good form.

Horses are often frustrated when direction is changed. Sometimes they try to escape by running backwards. Be patient — start over. See that they do it right in the beginning. Keep lessons short — 15 to 20 minutes — but stop on a positive note.

Potential problems

A horse may want to run while being longed. It may do this from frustration, or may feel good and want to expend some energy. Use your voice to reassure the horse. Get it used to your voice for future riding lessons. When a horse has confidence, the handler can often talk it out of unfavorable responses to unfamiliar situations.

If a horse panics, keep your cool. You can jerk a horse too quickly and possibly cause it to sprain a leg or fall. For this reason, weanlings and yearlings usually are not allowed to canter on longe lines. If the ground is slick, longeing should be avoided or restricted to older, better trained horses.

Getting the line tangled up will happen to everyone sooner or later. The main thing is not to get it around your feet or allow the horse to step over it. If something goes wrong, soothe the horse vocally as you correct the situation. Leave that lesson with a positive achievement, however small it may be.

The walk, trot and canter

Teach a horse to walk promptly and rapidly in both directions. Much of its future performance under saddle will be at a walk. Urge with the whip if necessary.

In an extended trot on the longe line, a horse should carry its head well and should trot squarely.

When cantering with good form and balance, a horse should not pull on the longe line or try to decrease the size of the circle. The horse should lead with the inside front foot and not try to bolt or run away. It is usually easier to teach a horse to canter with the correct lead from the ground, rather than from a horse's back. The weight of the rider changes the center of gravity and makes choosing the correct lead more difficult for the horse. Work the weak lead hardest.

Other uses of the longe line

One of the best uses of the longe line is to "tune up" an old well-trained horse. A biting rig will improve head carriage and sidechecks will help bring a horse's nose down. You may wish to exercise a stabled horse this way when you cannot ride.

Horses can be trotted across cavalettis or fence posts to regulate length of stride. This is particularly useful in jumping horses and in young horses that do not extend enough in the trot. Gaited horses with a pacing tendency can often be improved by this procedure, as can Western horses that need more length of stride in their extended trots.

Some horses jump well on longe lines. It is good exercise for trained horses and a good way to start young jumping prospects. Since jumping is demanding, don't overdo it.

Longeing is an important step in preliminary training. A young horse can learn to start, stop, stand, walk, trot and canter on command. It establishes authority and routines that reduce mounted training time.

Seasoned performers can be exercised, refreshed or even prepared for new activities from the longe line. Longe line training is a skill that most accomplished horse owners have found worthwhile to develop.

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