

Long Reining

A VALUABLE TOOL, A FORGOTTEN ART



It is fair to say that not many schooling methods are as underestimated and misunderstood as work with long reins. The results can be superb to watch, especially at the advanced levels. There are few things more breathtaking than the sight of a perfectly balanced horse performing passage and skipping through one-tempi changes, with only minor cues from its handler on the ground.

However, in the wrong hands, things can quickly turn to custard. Nasty accidents and massive regressions in training are common when the handler hasn't been taught exactly how to introduce the long lines to the horse.

Thankfully, there are a number of instructors around who can guide both horse and rider through their first tentative steps between the long reins. Eleena Kennedy, based in Clevedon, Auckland, is one of these rare people. Nowadays, although she focuses on classical dressage, she has students from a wide range of equestrian backgrounds, from beginners to highly competitive Grand Prix dressage riders.

'Many riders and trainers don't seem to realise how much long reining can help both horse and owner if it's done properly,' explains Eleena. 'It can be an effective way to supple a young horse and prepare it both mentally and physically for being ridden. It learns to move freely forwards on its own, and there are often more opportunities for handlers to recognise, correct and manipulate the movements of the horse from the ground. Every exercise that is performed while in the saddle can be gone over on the ground first, without the weight of the rider disturbing the horse.'

Eleena has heard some real horror stories when it comes to working with long reins, which usually involve the horse panicking and getting tangled up. According to Eleena, such mishaps are almost always down to the trainer not taking enough time to get the horse accustomed to the feel of the long reins and to understanding what is expected from it.

'Lots of people tend to throw the long reining equipment on and shove the horse on the bit straightaway,' explains Eleena. 'This is only ever going to lead to a negative reaction and backward movement. You need plenty of preparatory work before you even think about working the horse between the two reins.'

'The horse should only be trained on the long reins after it has learned all commands during normal single lungeing

lessons. You need to know that you have control over a horse's body, mind and feet before you consider moving on to anything else,' she says. 'Before you hook up those two reins, it must show that it is obedient but calm, and that it is connected with you. You should be the centre of its universe.'

Before leaping enthusiastically into that first training session, Eleena also takes a moment to point out the importance of using appropriate equipment. 'We use a simple lungeing roller and a padded cavesson with three rings for the babies,' she says. 'Some people use a halter but I find that it twists around and contradicts what you are asking the horse to do. The horse ends up going against the true bend, with its shoulder and neck popping out towards you. We use plain lunge reins in different colours, so it's easier to distinguish each rein and not get them mixed up.'

'The handler should carry a long whip, such as a driving or lungeing whip, that should be tucked up under the arm when not in use. Gloves must be worn because if a horse takes fright and yanks away it can cause serious rope burn. It is also a good idea to wear a hard hat, as accidents are just as likely working on the ground as they are in the saddle,' adds Eleena. 'Something as quick and simple as your horse whacking you in the head with his nose can cause real pain and put you out of action for a while.'

There are a number of lessons that Eleena recommends teaching the horse on the single lunge rein before a second rein is attached. This initial work does not have to be done on a circle but can be practiced around the whole arena, with plenty of turns and changes in direction to keep the horse alert and interested.

'Being able to ask for a side-on halt is especially important,' she says. 'It is imperative that your horse is capable of standing

still when you are setting up the reins. You should always be thinking about safety when working so close to a horse on the ground and while the horse is standing, the handler is safe. Panics tend to happen when the horse starts moving.

'While on the subject of keeping safe, never set up in the corner of an arena or near a wall. You must be able to get away from the horse if anything untoward happens. If it feels trapped, it is quite capable of pinning you against a wall and hurting you.'

According to Eleena, this step of training is a good time to start getting the horse used to the feel of a rein around its hindquarters: 'by letting the single rein rest briefly on its haunches when making a turn.' She reminds handlers to ask for a nice forward walk immediately after the turn and to give the horse lots of reassurance and praise.

After work on the one rein is well established and the horse is relaxed, a second lunge rein can be attached to the outside ring on the cavesson, but not through the turrets on the roller at this stage. The inside rein is still held in the same manner as it was when lungeing and the outside rein is brought over the horse's back. The first few times a horse is between two reins will look closer to two rein lungeing than long reining, with the handler standing to the side and encouraging the horse to move forward. Due to the horse's limited range of vision, Eleena warns handlers not to jump directly behind it once the two reins are connected.

'Most horses will get stressed when you move beyond their field of vision, behind their hindquarters,' says Eleena. 'It has to be a gradual process and it can sometimes take a while before you're able to move right behind them. In the beginning, always make sure that you are stood slightly to the side of them so that they can see you and you are away from

their back feet. This is especially important to remember when you are making turns. Ensure that the horse is not going to lose sight of you.'

'Slowly let the horse get used to the feel of the outside long rein around its hindquarters in the same way that you did with the single rein,' adds Eleena. 'When you are making turns, let the rein drop so that it is resting at the level of the hocks underneath the tail, not too tight but not loose and flapping around. Over the course of 2-3 weeks, the horse will become more comfortable with the sensation and you will be able to move away from its side, thread the reins through the turrets on the roller and adopt a position closer to what most people picture when imagining long reining. As the horse gains confidence and experience, you can start to ask for simple lateral exercises such as shoulder-in. You can also replace the cavesson with a simple bridle although I would advise against attaching anything directly to the bit, to preserve the mouth.'

Occasionally, even with the best preparation in the world, things do go wrong. Even though sharing ground space with a frightened horse can strike terror into the most seasoned of horsemen and women, the key to dealing with these incidents is to remain calm.

'If your horse has spooked slightly, move back to its side and, in a sense, return to the lungeing position,' says Eleena. 'If things have really gone downhill and you have lost control of everything, try to control its direction. If you can't control its speed, influence where it is running to. It may take a little while but it will eventually calm down and you can start again, first identifying what has upset it and probably going back a couple of steps in your training. Remember, there is no need to rush. You don't want to make mistakes now that you will only have to go back and fix at a later date.'

