



## Lunging and all things associated

Alexander Grayton

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Lunging is one of the most useful training techniques available to us, and is simultaneously the most underappreciated, misused, and potentially dangerous techniques that can lead exclusively to “untraining”. An experience at a recent horse show led me to write this article, and to say I was worked up about it would be an understatement.

When we arrived in California after a long trip from Calgary, our horses had a nice rest overnight and were ready to get moving the next morning. One by one, each of them accompanied me to the lunging ring for a nice trot to stretch their legs.

I fully expected exuberant or fresh behaviour after a few days of traveling and a good night’s rest, so I acted accordingly. First of all, it was not my first time lunging any of these horses – it seems like a doomed endeavor to lunge a fresh horse for the first time at a horse show, especially in the wide open space provided for lunging that easily fits several horses that all could be equally fresh and exuberant.

I started on a very small circle, and had my own safety devices (gloves and a lunging whip – yes, even though I didn’t need it due to their freshness a whip is key to sending your horse out on the circle, one must always carry a whip and never put it down – safety first). Once I felt I had established the start of work and some level of control, it was off to the trot we went. I kept an eye on the size of my circle to make sure my horse didn’t just run away bucking – if they wanted to go too fast, I brought the circle in to be as small as necessary to get them back to the trot, and then build it back out again.

Meanwhile, we were becoming really on edge from those around us who did not exactly do this same process. There were horses being lunged at the end of the lunge line, groom dug in by the heels, with the horse running full tilt, cross-cantering around a huge circle as the groom kept cracking the whip for even more (why?). Some horses were sweaty and exhausted, and yet their person kept bending down to grab a clump of dirt to throw at them to ask for more.

The purpose of working in the lunging area is to get the horses to stretch their legs and back, not to “get the bucks out” or “wear them down”, as is an all-too-common refrain heard at shows about lunging. By all means, if a horse is too fresh they won’t listen well or perform well, but a sensible approach to burning off adrenaline without killing you, your horse or those around you, is all that should be acceptable!

But there’s a larger issue here. Besides reckless behavior and safety concerns, soundness and longevity of the horses involved, and the training or untraining happening – it is the responsibility of the trainers to fully understand what is happening with the valuable assets in their charge.



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How does this come to be? Do the trainers themselves not know how to lunge? Do they not value lunging as a tool but rather only as a purging system? Never mind the detrimental things that could happen to the horse or those around them. For those horses whose groom lunges them, do their owners/riders/trainers know what happens at the lunging ring when they aren't there? Do they approve of what happens, or do they maybe not even know?

It's really quite difficult to have a nice relaxing stretch in the lunge ring with fresh, but well schooled horses when the guy 20m away has a plastic bag on the end of his lunge whip that he flails about at his poor sweaty adult hunter with a chain over its nose through the halter.

So what do we do? Employ stewards to monitor the lunging ring? They are already patrolling such a large area between all the barns, warmup rings, show rings, and spaces in between, it's a tall order to add one more place to keep an eye on.

I am sure that most of the people lunging don't want to hear anything from me, nor would they change if I asked. It's a grey area when talking about horse welfare, if I think the horse has 'done enough already' someone else might vehemently disagree, and they might even send their groom out again to do another 20 minutes.

Horsemanship must be the answer to this problem. Horsemanship is not a requirement to be a rider, or a trainer, though we may wish it were. It's tough, because not everyone is or can be a horseperson.

Horsemanship is aspirational. For those who love the sport of show jumping, we should all root our morals and values in horsemanship as we cultivate our competitive edge alongside it. As I continue my journey with horses, I know more resolutely that I can't be blindly competitive at any cost. I value my horses' well-being equally as high as my competitive goals.

The horse show scene is intense, busy, competitive, and sometimes overwhelming. All of those adversities don't change the order of things from trainer to horse. Bear in mind, at the top level of the sport the relationship between trainers and horses is not just about making horses happy with flowers and rainbows – it is with a competitive goal in mind, that the best horses are striving for just as much as the people. We all owe it to the horses to pay attention to them and not treat them like machines that need a little wearing down.