

Techniques Of Line Driving

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Line driving is one of the most valuable techniques for training horses. It can be used to train horses too young to ride, to retrain spoiled horses, or to teach others new movements. Young horses can be taught to move forward, stop, back, stand, turn, and other preliminary obedience steps by line driving. If these maneuvers have been taught on the longe line, so much the better. They can be advanced to sharp turns. Horses also can be introduced to strange objects they might shy from under saddle.

Equipment needed for line driving

Prepare for line driving a young horse by first driving one that is experienced. For line driving, you will need a halter and shank to lead the horse to the location (and to be used by the assistant if one is used), a snaffle bit bridle, and two light lines approximately 30 feet long. A training harness or saddle is necessary for line driving. A surcingle-crupper combination (see photo) is handy because it is padded on the back and adjustable for good fit.

Many horses are line driven with a saddle. The stirrups are tied together under the belly of the horse, then the lines are run through them. Lightweight nylon lines are good to use because they put little weight on the mouth of the horse.

If the horse has been longed, line driving is usually just another series of lessons in its training. If not, an assistant and a training pen are needed.

Preparing the horse

Groom the horse at the site of training. This relaxes the horse. If the location is near the stables, so much the better. Let the horse smell the equipment it is about to wear, so it will learn that it is not going to hurt. If the equipment has been used on another horse, this also will reassure it.

After preliminary adjustment of the equipment, slip it on the horse easily and quietly so as not to increase anxiety or create fear. Start with the surcingle, holding the crupper in the right hand. Next, tighten the surcingle gently around the horse, so it will not pinch. Keep the left hand under the buckle and pull the billet up gently. If the horse shows anxiety, tighten only enough to hold it in place. Let the horse stand for a few minutes and then finish tightening the surcingle.

Before putting the crupper under a horse's tail, get an idea of its adjustment. Adjust the back straps so it hangs about two inches below the root of the tail. Raise the tail with one hand and put the crupper under it. This may excite a young horse. It may respond by clamping down on the crupper or by kicking and trying to escape. The assistant should be prepared to calm the horse and prevent violent reactions. Buckle the crupper securely but not too tightly. Stand with the horse if it shows anxiety. Pat the horse, speak to it, and walk it around until it is no longer apprehensive of the crupper.

Make final adjustments after the horse calms down. If this has been a traumatic experience for the horse, you may wish to stop the lesson for that day. It might be best to let the horse stand in the stall with the rig on, until it is thoroughly used to the rig, before proceeding with the driving lesson.

If the horse accepts the equipment, walk it around in a circle in the training pen until it is relaxed before putting on the bridle and lines for driving. It is good to trot the horse for awhile. This gets its mind off the new rig and takes some of the edge off its energy. If it is trained to a longe line, its energy can be reduced by longeing first. Make sure the bridle fits before line driving.

Bridling the horse

Get an idea of a horse's head size and adjust the bridle accordingly before putting it on. It may be wise to bridle the horse in a stall a few times before going out to drive. Watch the horse if it is left in the stall. The horse might rub the bridle off or get it caught on something.

Before putting on the bridle, release the halter so the horse can still be controlled with the shank around its neck. Work the bit into its mouth gently and its ears into the crown of the bridle without pinching them. Make sure the bridle fits. The throat latch should not be too tight and the bit should not hang too high in the horse's mouth. A full-cheek snaffle bit should be used. It will not permit the ring to be pulled through the horse's mouth if one rein is pulled hard.

The objective of line driving is to get the response you want from the horse without its associating the activity with a bad experience.

Beginning the lesson

An assistant should be available when starting a young horse for the first time. The handler can reassure the horse, standing at its head, while the assistant gets the equipment straightened out. Snap a halter shank onto the bit or the halter and let the assistant walk with the horse for the first few circles. Lower the lines to the bottom rings in the surcingle. This will help keep the horse between the lines rather than getting one over its back and allowing it to face the driver.

As the horse accepts response from the lines, the handler should release the halter shank and begin to drop away. This allows the driver to take full control of the horse.

After the horse responds well, let it do most of the walking by going in circles around the driver. Keep the circle large by putting tension on the outside line. This teaches the horse to respond to the lines around its hind legs. Keep the lesson short in the beginning — 10 to 15 minutes.

Changing directions

When moving in the opposite direction, have the assistant start the horse again, release it, and drop back. Be sure the horse responds and does not get its own way if it should decide not to follow the signal.

It is important to teach a horse to stop and stand until you are ready for it to move off. Don't let the horse anticipate and move forward before you are ready. These habits may carry over when you ride.

It is good to drive the horse with a saddle on part of the time. This gets it used to carrying more weight and it becomes familiar with wearing a saddle before carrying a rider.

Teaching a horse to back

When the horse is going well, teach it to back. If it has been taught to back on a longe line, this will be no problem. If not, you may need an assistant. Stand straight behind the horse, say "back" and apply even tension on each line by light pulls. If you get any response toward backing, release pressure. Then say "back" and pull again.

Backing is a series of pulls and releases. Don't expect too much the first time you try backing. If the horse moves backward one or two steps, be satisfied for that day's lesson. After a number of lessons, the horse will back promptly.

If the horse will not back at all, have an assistant stand in front of it and tap it lightly around the legs with a whip as you give the signal orally and with light pulls on the lines.

This often will start a horse. Be patient when a horse is backing. This is an unnatural gait for a horse — it has to learn and it takes a long time.

If your horse shows a tendency to turn and face you, put the lines in the lower rings on the surcingle. Although it is easier to handle well-trained horses with lines in the top rings, green horses tend to turn out of them easier.

Spend a lot of time in open spaces driving in a straight line.

Loose horses "weave" and "wind" when they travel naturally and must be taught to travel a straight course.

Sharp turns can be effected against a fence or in small circles. This may be frustrating for a horse, and it may attempt to anticipate the direction of the turn or try to back out of the situation. Be patient and stay with the horse until it will turn promptly in the direction you wish and not the way it might prefer.

Using side reins

After line driving a while, a horse may show a tendency to raise its nose. If so, be sure its mouth is not sore. Lower the lines to the bottom position on the surcingle and consider attaching side reins that will help tuck the horse's chin and prevent rooting with its nose.

Side reins are attached to the upper ring in the surcingle and have elastic bands to make them easier on the horse's mouth. Be sure they are adjusted to the same length on each side. Then drive with as loose a line as possible.

Problems

Most horses try to turn out of the lines and face the handler. This can be prevented by driving with the lines in the lower position and staying a little closer to the horse. Be careful not to drive close enough for the horse to kick you.

When a horse turns, don't panic. Hold one line tighter and try to get to its head. An assistant is especially useful when this happens.

Another problem that is likely to occur is getting the line under the horse's tail. This can be a traumatic experience for a horse the first few lessons, but if it has had good basic training and has been driven with a crupper, it will stop. As soon as possible, get back to its head and straighten out the situation. This is a good reason for using a small pen, free of objects, from which the horse cannot escape when line driving for the first few times. It would be a bad experience out in a field if the horse got away from the handler.

Sometimes a horse will tuck its chin too much when being driven. This may be a result of overwork, equipment that is too tight, or having a limber-necked horse. Consider not working the horse quite as long in its lesson or letting it rest a few days. Another alternative is to put a sidecheck on the bridle. This keeps the horse's head up and tends to prevent too much tucking of the chin.

Line driving is time well spent

Trot your horse under saddle before you ride it. If it will trot square and straight on a longline or long driving line, much of your work is done before you mount.

You may even wish to jump the horse a little from the long driving line if you have enough energy to keep up with it. However, this activity is probably best done with a longe line unless the driver is in good physical condition.

Time spent line driving is time well spent. It saves time and reduces risk when you ride the young horse later.

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