

# Keep Him from Pulling on the Longe

**This California trainer's three-step system will help you teach your horse proper longeing etiquette.**

By Wendy Wergeles

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**T**EACHING A YOUNG horse how to longe is a useful tool to have in your training toolbox. At different stages in his career, you can longe him to increase his fitness and to help him understand new training techniques. But as you train him, you need to be sure he doesn't begin to pull. In this article, I'll share some basic lessons that will keep him light while longeing.

First ask yourself, how young is your horse? Longeing can put a lot of stress on joints, tendons and ligaments and shouldn't be done with a horse younger than about 2. It's OK to teach the concept to a 3-year-old, but even then, the sessions should be brief (15 minutes max) and focused on technique, rather than tiring him out. With an older horse, occasional longeing (still no more than 20 minutes per session) for training and exercise is fine, but try to limit it to a few sessions a week, and never longe more than three days in a row.

Next, evaluate your horse's energy level. If you're planning to longe him because he's "bursting at the seams," try other ways to calm him down—increasing turnout or cutting down on high-energy grain and hay, for example—before tackling his longeing behavior.

Consider your own longeing technique. You need to be able to handle the equipment smoothly and efficiently,



Once you have successfully introduced my first two lessons, you will be able to progress to longeing your horse on a large circle or in an open field without him pulling you.

and if you're having trouble organizing your line and controlling your whip motions, you could confuse your horse with conflicting signals. Ask a friend with a more experienced, obedient horse if you can practice your skills on him.

Finally, if your horse already is pulling on the longe line, consider why he's doing it. A horse will pull on the longe line because he's **in pain**. If you're longeing your horse in a bridle and bit, ask a veterinarian or dentist to check his teeth for sharp edges and wolf teeth, which can hurt

him and cause resistance.

- afraid. He might fear the whip, for example, especially if someone has used it improperly on him in the past.
- not understanding longeing basics.

Before beginning the lessons below, understand that it takes two to pull. To paraphrase renowned clinician Buck Brannaman, if you have to wear gloves, you're pulling too hard. This doesn't mean you can't wear gloves when you longe. It just means that you should always try to keep a light, steady feel on your end of the longe line. With this

concept in mind, you can train *any* horse to be light on the other end.

I prefer to start longeing a horse in a rope halter. The narrow, stiff material provides a great deal of control when it's needed. I also recommend galloping boots for protection.

## Lesson 1: Lead Him at the Walk

Start in a very small enclosure, about 30 feet in diameter. If you don't have a roundpen or paddock that small, set up temporary barriers, such as jumps, to create a space in the corner of a larger enclosure. Be sure the barriers are safe, without any protruding parts that might catch your horse if he gets close to them. Lead him in small circles at the walk, staying by his shoulder and occasionally flicking the end of the longe line behind your back at his flank to keep him moving forward.

Periodically ask him to halt, saying, "And ... whoa." I say "And ... " before every voice command. The "and" is a verbal half-halt that asks him to pay

attention to what's coming next. As you do, step forward quietly toward his head, pointing a finger out in front of him. If he doesn't respond to this visual barrier, step closer, give a firm but gentle tug-and-release on the line and repeat the voice command and hand gesture. When he finally halts, make a big fuss over him. Let him stand quietly for a moment before saying, "And ... walk," as you again flick the rope behind your back toward his flank. Repeat these transitions several times in both directions, staying as calm and quiet as possible.

As his understanding improves, let the longe line play out a little bit at a time, but still insist that he respond promptly to your aids, even when he's several feet away from you. Finally, at the standstill, introduce the whip, but without actually using it in the lesson. Let him smell it, and gently rub it on his body until he no longer appears worried about it.

If you're consistent, your horse will learn to halt in response to your voice

and hand signals alone and without any need for a tug on the longe line. Even if this first lesson takes several sessions, don't move on to the next one until you have achieved this goal.

## Lesson 2: Start to Longe on a Small Circle

This time you'll be in a medium-sized enclosure, about 45 feet in diameter. Begin this—and all longeing sessions—by quietly leading your horse around the enclosure once or twice at the walk. You may carry the whip, but be aware of it at all times.

Standing in the middle of the enclosure, start feeding out the line while pointing the whip at your horse's rib cage to encourage him to move away from you toward the wall. If he overreacts by quickening his walk too much, point the whip low to the ground and well behind him or even turn it behind your back. Ask him to halt the same way you did in Lesson 1 with the raised-arm cue. Repeat the walk-halt and halt-walk transitions.

## Lesson 1: Lead Him at the Walk



**1** Safety Tip: When I hold a longe line, I ribbon the end of it—crossing it back and forth over my hand. This way, if my horse pulls away from me, I can quickly open my hand and drop the line. You never want to wrap the line around your hand—if your horse pulls, your hand could become tangled in the line.



**2** I begin my longeing lessons leading Cronos, a 6-year-old Thoroughbred/Holsteiner cross, in small circles at the walk. Staying by his shoulder, I occasionally flick the end of the longe line behind my back at his flank to keep him moving forward.



**3** I ask him to halt by saying "And ... whoa," stepping forward quietly toward his head and pointing a finger out in front of him. (Here I've let the longe out a little because Cronos responded so well to my previous halt cues.)

## Lesson 2: Longe on a Small Circle



**1** I start to longe Cronos by feeding the line out while pointing the whip toward his rib cage to encourage him to move away from me.



**2** I ask him to halt by repeating the cues I used in Lesson 1: I say “And ... whoa” while stepping toward his head and pointing a finger out in front of him.



**3** If Cronos pulled against the line, I'd step my right foot in front of me, hold the line coming from the halter in my right hand and anchor my left fist with the excess line firmly in the small of my back. When he slowed, I'd immediately release the pressure.

*Cronos was bred and raised at Charlotte and Chris Wrather's Cottonwood Ranch in Los Alamos, California, and belongs to Charlotte Wrather.*

If your horse takes off at the trot or canter or ignores your halt cues, evaluate his motive before responding. If he's just being playful, let him cavort on the end of the line for a few minutes before calmly repeating your cues. If he ignores you at that point, add a short tug or two to your voice and hand signals. If the tug is unsuccessful, shorten the line until he's on such a small circle around you that he has to slow down. When he finally walks, allow him to settle for a few small circles, then gradually move him back out to the larger circle again.

Any time your horse pulls against the line, brace your body against him: If he's traveling to the right, step your right foot in front of you. Hold the line coming from the halter in your right hand with the excess in your left hand and your left fist anchored firmly in the small of your back (see Photo 3 above). When he slows down, immediately release the pressure and try to achieve the soft contact you had earlier. If, at any point, you feel as if you're not getting through to him, return to the smaller

enclosure and review Lesson 1.

Once he's OK with the walk and walk-halt transitions, move on to walk-trot and trot-walk transitions, saying, “And ... trot” and “And ... walk,” and using the same flick of the line or whip for the upward transition and the raised-arm cue for the downward transition. Keep your language simple and clear, and try not to garble your cues with superfluous words and sounds.

### Lesson 3: Move to a Larger Area

Now move to a larger enclosure, about 72 feet in diameter. At this point, it's also OK to introduce other equipment, such as a longeing cavesson or a bridle and side reins. Again, begin by walking your horse around the enclosure a couple of times. Review Lessons 1 and 2, and if all goes well, cue the canter in the same way you asked for the walk and trot.

Once you're comfortable at all three gaits in the 72-foot space, try longeing your horse in the corner of a larger arena, then experiment with different loca-

tions around the arena. Eventually, you should be able to longe him without any pulling in open fields, over small logs and even up and down gentle slopes. Note: Only longe in side reins on level ground and only longe over jumps in the rope halter to avoid damaging the sensitive bars of his mouth with a bit.

It may take many weeks to get to this point, but with patience and systematic, incremental consistency, you will teach your horse to longe properly. ■

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