



Longe Your Horse With Intention

Time spent teaching a horse to correctly carry himself pays off in the long run

Don't you just love clarity? Those rare moments when the disparate is distilled into one sparkling gem, rare and priceless.

For months I've been formulating a series of articles on all the wonderful work that can be accomplished with horses using various approaches to longeing. But I was stuck on how to start the series. Do I write a kind of outline/overview telling readers what's to come? No, because I can't predict at this point exactly what I'll choose to include in the written series and what I'll decide can only be presented experientially. A history of the technique? Yawn. Just dive in and provide exercises and illustrations of a few exercises? But where's the context? Why read my thoughts about the technique when there are so many others in print and floating in cyberspace?

Thanks to one short sentence uttered in complete innocence by the most novice of horsemen, I figured out what I need to say about longeing to introduce my approach to the reader, to provide a preview of my philosophy and practice. The client was telling me about watching a trainer working with a horse the client considered rather difficult, and he was quite pleased with the technique the trainer used. "She just ran him around the round pen until he submitted," he told me. "It took about an hour." My initial response was purely visceral, an instant knot in the belly. Then a fascinating mix of regret for the horse, disappointment in the trainer and uncertainty about the client's discernment and good sense.

Why, you ask. After all, driving horses around in circles is a time-honored technique, of late marketed to great acclaim and financial reward by a number of trainer-gurus.

Because forcing the horse to submit violates pretty much everything I have learned about horses over the past 40 years. Because work that only stresses the horse yielding to the pressure of a human's presence seems like kindergarten to me, for both parties. Because of the physical stress placed on the horse's body when he races round and round and round without regard to his carriage and balance. Because there are so many more fascinating, beneficial, supportive uses for the longe line and the roundpen. Because just driving the horse around and around is an activity so far beneath the abilities of both humans and horses to connect and explore and think and learn.

What's the purpose for longeing? For many, it seems just to be a way to get a horse tired enough that the rider feels she can get on and have a safe and somewhat productive ride. For others, it's the place to drill a horse in some kind of head-setting rig as a short-cut to make the horse hold his body in a certain position while ridden. And recently it has become the exercise of choice for people who choose to practice a popular form of dominance/submission conditioning to compel obedience.

All those applications of longeing fall far short of the potential for building up horses, for building relationship, for opening lines of communication. I incorporate work on a longe line and free longeing as one of the four techniques I apply to help build up healthy, happy horses. Work on the longe complements the bodywork, groundwork and mounted work I do with horses to help them learn balance and self-carriage.

For me, the longe line and roundpen are places where magic can happen. A lame horse can find soundness. An

unschooled horse can learn important basics. Bad movers can get better and good movers become spectacular. This is also the place where “difficult” horses can learn to shine: a “lazy” horse can find impulsion, a runaway can find control, rough gaits smooth out, heaviness becomes light and attitudes are adjusted.

But none of this happens simply because the handler says so. Teaching a horse to longe is a time-consuming process that begins with in-hand work and gradually expands on a line and then at liberty so that a horse chooses to execute the longe circle with proper bend, impulsion and lightness. I never want to see a horse exhibit common longeing postures such as racing around on the forehand with head up and back hollowed, or counterbent at the neck, falling in on the inside shoulder and disengaged behind. Those postures create unnecessary stress on the horse’s body and fail to prepare him to correctly carry a rider. They are the sign of a horse whose education is incomplete.

Over the next few months, a series of articles addressing a variety of longeing topics will be posted on this site. Each will include specific exercises you can put to use with your own horses.

Topics you might find in the series:

- In-hand exercises to prepare a horse to longe properly
- Use of poles to help solve balance problems and address movement issues
- Exercises specifically for common rehab challenges
- How longe work helps riders develop more subtle feel and learn to analyze movement

Yes, approaching longeing as a process takes longer at the outset - several months to help a horse choose self-carriage over the standard undesirable postures. But once taught, the lesson sticks with a horse and greatly expands the usefulness of the longe line and roundpen for exercise, training and connection. *Stacey Kollman*

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The two horses in these photos are at very different stages in the rehab and schooling process. The young grey has been off the racetrack for about a year and suffered a serious founder, with coffin bones rotating through the soles of both front feet. He is sound at the walk, trot and canter and just starting his education for the longe line, roundpen and, eventually, saddle. He has been getting bodywork for a few months and doing ground exercises to help him learn to bend, lift his back and move laterally. In the photo, he is in his first week of intensive work to learn to carry himself correctly at liberty. He works in-hand on a short line, but is also offered the opportunity to move on his own and apply what he has learned. In the photo, he shows both the classic undesirable longeing postures – nose turned to the outside, inside (left) shoulder dropped and hindquarters disengaged, plus head high/hollow back.

The much older bay horse is in the latter stages of a slow rebuilding process after having been laid off for two years and having lost a substantial amount of weight due to poor nutritional management. He’s also recovering from strained connective tissue at the sacroiliac joint, likely a cumulative injury made worse by his energetic playing in turnout. This horse has previously been through the educational progression to learn to carry himself correctly on a circle at liberty, so you see he is tracking quite straight on the left-bend circle with a nice relaxed topline.



