

# Learn to Lunge

*First of two parts. This month: lunging the horse.*

**L**UNGING CAN SERVE SEVERAL purposes as part of a classical training program. Among them:

**Training the young horse.** Lunging is useful in familiarizing the young horse with the handler and the training routine, in teaching him to accept the tack and the aids, in building his confidence, in improving his relaxation and balance, and in preparing him to carry a rider.

**Supplementing the training program.** Lunging can help to warm up and loosen the fresh or "tight" horse and is a good means of exercising the horse that cannot be ridden. Transitions performed on the lunge can help to improve the quality of the gaits.

**Retraining for dressage.** Ex-racehorses and -jumpers, among others, may have been ridden with too strong a hand and may have learned to fear contact with the bit. Some horses have not learned to stretch over their topline and to move forward. Lunging and work over cavalletti can aid in the reschooling process and in restoring horses' confidence in accepting rein contact. They can also help to improve conformational shortcomings.

**As preparation for in-hand work.** Many trainers advocate teaching such movements as half-steps, piaffe, and passage in hand instead of from the saddle. Lunging is a good introduction to the work in hand.

Just as in riding, lunge-line work should follow the progression of the pyramid of training (Figure 1). Basic lunging work generally addresses the

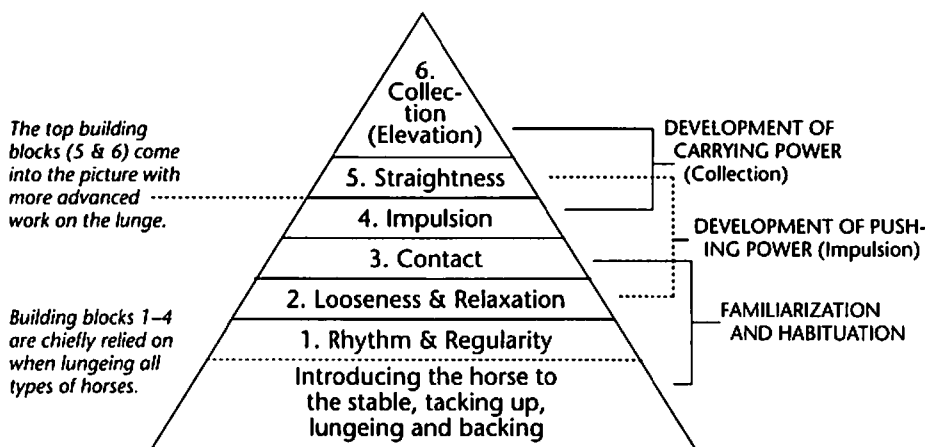


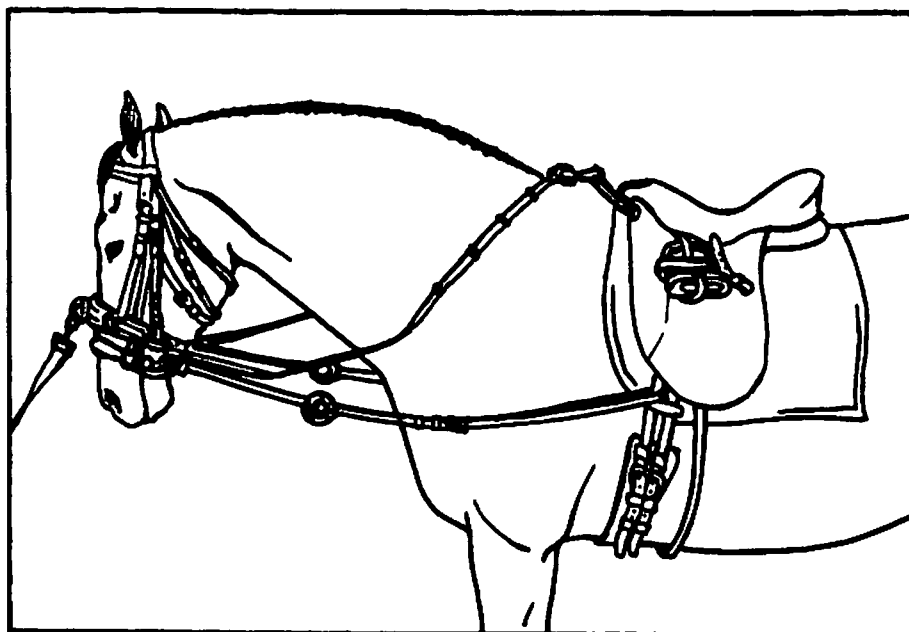
Figure 1. The training scale (pyramid of training)

first four building blocks: rhythm and regularity, looseness and relaxation, contact, and impulsion. More advanced work also employs the top two tiers of the pyramid: straightness and collection.

## Safety First

We all know that equestrian sports—including dressage—bear an inherent

risk of mishaps and accidents. Even if we know our equine partner well and have mutual trust, we must bear in mind that nowhere else can Murphy's Law strike as unpredictably as in the horse world. To mitigate the risks to both horse and handler while lunging, it's essential that you follow the safety procedures that I'll describe.



Horse correctly outfitted for lunging: with lunging cavesson over bridle with mild snaffle bit and dropped (or removed) noseband, reins twisted and secured under throatlatch, stirrup leathers run up and secured (or removed), side reins properly attached and adjusted

Adapted from Gerhard Politz (Ed.), *Lunging Manual*. Lincoln, NE: U.S. Dressage Federation, 1996.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PENNY COLTRIN

Professionals should take extra care to take proper safety precautions, for they are role models for students and observers alike.

Always observe the following rules when lunging:

1. *Walk, don't run.* Your horse should walk away from you, not rush away, when asked to move off.
2. *Check and adjust all equipment.* Remove reins or twist and secure them under the throatlatch. Remove or run up and secure stirrup irons so that they will not flop by the horse's sides as he moves. Side reins should be sufficiently long that they do not panic the horse. Make sure that leg boots and bandages are secure.
3. *Organize the lunge line.* Hold the excess line in neat loops or folds. Don't let the end of the line trail on the ground, and never wrap the line around your wrist or hand.
4. *Whip smarts.* Do not set the whip on the ground, and keep your feet from getting entangled in the lash.
5. *Dress for success.* Wear a safety helmet in case your horse kicks out, and don gloves to protect your hands. If you wear riding boots, remove spurs. Choose footwear that offers good ankle support and a grippy sole—no sneakers.
6. *Location, location.* Always lunge in an enclosed space: A 20-meter round pen is ideal. An advanced horse may be brought in to a ten-meter circle and then spiraled back out, but keep the duration short to avoid overstressing his feet and legs. Choose footing that is soft and springy yet not deep or slippery. The surface should be level.
7. *Change directions and gaits frequently.* Reverse every five to seven minutes. Give frequent short walk breaks.
8. *Outfit your horse appropriately.* Lunge only in a thick snaffle bit.

The lunging cavesson can be used with a dropped-noseband bridle (see Figure 2a); other types of nosebands can interfere with the cavesson (Figure 2b). Alternatively, lunge in your horse's regular bridle and with the line attached correctly to the bridle.

Figure 3 shows the correct way to attach the lunge line to a bridle with a flash noseband, which is a common type of bridle used in dressage.

Attach a sturdy lunging surcingle—one with several rings at various levels for attaching side reins—over the saddle.

Choose a lunge line that's at least seven meters in length. A ten-meter line is better. The lash of the lunge whip should be long enough to reach the horse. Most American whips aren't long enough.

There are four types of side reins that are safe and effective for use in lunging: plain leather, with rubber donuts, with elastic inserts, and sliding side reins. Plain-leather side reins are appropriate only for in-hand work and for advanced horses. Side reins with rubber donuts offer some "give" and can be used on all horses. Side reins with elastic inserts work best with green horses and horses that are not yet ready to accept rein contact. Sliding side reins, which can be attached in a variety of ways, can be useful in encouraging the horse to stretch over his back and topline.

Always protect your horse's legs with boots or bandages when lunging.

## Lunging Technique

When you lunge your horse, the lunge line substitutes for the reins and your hands; and the whip substitutes for your leg aids. Your voice acts as a "bridge" between the whip and the line. The tone of your voice can either animate or calm him. If you are consistent in your choice of words and tone of voice, most horses quickly learn voice commands: "walk,"

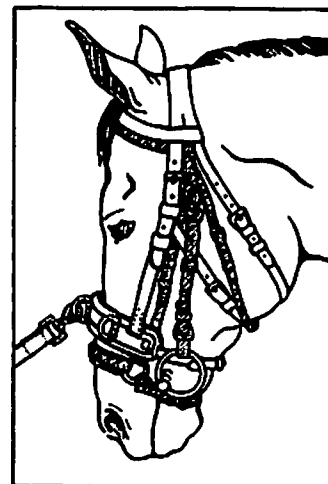


Figure 2a. Correctly fitted lunging cavesson with dropped-noseband bridle

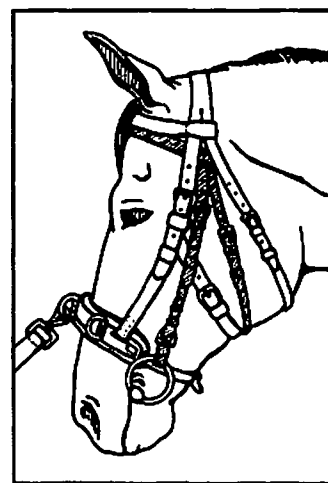


Figure 2b. Method of fitting lunging cavesson with bridle with noseband removed

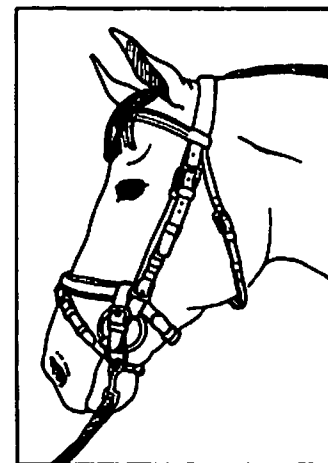


Figure 3. Lunging in a snaffle bridle with flash noseband: The lunge line is attached to a ring on a leather loop that runs through both the inside bit ring and the upper part of the noseband.

“trot,” “canter,” “whoa.” Use your voice sparingly; he’ll quickly tune you out if you talk incessantly.

Stand at the center of the circle, with your body parallel to your horse’s shoulders. “Frame” him between the lunge line and the whip. When you lift the whip, he should respond with increased forward drive. If he does not respond, use the whip in an upward motion. If he still does not respond satisfactorily, flick the lash toward his hindquarters, in the direction of his hocks. Do not crack the whip.

Your horse should accept and respect the whip but not fear it or run from it. If he scoots or bolts when you lift the whip, soothe him with your voice and use the whip very quietly, lash secured, until he relaxes and accepts its presence. Desensitize a fearful horse by gently stroking him with the whip, lash secured, while soothing him with your voice and feeding him a treat.

As in riding, your goal is to maintain even and elastic contact with your horse’s mouth. Don’t allow the lunge line to trail on the ground, and quickly take up any slack that develops. Use soft tugs, coupled with your voice, to slow him down.

Use the line and the whip as needed to keep your horse traveling on a circle of the desired diameter. If he drifts in toward you, move him back out on the circle by pointing the whip at his midsection or shoulder and gently shaking the line.

Bring your horse into the arena before you attach the side reins to the bit rings. Attach the outside side rein first, then the inside side rein. Warming up, or when lunging a green horse, attach the side reins to the lowest surcingle

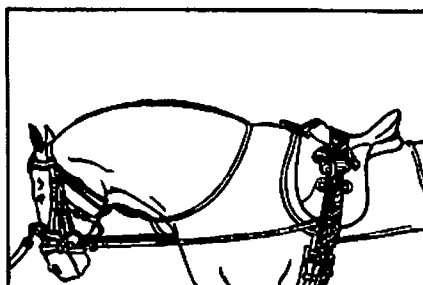


Figure 4a. Elementary side-rein position, with reins attached to lowest rings on lunging surcingle. Side reins should be long enough to allow the horse’s nose to be well in front of the vertical.

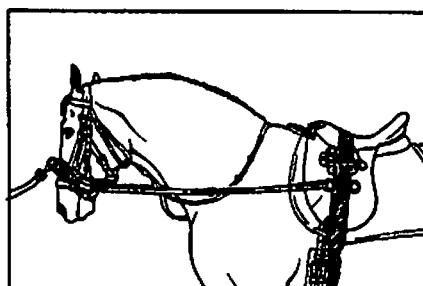


Figure 4b. Intermediate side-rein position, with reins attached to middle rings on lunging surcingle. Reins should be long enough to allow the horse’s nose to be slightly in front of or on the vertical.

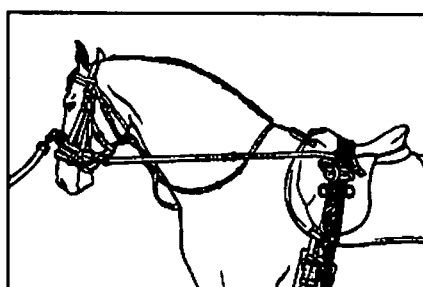


Figure 4c. Advanced side-rein position, with reins attached to the highest rings on lunging surcingle. Even when lunging advanced horses, begin with the reins attached lower and longer; move to this position later in the session.

rings (Figure 4a). As he progresses in his training, you may wish to position the side reins in a slightly higher and shorter position (Figure 4b). Only advanced horses should be lunged with the side

reins adjusted shorter and attached to the highest surcingle rings (Figure 4c).

If no surcingle is available, run the side reins through one billet strap of the saddle so that they cannot slip down.

To change direction, first ask your horse to halt on the circle. He should stand quietly as you approach him and not wheel in toward you. Place the whip under your armpit with the tip pointing behind you, and gather up the lunge line in neat loops as you walk toward him. If he is young or green, lead him into the center of the circle, change over the line and the whip, and ask him to walk away from you in the new direction. If he is more advanced, ask him to do a turn on the forehand after you’ve changed over the line and the whip.

Done properly, lunging can be a good supplement to the mounted work, although it is not a substitute. Lunging can improve the communication between you and your horse, build his condition and muscle tone, develop his topline, improve his balance, and supple him both laterally and longitudinally.

However, poor lunging techniques can be just as damaging to the horse as poor riding; so it’s important that you learn the correct procedures. If you are uncertain as to the proper adjustment of side reins or other lunging equipment or of correct lunging technique, check with your instructor or another knowledgeable professional. ▲

*Next month: lunging the rider.*

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