

From Field to FEI: The Young-Horse Years

Part 3: Lungeing

By Scott Hassler with Emily Covington
Photographs by Richard Malmgren

In the first two articles in this series, I discussed acclimating the young horse to his surroundings and introducing the tack. Now we have arrived at a critical stage in his training.

is not always “nice”—overly long, floppy side reins, for example, can scare a young horse—while too tight can be confrontational and claustrophobia-inducing.



ON THE LUNGE: *Fidelity* (Rousseau x Cordoba x Weltmeyer) in a relaxed and balanced trot in the round pen. I'd like to see her nose reaching out a bit further to the bit.

Although we may be excited to get going with the work, it is important not to rush this process. Take the time your young horse needs. This may include having two people work with the horse as a team. Two are certainly not necessary, but, to ensure a good experience, it can be time well spent.

By now, your youngster is comfortably wearing a bridle and saddle. As I mentioned last month, make all tack adjustments moderate—neither very loose nor extremely tight. Loose

Make sure that your youngster is not scared of the saddle. When you put the girth on, while he is standing still, vary the pressure—a bit tighter, then looser, then tighter again, then looser. Doing so helps to accustom the horse to the changing pressure of the girth. It is also very important in this stage to walk your horse in hand with the saddle on *before* you send him off on the lunge line. If you skip this step, he may go off bucking in a panic and scare himself.

Ideal for Lungeing: A Round Pen

A round pen can be the ideal place to introduce lungeing because you have a built-in outside “corridor,” but it is not essential.

When working with young horses, do your best to anticipate problems so that you can avoid them. This is one reason that having a helper can be useful. If your horse likes to stop and spin on the lunge, for instance, and you don't have a round pen, your helper can use the lunge whip to keep him moving while you are the “post” in the middle, keeping the direction.

Attaching the Line

There are many ways of attaching the lunge line: through the inside bit ring to the outside bit ring; over the poll and to the outside bit ring; to a device that attaches to both bit rings; to the inside bit ring only. It is a matter of personal preference; there is



ONE WAY OF ATTACHING THE LUNGE LINE: Through the inside bit ring, over the poll, and to the outside bit ring. *Fidelity* wears a full-cheek snaffle and a well-fitting bridle; however, the bit cheeks should be attached to the bridle with keepers and the throatlatch is too loose, which has positioned it too low on the horse's cheeks.

no right or wrong way. However, use good judgment if you do attach the lunge line to the inside ring. If the horse runs and pulls the bit through his mouth, obviously this was not a good decision! That's why I like to put horses in full-cheek snaffles (as shown in the photo on the facing page) at this stage, so the bit can't be pulled through the mouth. You can use the full-cheek until the horse learns not to pull away; then you can switch to a snaffle with round rings.

The Lunge Circle

Although this article is about lunging, I'm not a big fan of excessive lunging of young horses. Horses are normally in a growth stage at this point in their careers, and their growth plates haven't closed fully yet. As a result, I don't think that going around and around on a small circle is particularly good for their feet; besides, it's unnatural. Therefore, the lunging that we do must have a very clear purpose. It is

not to wear the young horse down or to make him "perfect"; it's to make him safe for riding.

Balancing on a circle is very difficult for a young horse, and that's why I don't do a lot of canter work on the lunge line with a youngster. Canter only enough to determine that your horse is safe to ride.

I recommend lunging young horses without side reins at first. We want the horse to have a good experience, especially in terms of trust in the mouth. If we mess up the horse's mouth at this stage, it can lead to life-long tongue or contact problems. Be patient and do not abuse the mouth. When a horse is running through the mouth, it isn't the mouth that is running; it's the legs or the mind. Address those issues rather than yanking on the bit and harming the mouth.

Side Reins

When your horse is confident enough being lunged with a saddle, that's the

time to put on your desired type of exercise reins, either Vienna reins (sliding side reins) or conventional side reins. The reins should be neither excessively long nor very tight. Keep everything in moderation. After you attach the side reins, start by hand-walking your horse. Let him feel the bit pressure. At a halt, can you flex him slightly with the reins and the bridle? Make sure that he understands bit pressure, and introduce him to the concept of softening to the bit. You don't want him to panic and suddenly stiffen his neck, bracing against the side reins, as you turn him loose on the lunge line. After he learns to yield and relax to the bit and bit pressure, you can start to let him out on the lunge line.

Think of lunging as riding. Too often, I see speed being equated with "forward" and people who chase their horses around on the lunge. Strive for relaxation and a tempo that you could ride. A fancy "auction trot" on the lunge is artificial; you are not going to be able to ride it, and you would

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be stressing the horse, who can't relax his back in such a trot. A horse being lunged properly shows clear transitions, a correct outline, straightness, flexion—ideally, everything you would want to see in a Training Level test.

Confidence and Balance Lead to Quality Gaits

Don't worry if your horse's trot on the lunge is less than stellar at this point. Don't push in an attempt to "make" the gaits. Allow him the time he needs to gain confidence. Your primary goal right now is to develop his confidence and understanding. Confidence leads to quality gaits.

Most horses are better balanced in one direction—usually to the left. Don't lunge excessively on the weaker side. I think it's important to cater to that weakness at this point. If your horse is more balanced on the left side, do more fitness work on the left side and do a little bit on the right side. Don't try to make the right side perfect. If you do, you may be asking for problems; for example, he may start to run in the less-balanced direction. Riding is where he will gain balance.

Getting On

During this stage—perhaps after the first few lunging sessions—you can begin to introduce the rider. Choose a time when your young horse is quiet and relaxed. A helper can be very beneficial at this stage.

Put the stirrups down and make sure that your horse is not nervous about them. Then start leaning on the saddle and on the stirrups a little. Stand on the mounting block; make sure that he is not scared when you are higher than he is. Lie over his back a little bit, making sure that, if you feel you need to, you can get off in a quiet and composed fashion. Never startle him by jumping off in a panic or making a sudden movement.

Work both sides of the horse, not just the left side. See if you can bend his neck in your direction while he



INTRODUCING THE RIDER: *An assistant holds the horse while the rider steps up onto the stirrup to accustom the young horse to her weight. Make all actions calm and quiet to help ensure a positive experience for the horse.*

remains soft and relaxed. I think that neck control and softness of the neck are very important in these early stages of leaning on, getting off, and getting on.

The last piece that you will want to achieve in this phase is that your horse is extremely confident with you sitting up on the saddle. On the lunge, the contact with the training reins should look very nice—but remember, we are not aiming for perfection. We only want to ensure that we are set up for a successful first ride. ▲

Next month: Your first ride.

Scott Hassler has been the US Equestrian Federation's national young dressage-horse coach since 2006. He co-chairs the USDF Sport Horse Committee and is a member of the USEF Dressage Committee, the USEF Breeding Committee, and the USEF Strategic Planning Committee. He is the director of training at Hassler Dressage

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COMING NEXT MONTH

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