

March 2012 Essex Rider
(Ground Driving)

Ground Driving

An important and useful training method that many clients ask me to teach and demonstrate is Ground Driving (aka Long Reining or Long Lining). Typically, I like to initiate ground driving in a round pen for both horse and client safety. Round pens make the situation much less daunting for both horse and client. However round pens are not often available in the U.K., which is another reason that I spent so much time in my November and December 2011 articles, explaining how to build both fixed as well as more affordable temporary round pens and uses for them.

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/or bit pressures whilst initially being able to see the "driver" on the ground. Stage one of 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. Stage two can then progress to helping them learn the feeling and limited view of us being behind them.

All stages are more efficient via the use of a round pen (if available) as the horse would not be so worried about what is happening outside the periphery of the round pen and could better stay focused on the lesson. However, they will still do better seeing us laterally before we move behind them. In all stages, the cues we use during ground driving / long reining should be consistently of the "pressure release" style/type. We must be careful not to put too much initial pressure on their head (nor on their mouth once bits are introduced) as the driving reins could illicit an opposition reflex. It is best to begin the process without using a bit by initially using a halter or hackamore. I prefer the 4000+ year old Mongol designed rope halters with fiador knots for adjustments.

I recommend "initially" beginning without the use of a circingle. The driving lines will move more easily through the stirrups of a saddle. The stirrups can be tied under the stomach with a wider splay to the outsides than normal. I like to use rope driving reins, as they tend to slide easier than flat reins and give better cues. By using the wide stirrups, you can more easily ask the horse to turn its head slightly before applying any pressure toward the rear. This splayed position and by using pressure release action makes it easier to ask and release very softly. This is especially effective once the bit is introduced and helps to keep a soft mouth rather than creating a hard-mouthed horse. During the first stage, and where the ropes are not encumbered by a circingle, it is more efficient for introducing all head and mouth pressures in smaller increments, making the cues much easier for the horse to accept. I typically repeat the stages, with the bit introduced, in order to assure each set of feelings tie together in the mind of the horse.

Once the initial (wider driving lines, guides /stirrups) stages are understood by the horse, then a circingle can be introduced in order to teach the rearward pressure. When ridden work has begun, using direct and indirect rein work, it will be much more productive as the horse will be able to more easily understand / accept the rider's rein pressures..

Teaching ground driving inside round pens (if available), then in a ménage, then in a fenced in field is important to accomplish before doing any road work where traffic could be encountered.

I trust these initial explanations are useful. Before beginning any ground driving / long reining exercises, here are some things I will advise you to teach your horse and of course, I am happy to visit if I am needed.

Prerequisites to Ground Driving

Before beginning any ground driving / long reining exercises, there are a few things I advise you to teach your horse. All being ground work exercises. Some of these pre-ground driving training needs are: being halter trained, bridle comfortable as well as bit comfortable. I suggest, once advancing to the use of a bit, using a straight (or Mullen mouth half moon curved shape bit) made in a malleable plastic mouthpiece to begin with. Personally, I never forget to use a leather chin strap (not a curb strap) whenever a bit is in use to enable use of emergency rein side pressure for turning the head, if needed, without harming the mouth. The chin strap is simply a strap fitted "above" any rein contact point. The strap should be tightened only to the point that when a rein is used to pull to the side - the opposing side moves both the bit and strap simultaneously in order to move the entire lower jaw, protecting the teeth and preventing pinching the skin inside the mouth. I also recommend keeping the bit fitted in the bar area and no further back in the mouth in order to help the horse get used to holding the bit on it's tongue rather on it's teeth. Wrinkles in the edges of the mouth are not needed.

If a plastic bit is initially used, it is important to make sure it is made of strong malleable material (such as are most happy mouth types) and not made from one of the brittle plastics that can splinter. A bit should not be made of soft or hard rubber, as the horse cannot gain a purchase on it. Once a steel bit is introduced, the part inside the mouth should not be made of chrome as it would likely contain nickel and can generate very irritating electrolysis. The horse needs to have done at least some basic groundwork foundation sessions (with pressure release exercises) on its body and hocks as well as head down, lateral work and backing movements. For head down I use and prefer simple poll release pressure release exercises. It is important to have done some feet handling work as well as working with a rope around the hock and over the back exercises. Do not forget to include "foundation" firm / benevolent leadership exercises (with disengagement understanding). Foundation exercises are explained in my 4 part series (Essex Rider Magazine articles dated July, August, September & October 2011).

Closing Reminders

When you begin ground driving / long reining and/or teaching your horse to accept you as a rider and leader, things will go much better if you have done your groundwork to prepared him. Learning to be a firm and benevolent leader from the ground is very important for maintaining the confidence of your horse.

Release of pressure motivates horses. It is the release of pressure that they most quickly recognize. This can be seen by watching any foal learning from its Mother or even other horses. Building or rebuilding clear communication between horse and rider, initially via groundwork and carrying that on to saddle work, is like changing a long ingrained habit and is much more difficult without professional assistance. It is often false economy to cut corners trying to save money by avoiding professional assistance.

Ya'll ride safely and Aware.

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