

“Properly Lunging The Horse”

This month, I will be teaching you how to properly lunge your horse. Lunging your horse not only teaches him respect for your personal space, but also teaches discipline that will transfer to your horse when you are riding him. I will provide you with the instructions to lunge your horse in a way that is safe for you, as well as your horse.

In order to effectively lunge your horse, you need to have complete control over your horse's body. If you are not able to properly lead your horse, stop, and have your horse respond by stopping his body simultaneously and back up without any physical pressure, you are not ready to start this exercise.

The simple exercise of leading your horse and backing him up helps gain the essential control of the shoulders needed to lunge your horse. Your horse also needs to respect your personal space. I like my horses to walk behind me and off to the side approximately twelve inches behind me. This gives him enough distance and time to get around me should he react or spook at something. You can never stop your horse from spooking, but if you can get your horse to respect your personal space, it will save you from getting run over. To review leading instructions see last month's article or visit our website at www.dennisauslam.com. You will find the article there also.

Now that we have gotten control over our horse, we can start lunging. I like to use a four-knot rope halter, which I prefer over a nylon halter. Some consider rope halters to be severe compared to a nylon halter. However, the only time a rope halter is severe is when you need it to be, i.e. when your horse is misbehaving. I also use a weighted twelve-foot lead and a training stick.

I start with the horse about three or four feet

away from me, always keeping physical contact with his head. To ask him to move, I use the hand I am holding my lead in to point in the direction I want my horse to move. If I don't get the movement I am asking for, I will use the training stick to encourage my horse to move away from me. The first thing I do to encourage movement is tap the ground next to the shoulder that I want to move away from me. If that doesn't work, I reach up and tap the shoulder. It is not uncommon for the horse to react to the training stick; they may try to side pass or act up. If this happens, stick with it. Let the horse punish himself; he is using more energy moving laterally than he would if he just did what was asked.

Once this movement is achieved and the horse is moving forward, I concentrate on the girth area, which I call the “drive line.” Doing so will balance the horse out, so to speak. The farther back I go, the faster the horse is going to move, while the farther forward I go, the horse will be inclined to slow or stop.

While lunging your horse, do not allow him to drop his shoulder. To prevent this, I make sure my horse keeps his eye on me. Horses have the tendency to lose focus; if there is something going on around the horse, he will want to look that way. When the horse looks in the opposite

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direction, body mechanics say that the shoulder will drop. If the horse continually wants to drop his nose to the outside or is trying to ignore me, I will gently bump his nose until he fixes his eye on me. This teaches the horse to travel correctly and keep his shoulder up. However, as long as my horse is behaving, I won't put any pressure on him with my lead rope or my stick.

The next step in the lunging process is stopping your horse. "Whoa" is the most important word your horse will ever learn. Teaching your horse to respond to "whoa" on the ground translates to a responsive horse under the saddle. When I ask my horse to stop, I expect him to turn and face me and plant his feet. If your horse does not respond, a consequence must follow. If my horse doesn't respond to the first "whoa," I will follow it up with another "whoa." If my horse still does not respond, I will firmly pull down with the lead line, which will transfer pressure up to all the nerve points that the knots on the rope halter are hitting. Once my horse has responded, I remove all pressure. I keep my line loose, but not so loose that if he reacted I could not get a hold of him.

Once my horse is facing me with his feet planted, I do not automatically ask him to move off. I want him to look at me and wait for instructions. When starting out, I make my horse wait with his feet planted for about 10-15 seconds. As we progress through the training, I may make him stand there for two or three minutes and focus. I will not let him come into me. However, I will allow him to retreat if he is nervous. By retreating, the horse is only punishing himself. If my horse steps in my direction, I will once again pull down on the lead line.

Asking for a reverse in direction while the horse is standing and facing me is the next step. To do so, I start by pointing with my lead hand in the direction I want my horse to move. I step out of the way of his shoulder, tap the ground near him, and ask him to move off. If he doesn't move off, I begin tapping the stick on his shoulder. When the reversal is done correctly, your horse will roll back on his hocks and go in the other direction. This strengthens his back end, as well as his back.

Do not allow your horse to cut into the circle when reversing directions. Allowing him to cut into the circle only puts you in harm's way. The horse may begin by lazily cutting corners here and there, but pretty soon he will get closer and closer, forcing you to move. I never want to have to step



out of my horse's way; I want him to have to step out of my way. This instills in my horse a sense of respect for my space, which will translate to all aspects of my groundwork, as again pull down on the lead line to get him out of my personal space.

I don't make my horse do a lot of lope when I'm lunging; I typically stay at a walk or trot. The only situation when I would lope a horse while lunging is when they are very well trained on the twelve-foot lead and are able to be sent out on a longer lead. When using a twelve-foot lead, the circle is usually too tight for the horse to maintain a lope.

When I'm starting a young horse, I will lunge him four to five days a week.
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Bridle Up Horsemanship Experience



About Dennis Auslam: Dennis has been a trainer for over 30 years, working with many different breeds and disciplines. He grew up with horses and has worked with some of the best trainers in the industry. His passion is horses and people and he loves helping people learn how to work with their horses, progress in their riding abilities and make that connection with their horse. You will find Dennis at various horse related events in 2012. He also does numerous clinics and demos, both at his stable Redwood Stables in Morton, MN and at other venues. His main focus is on confidence building for the horse and the rider.

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The amount of time I lunge a horse depends on their age. If I'm working with a yearling, I will only lunge him for ten or fifteen minutes. If the horse is three or four years old, I can lunge him up to half an hour as he becomes more conditioned. I don't want to have to lunge my horse every time I want to ride him.

As a safety precaution, always lunge your horse in an area with proper footing. The footing should not be slick, especially when you are first teaching your horse to lunge. Footing should be soft with some grip on it for the horse. We also don't want the footing too deep. By lunging your horse in excessively deep footing, you are running the risk of your horse bowing a tendon or injuring himself in another way. I would suggest footing be three to four inches deep.

Stay safe and God bless

Dennis Auslam
with Maria Gilland

