

Horsing around: The importance of proper leading

By Birgit Stutz

Leading a horse is one of the basic things that you need to do when you want to move a horse from one place to another. However, many people don't pay attention to what's happening on the ground with the horse's attitude. Proper leading of your horse requires that your horse respects your space, doesn't run past you, doesn't lag, doesn't run over you or step on your feet.

I put leading into two categories: loose leading (your horse follows you on a loose lead) and in-hand leading. I don't lead a horse on a loose lead unless he has learnt to lead properly in-hand. In-hand leading prepares your horse for lungeing, long-lining, driving, and riding by teaching him to move forward into contact (your hand).

I may also go back to in-hand leading a horse that I have been loose leading whenever I need added control, such as when the horse is excited, unfocused or disrespectful.

I like to use a well-fitted web halter with a long (at least 10') lead. From my experience a web halter works better for in-hand work than a rope halter, but if that is what you prefer, that's fine too.

I teach my horses to lead from either side, but to start with, and for the purpose of this article, I lead from the left.

I start out by standing at my horse's shoulder or slightly ahead, but not behind. I hold the lead rope with my right hand a few inches below the horse's chin and the folds (not coils) in the left hand. Don't let the lead drag on the ground where it can be stepped on, and never wrap the lead around your fingers, hand, wrist, or any other part of your body. A knot at the end of the lead can help you keep a grip on the lead if the horse pulls back.

I slightly extend my right elbow towards the horse so that if necessary, the elbow can be used on the horse's shoulder to prevent him from crowding.

So now how do I get the horse to move forward?

The horse's 'engine' is in his hind end, so in order for the horse to move forward, the energy has to come from the hind end, through his barrel (the mid-section of his body) and into the front end.

Now if I just pulled on the lead rope in order to get my horse to move forward, which is, unfortunately, very common, the horse will most likely raise his head and hollow his spine (invert). This is the one frame I never want in my horse, whether I am working with him on the ground or under saddle. When I lead a horse, I want his head to be level or low. First of all it is safer for myself and people around me as this gives me added control and secondly it is more comfortable for the horse. A high-headed, inverted horse is full of adrenaline, whereas a low-headed horse has endorphins, a natural relaxant, flowing through his body.

I like to use a dressage whip as a training aid, es-

pecially if the horse hasn't had any previous experience with in-hand leading. You can also use the end of the lead rope, but I find that to be less precise and a lot of times the horse will move away laterally from a twirling rope instead of forward. I hold the whip in my left hand, together with the folds of the lead, and, reaching back over my outside (in this case left) shoulder, tap the horse on the flank. I like to use a verbal command at the same time, such as "walk-on". If the horse refuses to move or starts to pull back, I stay at his shoulder with my eyes focused ahead and keep tapping until there is a response. I wait for the horse to take his first step before I start walking.

Teaching your horse to lead well not only benefits you but your horse as well. It not only improves his manners and teaches him to engage his mind on you, but by having your horse's attention, you also have greater control which leads to greater safety levels.

Once your horse leads well, including turning, stopping and backing up, and holds his position beside you without you having to constantly correct him, with a level to low frame, he is ready for loose leading.

Safety tips

- Wear gloves when leading a horse.
- Wear sturdy footwear while working with horses on the ground. It is easy to get stepped on.
- Use a soft lead rope. It will be less likely to burn your hands if the horse pulls unexpectedly.
- Never lead a horse by its halter without a rope. If it tosses its head and your hand or fingers get caught, you could be in a lot of trouble.
- Horses can toss their heads around without warning. It is a good practice to wear a helmet for safety reasons, even when doing groundwork.

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"This year it was all done locally."



Kelly Shawara
"I'm going to do it all at the kids shopping day at school."



Rick Thompson
"I haven't even thought about Christmas yet!"

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"Not very much, there's not much to find here."



Yvan Lavoie
"I did all of mine locally. I hit the late night shopping."



Glen Welsh
"I'm going to do all of it here. Any time we get an opportunity we should support local business."

- Never cut corners. Keep well away from objects as you and your horse pass them.
- Stand well clear when you remove a horse's halter in case it makes a showy departure. If you've just led the horse through a gate, turn it to face the gate before releasing it.
- Do not hang on to the lead rope at all costs. Let it go if you have to, then go and get the horse.
- Sound a warning to others if a horse gets loose. Aside from avoiding a spooked horse, they may be able to shut gates and help catch it.

Birgit Stutz is a Chris Irwin Silver Certified Trainer and Coach and has been involved with horses for a quarter century. She owns and operates Falling Star Ranch in Dunster together with her husband. Birgit welcomes any questions related to horses.

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