

newsletter

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B L E N D I N G N A T U R E A N D T E C H N O L O G Y



in this month's issue

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Happy Holidays

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all our loyal customers for your support during 2016. This hasn't been the easiest year for our industry and we are thankful for your patronage. Equus is at all times committed to bringing you the very best products at the best price. We wish you and your families all the very best for 2017. *Equus.... a modern feed for the modern sports horse*

SAFE LUNGING FOR YOU AND YOUR HORSE

With the holidays upon us, many of us will prepare to pack up and leave for vacation. For most, this involves instructing the yard to "lunge" while we are away, to ensure the horse gets a small amount of exercise and stays "even tempered" for when we return.

But, have you ever thought about how your horse is being lunged? Have you considered that it might not just be some 'easy exercise'.

In this article we'll explain why experts urge you not to consider lunging a mindless activity and, instead, to treat it as a serious training tool. Also included are suggestions on best practices for horse health and handler safety.

Basic Lunging No-Nos

Duncan Peters, DVM, MS, Dipl. ACVSMR, ISELP, a sport horse practitioner and co-owner and founder of East-West Equine Sports Medicine, recommends lunging as an exercise and training modality, "as long as the horse is kept under control. The worst thing is when the horse is at the end of the line, basically left to his own devices. We see more horses get hurt (while lunging) than with controlled exercise" he says.

"Some of the worst lunging I've seen is by grooms who are told to get the horse tired," Peters says. "I have videos of some of these—the horse's head is up; he's bucking, slipping, and sliding."

Ever see a horse lose his footing and go down on the lunge? It's scary. The training surface is always important in terms of soundness and performance, but it's paramount in lunging because 1) the horse is more apt to lose his balance while turning, and 2) certain kinds of footing exacerbate lunging's stresses on the horse's soft tissues. That's why Peters strongly cautions against lunging on slick surfaces, very firm footing, packed-dirt roads, very deep footing, wet or dewy grass or fields, or mud.





Stresses of Lunging

We can get lulled into thinking of lunging as “easy exercise” because we sometimes use it when we want an easy day—that is, we’re short on time or otherwise want to skip riding. But that easy day for you can be a tough day at the office for your horse, especially on the soft tissues of his legs and feet. Here’s why.

Horses “normally don’t run in tight circles like that,” Peters says. The uneven medial and lateral forces, the torque, the centrifugal force—all can be damaging to tendons and ligaments, he says. Not surprisingly, “I’m not a huge fan of chasing them around, letting them cross-canter or counter-canter,” he adds.

As Peters explains, circling weights the horse unevenly, with more stress being placed on the limbs on the outside of the circle. As a result, lunging “can put abnormal stress on a subclinical (in apparent) problem.” And then there’s the torquing and twisting of the leg joints. “The tighter the circle and the greater the speed, the greater the stress,” he says.

And let’s not forget the potential for what Peters calls “the boredom factor”—going around and around on a circle. Not exactly a horse’s idea of interesting work.

Why Lunge?

Despite the potential drawbacks, lunging can have a useful place in your repertoire, both for rehabilitation and as part of your regular training.

“I use lunging as a training device or as controlled exercise,” says Peters. In training, lunging is a time-honoured way of getting a young horse accustomed to starting, stopping, and changing gaits and tempos without having to balance under a rider’s weight. The youngster learns to accept the saddle and bridle and (in equestrian disciplines in which the horse takes contact with the bit) to go forward into an elastic contact with the reins.

With just lunge line, whip, and voice, a skilled handler has as much control over the horse as a rider. Many trainers introduce such exercises as cavaletti (ground-level or slightly raised poles) and even jumping on the lunge. Lunging can serve as a precursor to ground-driving for horses that will eventually be put to a vehicle. And in highly sophisticated forms, such as long-lining or work in hand (think the Lipizzaner stallions of Vienna’s Spanish Riding School), the horse can be taught to execute the most advanced dressage movements, from piaffe to airs above the ground.



As part of a rehabilitation process, many veterinarians recommend controlled exercise, which might include lunging. And certain ongoing conditions might benefit from lunging, as well. Peters says horses with arthritis of the articular facet joints (“kissing spines”), muscle spasms, and other back problems can benefit from the riderless exercise.

Effects of Footing and Shoeing

What’s underfoot can either ease or worsen lunging’s effects on the horse’s legs and feet.

As discussed, poor footing is even less appropriate for lunging than it is for riding. But even some “good” footing isn’t great for lunging, says Peters. He recommends sticking to natural materials—sand, dirt, bark, - and avoiding synthetic surfaces, which can be grippy enough to cause extra torque.

You’re probably not going to have your horse specially shod for lunging, but know that a bevelled shoe produces less torque than a standard flat shoe, Peters says. Bevelled shoe examples include the half-round, the Kerckhaert Classic line, and the Natural Balance shoes. Lunging the barefoot horse is just fine, he says.

Best Practices

Safe lunging starts with a safe space. The ideal is a walled round pen or other enclosed area, large enough that the horse can circle safely (at least 15 meters in diameter) but enclosed so he can’t run like crazy should he manage to pull away from the handler.

- Loop the lunge line neatly. Don’t allow the line to drag the ground, where it can be stepped on. Never wrap the line around your hand or wrist. A cotton or jute line is preferable to slippery nylon.
- Stand opposite the horse’s shoulder. For optimal control and influence, place him in a V between the lunge line in one hand and the whip in the other.
- Don’t let the whip trail along the ground or poke the tip of the lash into the ground. Your voice and the whip encourage the horse forward—but avoid dramatic whip-cracking, which could provoke an explosion.



- Ideally, use a lunging cavesson, to which the line attaches via a ring on the noseband piece. If you must lunge using your horse's bridle (snaffle only), remove the reins or twist them together and secure beneath the throatlatch. Attach the line to the inside bit ring; some horsemen and women discourage this practice so, alternatively, run the line through the inside ring, wrap around once, then attach to the outside bit ring. Running the line over the top of the poll and attaching to the outside bit ring is severe and has a gaglike effect; this method is not recommended.
- If your horse is wearing a saddle, remove or run up and secure the stirrup irons.
- If you're wearing spurs, remove them; they can be a tripping hazard. Wear sturdy shoes with good traction, protective headgear if possible, and gloves.
- Used and adjusted correctly, side reins mimic the steady and elastic contact of the rider's hands. (If your horse is unaccustomed to side reins, seek professional guidance before using them.) You can attach them to the saddle's billet straps or to the rings on a lunging surcingle. There are different types of side reins, including plain leather and those with elastic inserts. Many trainers prefer side reins with rubber donut inserts, which offer a bit of give but aren't so stretchy that the horse is tempted to lean against them. Adjustment is key: too loose and they'll have no effect, and the horse could risk catching a leg; too tight and the horse might feel restricted, which could cause him to rear up and flip over. A good rule of thumb is to find the length that approximates a correct "on the bit" outline, with the horse's profile slightly in front of the vertical (if you draw a line perpendicular to the ground, the front of his face and muzzle should be slightly ahead of it).
- Shield your horse's legs and feet from bumps and nicks with leg boots all around and bell boots in front. "Leg boots are cheap protection," Peters says. "Bell boots are helpful because the horse is more likely to tweak his shoes on the lunge line—to catch a front shoe with a hind foot on the inside of the circle."
- If you (or your horse) are new to lunging, seek an experienced, reputable trainer's guidance. In dressage, for example, USDF-certified instructors have passed exams demonstrating their skill and knowledge of safe and effective lunging practices.

The Lunging Session

Keep it on the short side, advises Peters—no more than 20 to 30 minutes. If you're lunging as a warm-up to riding, five to 10 minutes should be sufficient.

Reduce stresses on your horse's body by varying the gaits frequently, he notes. Doing so offers the added bonus of helping keep your horse focused on you and interested in the work.

Change directions at least once, ensuring that you work your horse both ways for equal amounts of time. The exception: "With some injuries, you might want to go in only one direction," says Peters. An example would be the horse that's rehabbing from a collateral-ligament injury, he says. Collateral ligaments, which stabilize a variety of joints, are placed under greater stress when on the outside of the circle; in such cases your veterinarian might advise you to lunge only with the injured leg on the inside of the lunge circle.

A Valuable Tool

Done properly, lunging is a useful skill to have in your equestrian toolbox. With its potential for causing mishaps and injuries, however, horse and handler alike must be taught to respect lunging as work time, not play time. It needs to be treated as importantly as riding.

This article has been adapted from the original visit <http://www.thehorse.com/articles/35479/safe-longeing-for-horse-health> for the full article

Feeding Advice: 073 423 5491 / 083 998 6824

Email: info.equus@driehoek.co.za or tech.equus@driehoek.co.za

For an absolutely free consultation with no further obligation contact our professional consultants to schedule a visit to your yard.

Hannah - 073 423 5491 - tech.equus@driehoek.co.za

Helen - 083 998 6824 - helen@driehoek.co.za

