

CAN I LONGE MY GAITED HORSE?

By Lee Ziegler, 2001

Although working a horse on the longe line (from Old French, meaning long, not *lunge* or *lounge*) is a centuries-old training technique, longeing a gaited horse can be a controversial subject. Latin American gaited horse trainers often use work on a line in tight circles to help “set” their horses in gait, but many other gaited horse trainers believe that working on a longe can ruin a horse’s easy gaits. Add to these contradictory beliefs the negative sentiments about the longe held by many in the “natural horsemanship” movement, and it is no wonder that people trying to do the right thing with their gaited horses are likely to be confused!

Good longeing and bad longeing

The poor impressions many people have of longe line work are most often a result of seeing it done badly. The most common use of this tool, as a “gyp” line to exercise horses by making them run in circles, is hard on their legs and useless in the training of their minds and bodies. This use of the longe does not improve the performance of any gait, whether a hard trot or one of the easy gaits. There is, however, a lot more to using a longe line correctly than just making a horse run around in circles.

Good longe line technique exists, but it is often not easy to find. Some qualities of good work are:

Lessons are kept short, no more than 20 minutes three times a week for a mature horse, much less for a younger one. This preserves the soundness of their legs and minds.

Longeing is done inside a round pen or in the corner of an arena, on firm, not hard or overly soft footing. The boundaries around the longeing area help keep the horse focused on the trainer, and the footing is less wearing to his legs than hard ground or deep sand.



A longeing cavesson can be useful, although you can also use an ordinary web halter

Appropriate head gear such as a longeing cavesson, correctly fitted nylon or leather halter, snaffle bridle, or bosal hackamore is used. These are stable on the horse’s head and clearly communicate signals to slow, stop, raise or lower the head, or bend on the circle.

The trainer carries a longe whip, to signal the horse to move forward or to bend on the circle, not to hit the horse. This allows more precise and varied cues to the horse than a twirling line or doughnut.

The line used is a 20-25 ft long web longe line with no chain attachment which could swing and distract the horse, or restrain him with pain in the mouth or over the nose.

The horse bends on the curve of the circle, in response to light tugs and releases on the line. The circle is relatively large, 18 to 20 feet in radius. This helps develop lateral suppleness and prevents the brace of the neck that is seen too often in horses that are longed with their heads cocked toward the outside of the circle.

Lessons include constant variations of speed and gait, from walk to halt, halt to walk, intermediate gait to walk, as well as slow walk, faster walk, or slow intermediate gait, faster intermediate gait. This keeps the horse mentally alert and develops suppleness.

Except in rare instances, the horse's head and neck are left free to allow him to find his own balance on the longe, not force him into a pre-determined frame. No side reins, draw reins, Chambons, "balancers" or other strapwork are used unless the horse has a severe physical defect that can only respond to such tools. A free head and neck helps a horse develop natural balance, and in a gaited horse, allows for head nod and elastic use of the neck and back.

When it is done the "good" way longe line work teaches a horse to be calm, obedient, supple, responsive to voice aids, and improves his physical condition. While there are a few different techniques for working with gait and gaited horses on the longe, the overall program of "good longeing" is almost as effective for them as it is for the non-gaited ones.

Which easy gaits on the longe?

A longe line is by no means as precise a gaiting tool as work under saddle. While many gaited individuals can do a moderate speed of their preferred gait on the longe, it is not realistic to expect a horse to do a long-striding running walk, fast rack, or largo in a 40 foot circle. For some horses, the intermediate gait is likely to be the hard trot or the stepping pace. If a horse does not offer the gait expected of his breed, work him in the "wrong" gait only often enough to teach him to control his speed, and do most of your longe line work at various speeds in the walk.

The fast, or flat footed walk: One of the easier gaits to teach on the longe is a fast, reaching flat footed walk. This is a desirable gait in Tennessee Walkers and Fox Trotters, and teaching it on the longe can make it easier for the horse to perform under saddle. To teach the flat walk, start the horse circling in an ordinary walk, then, repeating the command "walk OUT" or "walk UP" gradually increase his speed in the walk by snapping or pointing the longe whip behind him, and restraining him from breaking into a faster intermediate gait with light tugs and releases, never a steady pull, on the longe line. The speed of his walk will increase, as will the length of steps he takes, if only for a stride or two. Build on those few strides until the horse will go into a flat walk on the verbal command, a process that may take several months of lessons.

The slow fox trot, and slow running walk: Once the horse understands the flat walk signal on the longe, you can urge him out of that gait into a slow fox trot or running walk. Again, ask by using a verbal cue such as “fox trot” or “walk on” and pushing the horse for speed, while restraining him from moving too fast into a hard trot or a rack. Sometimes raising the horse’s head by raising the longe line in your hand a little will prevent a hard trot and encourage a fox trot or running walk. Often asking for a lower head by lowering the longe line will encourage a running walk or fox trot instead of a rack or stepping pace. Experiment with head position to see what works best for your horse. Not all horses will do a fox trot or running walk on the longe line, so do not be disappointed if yours does not choose one of those gaits. If he prefers a hard trot at speed, spend most of your longe line time in the flat walk, with a only a few circles in each direction in the trot. If he tries to pace, avoid that gait by returning at once to the flat walk or ordinary walk.

Llano, sobreandando, corto: All of these gaits are easier for the horse on a smaller circle — shorten the longe line to 10 to 15 feet to work on them. Remember to keep the lessons in these gaits short, and relatively slow, to preserve the soundness of the horse’s legs. The slow version of the paso llano is almost identical to the flat foot walk, and can be taught with the same technique of starting the horse circling in the ordinary walk, asking for increased speed, while restraining him with light vibrations on the longe line from breaking into some other gait. It is sometimes helpful while the horse is learning this gait to keep steady, light tension in the longe line, supporting the head and neck in a slightly elevated position.

The slow sobreandando is an uneven lateral gait that can also be done on the longe. Start the horse circling in an ordinary walk, then use a light give and take on the line, bringing his head and neck toward the center, then allowing them to return to a straight position, encouraging him to “lateralize” his walk. Once he goes at a lateral walk, ask for more speed, giving some support through the longe line by maintaining light tension on the horse’s head and keeping it elevated.

The corto can be encouraged on the longe by working the horse with his head high, holding the longe line above the level you would normally carry it, and asking for increased energy from the horse by driving him out of the ordinary walk with the snap of the whip, if necessary, while restraining with a taut longe line. If the horse is inclined to a trocha, raise his head a little as you ask for the corto. If he is inclined to a more lateral gait, lower the line and encourage him to bring his head down a little with light downward pulls and slacks on the longe line until he is more even in his gait.



Longe line work over a pole can help a horse overcome a pace.



Longe work over a series of low cavalletti will help condition a horse's back and hindquarters.

Dealing with the pace: Work on the longe is very effective for discouraging the pace, especially for young horses that are not yet under saddle. Lay down poles at the points of the compass on the longeing circle, and work the horse over them, first at a walk, then with enough speed so that he tries

to pace. As he lifts his legs over the poles, his pace will break into a less lateral gait, often a hard trot. The more he practices over the poles, the less he will pace, until eventually he will stop pacing entirely even if they are removed. Along with breaking up the timing of his footfalls, this work over poles helps strengthen his stifles and his back, improving his over-all condition.

The one exception to the rule about not working a gaited horse extensively in the wrong gait is the horse that paces. If he can be broken into a hard trot through the use of poles, working him on the longe in the trot will help him develop the condition and coordination he needs to travel in his easy intermediate gait. With this type of horse, plenty of practice in the hard trot can be a very good idea.

To longe or not to longe?

If you longe your gaited horse sensibly and carefully, working on obedience and the gaits that are possible in a circle, you may discover that this tool can work well for you. As with most training techniques, the results you get depend on your horse and your own level of skill. Don't be afraid to try it.

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