

Longeing Horses

Our topics for this week are longeing of horses:

- **Benefits**
- **Equipment**
- **Technique**

Longeing is an ancient method of handling horses on a long line. To longe means to “to stretch out”. Longeing horses is often pronounced lunging horses, but to lunge is inappropriate as it means “to thrust or jab”. Longeing is having the horse move in a circle around the handler while controlled by a lead line called a longe line. A longeing whip is also used to encourage the horse to move around the handler in the desired direction and at the speed desired by the handler.

Benefits

Longeing can have many beneficial functions, such as:

1. Training young horses to respond to verbal and visual cues, to accept wearing tack, and to become familiarized with the handler. .
2. Permitting a controlled safe introduction to new surroundings and desensitization to new tack.
3. Allowing aerobic outdoor exercise for the horse without the need for an enclosure.
4. Assessment of soundness of the horse in motion by one person.
5. Calming an excited horse with pent up energy.

We advise against horses being ridden while on a longe line. This is not a safe method of teaching how to ride horses.

EQUIPMENT

Longe Lines

Training and exercise longe lines are usually 12 to 25 ft long. Many are flat webbing, but round cotton or polyester lines are easier to manage and handle. One end generally has a metal snap to attach to a horse’s halter or cavesson. Some trainers use a chain at the end of the longe line for difficult horses, but this is not recommended by us. The other end should have a stopper knot or disk to prevent the line being pulled from the handler’s grip. A loop at the end is not advisable since it could entrap a hand. The preferred grip on the longe line is to create a bight, loop it over the thumb and grasp the bight with the fingers. The line to the horse comes out of the bottom of the grasping fist. This grip reduces the risk of slip but will release the thumb as soon as the

fingers release their grip. Extra line is folded back and forth and held around the middle with the other hand.

Longe Whip or Flag

The stock of a longe whip should be 6 to 7 ft long and have a lash of the same length. A flag can be substituted for the lash. Riding or driving whips are too short to be as effective or as safe as a longeing whip. The whip is used most often as an arm extension visual aid. Raising the whip is usually sufficient to stimulate movement in horses. When visual or verbal cues are not effective, the lash is used to slap the ground or create a cracking sound. If a flag is used, it can be flapped quickly up and down.

Longeing Cavessons and Halters

Bridles and bits should not be used to longe horses. The risk of injury to their mouth is too great. If longeing for training, a longeing cavesson transmits the clearest cues to the horse. The longe line is attached to a center top ring on the noseband. The noseband often has a metal band that is padded underneath. The metal band improves response when using flat leather cavessons. Flat leather halters without a metal band do not provide good cues to a horse.

Rope halters allow better cues to a longed horse than flat leather halters and do not require metal snaps for attaching the longe line. Some trainers believe that knots in the noseband of a rope halter improve responsiveness. Metal snaps can uncontrollably thump the horses face or jaw during the horse's movements. Rope halters with round cotton or polyester longe line tied to the halter with a double sheet-bend knot is our preferred method of longeing.

Leg Wraps

During longeing, horses are often asked to change direction with speed, a movement called a rollback. This can risk a front hoof hitting the other front leg. To protect the legs, split boots and bell boots should be worn by horses when they are longed. Polo wraps require more effort and expertise, but also provide sufficient leg protection.

Saddle Stirrups

Longeing with a saddle on the horse is often desirable, but flapping stirrups can be an undesirable distraction. The stirrup irons on an English saddle should be "run up" the stirrup leathers. This traps the metal stirrups underneath the saddle skirt. Western saddle stirrups cannot be run up. Instead, they are usually tied together by a string or thin strap beneath the horse's chest.

TECHNIQUE

Training and Conditioning

Longeing should be done in an unobstructed area of at least 50 ft in diameter, on smooth soft ground with good footing that is not slick. The first longeing sessions should be approximately 5 minutes to allow the horse to become conditioned for longer periods. Longeing should never be more than 20 minutes long with equal movement in each direction and changes in gait going both directions. There should be no loose dogs in the area and conversations with others, live or by phone, should not be allowed while longeing. All communications should be only between the horse and its handler.

After preparing the horse to be longed, the longe line should be held with the hand that represents the direction to send the horse, i.e. the left hand for movement to the handler's left. If there is extra line, it should be folded and held by the other hand. Longe line excess should not lay on the ground because of the risk the handler could trip on it or entrap a foot. The longe whip is also held with the other hand. Except for when the whip is needed, the whip hand is held low with the end of the whip stock near the ground. The lash drags on the ground.

To initiate movement the leading hand is raised pointing in the direction for the horse to move. As soon as the horse is moving in the correct direction at the correct speed, the leading hand on the longe line is lowered. If the horse does not move in the correct direction or at the desired speed, the whip is raised and clucking sounds are made. When a horse ignores the visual cue of the raised whip and the sound of clucking, the whip's lash is slapped on the ground behind the horse's shoulder (drive line). Alternatively, the whip may be cracked behind the horse.

The horse's ear that is closest to the handler should be turned toward the handler, not forward or backward throughout the longeing exercise. As the horse circles the handler, the handler's eyes should be on the horse's flank to encourage continued movement. The handler's feet should move only to rotate, not to chase the horse. Spurs should not be worn to reduce the risk of tripping.

The horse should not be allowed to pick its gait. It should be moved at a walk, later a trot, then an extended trot, and finally a lope in both directions. While it is moving, it should be moved closer to the handler and then at full length of the longe line, i.e. spiraled in and out.

To stop the horse, the handler should quietly say "whoa" and step in front of the horse's shoulder. The horse should stop immediately and stand still. It should not turn toward the handler or attempt to come toward the handler. A change of direction requires switching hands as the lead hand and the whip hand. With practice this can become a smooth, calm movement, as will the horse's rollback to the other direction. Whenever the horse responds to cues correctly, it should be given a brief rest as a reward and indication that they have performed as desired..

Experienced horsemen on seasoned horses can longe another horse while horseback. Having another horse nearby can calm a nervous horse. Unless experienced with using ropes while horseback, this method can be hazardous.

Calming

When trail riding, “get-down” rope or mecate reins should be used. A 14 ft. get down rope is tied around the upper neck and run through a cavesson. The bridle is put on over the cavesson. The long end of the rope is wrapped to the saddle. When needed the get down rope is used on the trail for small circle longeing to calm a horse down or as a lead for tying.

Mecate reins are 22 ft long. One end is tied as a loop to create looped reins while the remainder is used in the same way as a get-down rope.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let’s recap the key points to remember from today’s episode:

- 1. Longeing can provide a means of training, exercise, assessment of soundness, desensitization to surroundings and tack, and calming excited horses.**
- 2. Longeing requires appropriate surroundings, ground condition, and equipment.**
- 3. When longeing a horse, the only communication that should occur is between the handler and the horse.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources. My new spiral-bound handbook, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling* was recently published and available from all major science book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 150 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don’t forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.