

Teaching a Horse to Lunge

Being able to lunge a horse can be a very useful technique. Often, it is used for schooling a horse without the rider having to be on his back. At many horse shows, it is common to see horses lunging in the early morning. This allows the horses to stretch their legs and relax with their surroundings. I use lunging when I am helping a horse to accept a saddle and rider. It can also be used to build a relationship with a horse.

It is not an easy task to teach a horse to circle around me while on the end of a lunge line, but by teaching it in stages, it can become quite natural. Many trainers like to use round penning, instead of lunging, but I have found that working a horse on the lunge line can help teach a horse more that is directly related to aids given by a rider.

For this exercise, I use a rope halter with four knots across the nose and a 15ft rope lunge line. As I lunge the horse, I envision that the horse and I are on a donut in which I am walking the path of the middle circle and the horse is working on the outer edge of the donut. I am always going to keep my shoulders lined up with the horse's haunches and pivot with the horse's haunches around the entire circle. This is how I drive the horse forward.

In a previous article, I discussed how the engine of the horse is the hindquarters and that all motion is directly related to the hindquarters. I start a training session by engaging the hindquarters. I always work in baby steps, so the first exercise that I ask the horse to do is to move his hindquarters around his shoulders. Since I am only asking for the hind quarters to move, I get the horse to think about engaging his engine, and moving his feet. To ask the horse to move his hindquarters, I hold my line about 3ft from the horse's halter, step towards his hip, and swing the free end of the line at his hip. It is important to watch that the horse keeps his front feet still and that the hind foot nearest me steps across the opposite hind foot. If the horse decides to move his shoulders, I stop the forward motion by redirecting it. I may start with slight pressure on the rope halter, as if pushing the horse backwards, or with stiff horses, I may need to give a couple of tugs on the halter to awaken their attention. I do not

want to diminish any energy that the horse is offering me, because as long as his feet are moving, he is trying to figure out exactly what I am asking, and that is a sign of his willingness to work with me.

I repeat this exercise in both directions until the horse is freely moving their haunches in both directions without the need for much pressure from me or the rope. Once I have achieved this, I allow the horse to walk in a circle around me. Most horses pick this up very quickly and others need a little more help. To help the horse understand what I am asking for, I keep my body lined up more with the horse's shoulders to encourage the horse to engage his front feet. Then I swing the rope at his haunches to ask for movement. If the horse continues to struggle, I will open my leading arm, the one closest to the horse's head, and pull him forward around me to point him in the right direction. As soon as the horse begins to walk around me, I release all pressure from the rope and my leading arm and allow the horse to freely walk by the simple cue that my shoulders are lined up with his haunches. If the horse stops after a few steps, I help him by swinging the rope at his haunches, and if needed, I add my leading arm until the horse returns to walking freely around me.

Once the horse is walking freely on the lunge line in both directions without stopping, I'll then ask the horse to pick up a slow trot. Many horses struggle with this because in the wild horses rarely trot or canter in a circle, but instead travel in straight lines. It takes a great deal of strength and coordination for a horse to travel in a steady circle, especially on a 15ft line. Commonly, a horse will stop and turn into me when he panics and feels stuck. Since the horse has become nervous, I do not want to get anxious to further elevate the horse's anxiety. Instead, I keep all of my aids consistent and wait for the horse to react in the correct way. When the horse stops, I reapply the aids in the same way as when I asked the horse to move forward. If he jumps around or pulls, I'm just going to stay consistent and step behind his shoulder, towards his haunches, and slowly swing the rope until the horse finds the release in moving forward with the lunge line. During this process, I include a lot of rewards which keeps the horse relaxed. In the very beginning, at the point when the horse has trotted once around without stopping, I'll step in front of his shoulder to return him to the walk, or stop and

allow him to rest for a few seconds. Then I change direction and repeat the process.

If I encounter any difficulty in teaching the horse to lunge, I ask myself two questions: What is the horse doing? And what do I need the horse to do? If I break it down into these two questions, I can figure out what I need to change and how to change it. Are the shoulders moving? How can I engage the shoulders? In what direction are the horse's feet moving? Where can I move to change how the feet are moving? These are the types of questions I must ask myself with every horse, because every horse is different and may need different cues.

Teaching a horse to lunge takes patience and consistency. If I rush this process, I cause the horse's adrenaline to spike, which in turn could cause the horse to mentally shut down and give up trying to find the correct answer. When I allow the horse to take multiple short breaks, after even the smallest accomplishment, the horse stays relaxed and wants to keep working. When working on a 15ft line, I don't normally ask the horse to canter because the circle is too small and there is no real need. I do not use lunging to tire my horses, but rather as a schooling session to show them new exercises and to gain their focus.

For more lunging exercises, read my article on “Calming the Nervous Horse”.