

Ground Driving Training

An important and useful training method that many clients ask advice and demonstration with 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 ease and 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 previous articles, explaining how to build both fixed, as well as more affordable temporary, round pens and methods for their uses.

There are many benefits in using ground driving as one of the good starting / restarting / retraining / maintenance and/or refresher exercises following periods of inactivity. 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. This is especially important in that horses have such limited bifocal vision they cannot see the rider and need to be sometimes reminded how we feel and look to them. The exercise is best started by initially working with them wide to their side rather than from behind. This keeps us clearly within their easy line of sight and they learn to accept and trust the pressures we apply via the driving lines. We can then progress to helping them learn the feeling and limited view of us being behind them by gradually moving over.

All positions 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. In all positions, the cues we use during ground driving / long reining / long lining should be consistently of the "pressure release" style/method and "NOT STATIC". 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 a "Natural" 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 "free" or through the stirrups of a saddle. With the stirrups tied together around the girth area of the saddle. The stirrups can be tied under the stomach with varying width in order to splay to the outsides and gradually close them down tighter as you progress. I like to use "ROPE" driving reins, as they tend to slide easier than flat reins and give much better feel to cues given by us. By using the wide stirrups, you can more easily ask the horse to turn its head slightly before applying any pressure toward the rear. Via the splayed positions whilst using pressure release actions, makes it easier to ask and release very softly and more understandably to the horse. This pressure release method is especially effective important once the bit is introduced in order to help keep a soft mouth rather than creating a hard-mouthed horse. During the initial positions of the ground driving lines 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 understand and accept. I typically repeat the steps when the bit introduced, in order to assure each set of feelings tie together in the mind of the horse.

Once the initial (wider positioned driving lines) stages are understood by the horse, then a circingle can be introduced in order to teach the rearward pressure. Again being certain to use pressure release rein / line methods. When ridden work has begun, using direct and indirect rein work, it will be much more productive. Teaching ground driving inside round pens (if and when available) then in a ménage, then in a fenced in field is

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important to accomplish before doing any road work where traffic might be encountered. I trust these initial explanations are useful. Before beginning any ground driving / long reining exercises, the following are some things I advise you to teach (or remind) your horse - and of course, I am happy to visit to provide help when needed.

Prerequisites for Ground Driving

Before beginning any ground driving / long reining exercises, there are a few ground work exercises that can be useful. Some of these : being halter trained, bridle comfortable as well as bit comfortable. I suggest, once advancing to the use of a bit, using a Mullen mouth half moon curved shape bit or better yet a sweet-iron Reinsman 292 model snaffle with a steel tube preventing it from closing to tightly on the tongue). The sweet-iron will not generate uncomfortable electrolysis as does chrome mouthpieces. Personally, I never forget to use a leather chin strap connected "above" the rein connection point on the bit rings (not a curb strap) 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, jaw and strap simultaneously in order to move the entire lower jaw, whilst 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 unless the physical structure of the horse's mouth requires it and that is quite rare.

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, as well as head movements, neck and head lateral work and backing movements. 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). The Foundation exercises are explained in my previous articles.

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 as you will 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, prior to mounting up. Release of pressure motivates horses. Its 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 into saddle work, is immensely important.

Until next time, have fun and stay safe.

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