

Getting Ready for Spring Riding: Lunging your horse

by Julie Penshorn

Worried your horse has been enjoying his winter vacation just a little too much? Not looking forward to stepping up on him? This article will help you safely get ready to start riding this season.

One thing to do is lunge your horse. Here are a few skills and equipment ideas that will make your life a lot less stressful.

First, get your equipment together. You'll need a stiff, full length lariat rope. You could also use a lunging cavesson, but it doesn't pack the wallop that that lariat does. A lunge line attached to the bridle is another option. Finally, you can use a war bridle or a thin rope halter. The lariat is the best tool I've found for teaching your horse to lunge. A lunge line on the bridle ring is perfectly suitable for an advanced horse who has already been educated with the lariat.

Sidereins are optional, should only be used when your horse understands the basics of lunging and can do it obediently. Never attach the sidereins until almost ready to trot. Too long standing still, or walking slowly with them on, teaches a horse to go behind the bit. Always let the horse have a complete stretch by detaching the sidereins and clipping them up over the horse's neck when standing still or changing direction.

Now tack up your horse as usual. Use protective boots so the horse doesn't get splints from interfering. Attach the sidereins just above the girth buckles. Wrap the bridle reins many times and then go through, between the reins, as you attach the throatlatch, to secure them. You can tie up the stirrups, or just leave them down. I often leave them down so the horse gets used to things flapping. Later it will be your leg or your lost stirrup dangling, so he might as well accept it. But always run them up when going through doors, and make sure there is nothing that could possibly get caught on a stirrup or its leather.



Putting on the lariat to lunge to the left (above)
Final placement of the lariat to lunge left (below)



Before lunging to the right, the lariat has to be removed and the entire length of it needs to be pulled through the loop. Then the loop replaced on the horse's head. At left you can see a picture of a horse working over his back with good engagement and an obedient, stretching frame to the right. This type of shape promotes relaxation. He's doing his yoga!



Make a loop with the lariat as shown in the picture. Slip it over his head as shown in picture one, then snug it up as in picture two. Now you can tug on your horse's head and not injure him like you would with the lunge line attached to the bit, and you'll make more impression than with the lunging cavesson. The lariat is a great tool for getting the attention of your horse.

Before lunging, practice leading him with it and perfect his obedience to "whoa!" Always use the word first, and then tug hard and sharply, while saying "whoa." Tug repeatedly if needed, to get his attention. Soon he'll understand. You'll know success has been achieved when you say "whoa" and he stops on a dime with no tugging.

To lunge him, start on a small enough circle that you have no danger of letting the horse get out of control, but a large enough circle that you won't get kicked if Mr. Frisky decides to play. Play out the line as the horse settles down and decides to work appropriately. It's best if the horse spends most of his time on a large circle, plus, the lariat is impossible to keep coiled so it gets underfoot if you use a small circle. You'll have to let the extra part hang down on the ground when the horse is close to you. This can be very dangerous with a lunge line, because it gets wrapped around your leg. But with a stiff rope there is little danger of getting tangled. Just step over it as needed. Always be aware of its presence.

Tips for using the lariat:

Never hang on it. Use quick, short bursts of pressure or send a ripple down the line to bump your horse on the nose. Hanging on the line makes the horse fight it. Tug and quickly release when using it. If your horse is running away, several tugs in a row are fine. You will get his attention!

Wear gloves. I use bare hands for tacking up in my warm tack area, but put gloves on before I work the horse. It hurts when the rope slides through your hands. This applies to any lunge line.

Always put the hondo (rawhide loop) away from you and facing down. To switch sides, pull the line through the loop, and put the hondo on the side away from you again.

Lunge in an enclosure. Especially when you are new to this, your adjustment of the lariat may be faulty and it could slide off your horse's head while lunging.

Frequently check the outside of the horse's head on the lunge line, or have a helper monitor the lariat to make sure it doesn't ride up the side of the horse's head too close to his eye. It will distract him, and if it gets up too far it can slide off his head.

Always warm up slowly. Even though your horse wants to blow off steam, insist that he walks for 10 minutes, either being led or being lunged, before you trot and canter. Don't do too much at a time. Let your horse's muscles gradually adjust to his new work schedule.



The horse to the left is lunging beautifully. The horse above demonstrates the length of the side reins we used to achieve the horse on the left. Also note placement of sidereins. As soon as sidereins are attached, the horse should be sent forward. Note that the sidereins are as long as possible to achieve a round frame without bringing the horse behind the vertical with his nose. See how his neck reaches forward toward the contact, and does not drop behind the contact.