

October 2009 Essex Rider
(Centered Riding and Ground Driving aka Long Reining)

Howdy Folks, I begin this month with some comments about common misconceptions concerning **Centered Riding**. Centered riding is an important thing for riders to adhere to when riding normally and typically in a ménage where a line of gravity between the center of the top of a riders head should run down through the body core and pelvis then on down to the back of the heel. However, when more extreme centrifugal forces are involved, such as many “riding out” situations and in more extreme competitive or sport riding, it means something else entirely.

Centered riding is an often misunderstood concept which can be even more confusing when riders are told to be careful not to ride as one would ride a motorcycle or bicycle. Riding is not so much a mechanical and “rules driven” exercise. It is a more a fluid action / activity which is a mutual situation between rider and horse. A more accurate description would be to remain mutually “Gravity Centered” with your body and the horse’s body. When you ride a bicycle or motorcycle and make a turn the rider must lean in the correct direction and degree in order to keep the center of gravity in a straight line from riders head, down through the body and on down through the machine seat – on through to the line of the center of the machine frame and to the ground via the tires. This is not totally different from riding a horse. A simple example is that if the rider remains sitting absolutely vertical to the ground -- the centrifugal force will change the line of gravity and become out of sync between the rider and the horse just as on a motor/bicycle. This out of sync position causes a horse to have to compensate for the riders centrifugal forced weight shift, a very awkward thing for the horse to deal with and invariably causes undue strain on the fetlocks, pasterns, muscles and tendons. On a motorcycle or bicycle there is only the friction of it’s tires on the ground or road with which to compensate for the imbalance and typically can and will cause the wheels to slip out from under the vehicle / cycle and a crash ensues. When horseback riding in extreme centrifugal force situations, such as when barrel racing (in Western riding) and making sharp turns when endurance riding (for limited examples of either English or Western riding), just as devastating a crash can occur and often does. This gravity centered concept is not only applicable for turns (of any degree or and at any speed) but it is also just as important in riding downhill or uphill, stopping (whether abruptly or otherwise) and / or departing from a standstill or when increasing speed (also whether abruptly or otherwise). This needs to be a fluid and relaxed feel from the balls of the feet through the seat position and up through the body core whether riding a horse or a bicycle, etc.

One additional point to make with regard to turns and more sporting or extreme movements is to remember keeping your reins in contact with the bit, hackamore or halter - but not in a solid or braced feel / fashion nor with too short a rein. One must allow the horse to feel free and soft if we are to expect them to do a confident / competent job of balancing themselves with us on their backs and not become tense due to our constraining them.

----- Ground Driving-----

Ground Driving (aka Long Reining or Long Lining) is an important and useful training method that many clients ask me to teach and demonstrate. Typically I like to initiate ground driving in a round pen for both the horses and clients sakes as it is less of a daunting situation that way. However round pens are not often available, which is why in last month’s article I spent so much time explaining how to build temporary but functional round pens more affordably and mobile.

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There are many benefits in using ground driving as one of the good starting and/or restarting / retraining exercises. One benefit is to give a horse an easier understanding of hackamore, halter and bit pressures whilst initially being able to see their leader (us) on the ground. * The exercise is best started by initially working with them from just to their side rather than from behind. This keeps us clearly within their easy line of sight, since they cannot see behind them. Then we can progress to helping them learn the feeling of having us behind them, whilst we are out of their sight. Both steps are greatly improved via the use of a round pen as they will not be so worried about what is happening outside the round pen and can better focus on their feel of us behind them. However, they initially need to be able to see us laterally for their security and calmness before we move behind them. In all cases, the cues we use during ground driving / long reining should be consistently of the pressure release style/type and we must be careful not to put too much pressure on their mouths as the reins are pulling straight back against their mouth which is painful and distracting.

* I recommend initially beginning without the use of a circingle at all and use a saddle with stirrups hanging loosely to the sides and running the long reins (I like to use rope reins) through them from the hackamore, halter and/or bit out to me on the side or rear. By using loose stirrups one can easily ask the horse to turn its head slightly before applying any rearward pressure. Also, it is possible to ask and release very softly and keep a “soft mouth” rather than creating or generating a “hard mouthed” horse. Once this initial ground driving (or long reining) work is understood by the horse, then a circingle can be introduced in order to teach the rearward pressure from the close to its body position without creating a painful memory. When ridden work is begun with direct and indirect rein work being introduced, it is much more productive as the horse does not have a fear of the backward pressure when dressage and various other riding disciplines using that rein type pressure is taught.

I typically repeat this entire process in both stages to assure each set of feelings tying together in its mind. During the first stage, where the ropes are not encumbered by a circingle, I like to pre-condition the horse by looping a 22’ single rope, from a halter, over its back from time to time, as well as behind its hocks. As I said earlier in this article, here is where Round Pens make such a good starting place for ground driving, then in due course, working in a ménage, then in fields and on appropriate roads is much safer for any desired advanced training.

My own preference of ropes for ground driving are (of course Two) 1” tightly braided cotton rope or 12mm English Braid on Braid nylon ropes in lengths of 22 to 25 feet, due to the smooth surface, weight and durability. They also do not get caught up in the surcingle rings or stirrups (when a saddle is used) as opposed to flat lunge lines which are not satisfactory at all, in my opinion.

I trust these initial exercise explanations are useful. Before beginning any ground driving / long reining exercises, there are some things I will advise your horse to learn and I will carry on next month with more on this subject. Of course I am happy to visit if I am needed.

Until next time, have fun and stay safe.

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