

Improving Ground Manners Through Lunging

Many horse owners struggle with their horses having poor ground manners. Getting their feet stepped on, being dragged to the barn, getting shoved to the side as the horse plows his way into his stall, the horse walking circles around them while they try to have a conversation with a friend; these are common acts of poor ground manners that horse owners struggle with everyday. The common solution is to reprimand the horse with a snatch on the halter or a smack by the back of a hand or rope. I have a technique that can cure bad ground manners through lunging and using the language that horses already know.

Horses communicate among each other through body language. The eldest mare in a herd is the one that makes the major decisions and controls discipline of the colts and fillies. The stallion has only two duties, to protect and to breed. When a colt misbehaves the boss mare squares her shoulders, makes eye contact, and flattens her ears against her head to drive the misbehaving colt out away from the herd. When the boss mare feels as though the colt has spent enough time out on his own, she lowers her eye contact and begins to walk in a circle, exposing her flanks. The flanks of a horse are the most vulnerable parts for attack by predators because there is no bone structure under the skin to protect their organs so, when a mare exposes her flanks she is releasing any offensive pressure telling the colt that it is okay for them to return to the herd. It is this body language that will be communicated through me to establish space boundaries with the horse.

A horse can be driven forward and slowed down depending on where I am standing in relation to his conformation. All forward motion is controlled by the hindquarters of the horse, so if I want to drive the horse forward I am going to square my shoulders and step towards the horse's hindquarters. My eyes are going to mimic what a boss mare would do and pick up eye contact with the horse. To stop the horse or to back the horse up I want to step in front of the horse's shoulders or into the horse while keeping eye contact.

Now I'm going to incorporate these ideas into lunging. This exercise is assuming that the horse

already knows how to lunge. When I lunge horses I use a rope halter with four knots across the nose and a fifteen foot rope line. I begin by sending the horse out in a circle around me by stepping towards his hindquarters, keeping my shoulders square to his hindquarters, and taking up eye contact. If the horse is lazy to moving out, I will swing the end of the rope towards the his hindquarters to increase the pressure to move him forward. To affectively teach the horse this new exercise, I want to keep them quiet and relaxed, so I'm only going to ask the horse to walk. Once the horse is walking consistently around in a circle around me I am going to stop their movement and ask them to change direction. Training horses is all about opening and closing doors to create pathways in the direction in which they are to travel. So to ask the horse to stop and change direction I am going to step in front of the horse's shoulder, open my arm in the direction in which I want the horse to go, and pick up eye contact with the new inside eye. When first teaching this exercise to horses, it is common to have to pull on the rope line to turn the horse in and around into the new direction. It is important to coordinate the step in front of the shoulder, new eye contact, and opening arm with the pull on the rope, so that I teach the horse to respond from the original step in front of the shoulder and to not rely on feeling a pull on the halter.

Once the horse is walking in the new direction, I reward him by allowing him to walk freely around me. When the horse relaxes, I will then change his direction again. I will continue this exercise until the horse is freely and smoothly changing direction with little to no pull on the rope line.

How does this teach a horse better ground manners? By using this lunging exercise I am teaching the horse to move away from my energy. A common technique to turning a horse into me is by me dropping my shoulders towards the horse's hindquarters and inviting him in before sending him back in the opposite direction. The problem with that is that I am now inviting the horse to turn into my space and I am basically setting myself up for him to walk over me if he wants to. By keeping my shoulders square and only changing where my body is in relation to the horse, I teach the horse to move out of my space wherever I am standing and I give him no freedom to walk into my space, but to simply move away from me.

After working the horse through this exercise at the walk, then I am going to school them at the trot. The most important part to this exercise is to watch the horse's feet. I do not want the horse to walk a circle in towards me to change direction, but rather to stop his feet and cross his front legs as in a turn on the haunches a hundred and eighty degrees into the opposite direction. Once a horse becomes sensitive to what is being asked, some will want to perform very quickly. It is important to try and keep the horse quiet and relaxed to extend the amount of time in which the horse begins to panic. If a horse begins to act tense and anxious, I will often continue turning the horse back and forth within five steps of each change until the horse walks out of the turn instead of trotting or cantering. Once the horse is walking, I allow him to walk a full circle before asking him to pick up the trot again. With anxious or nervous horses, always return to a place where they find the freedom to relax; often the walk.

When do I take the pressure off and allow the horse to stop? I first look for the horse to lock their inside ear towards me in recognition that he is focused on what I am asking. I then look for the horse to start willingly change direction with very little or no pull on the rope line. Once I have seen these signs of willingness to work from the horse, I drop my eye contact, turn my side to the horse as if I were exposing my flanks, and take one or two steps away from the horse as to tell them that it is okay for them to stop. I am not asking the horse to come into me, so if the horse proceeds to walk into my space after stopping, I shake the rope to send him one or two steps backwards. Because I am working with improving ground manners and not establishing a join up I am going to develop a cue for the horse that will allow them to know when they are allowed into my space.

After, the horse has stopped their feet in response to my releasing of pressure, I'll allow the horse to stand there for a few seconds, then I will make the rope taught between us and give a light pull. This is the horse's invitation to come in. When the horse comes into me I reward him with a rub on the forehead in a circular motion as to mimic the circling motion that a boss mare may make in a herd. The horse will then drop his head to my chest level as a sign of relaxation. Keep in mind I rarely end up working a horse into a sweat in order to get this type of response. I do not want to wear the

horse out into submission, but to see the horse *want* to work *with* me.

When working with horses that have poor ground manners, I want to establish with the horse that “I will come to you, you will not come to me unless invited”. If I have gotten the correct responses from the horse during this exercise, I will have developed a mutual respect with the horse and he will not want to come into my space as in fear of hurting me. At this point I have begun to develop a relation with my horse. I never want to be superior to a horse, but rather a partner with him, to then grow into a caring relationship for one another.