

Rein Dancing....Learning to Long Line with Clay Maier

Warning: The following article contains information that may be habit forming and addictive. Read at your own risk.

Long reining, long lining, and ground driving are all names for a training technique that's been around for centuries. Teaching certain lessons from the ground, establishing trust and clear communication before ever getting in the saddle, make it much easier on both horse and rider. It's an excellent way to start young horses, carriage horses, and develop basic horsemanship skills. It's safe, the horse does not have the distraction of a rider's body weight, and the handler is in a position to see exactly how the horse is performing each movement, receiving immediate visual feedback. It's a great way to teach your horse about connection, encouraging the horse to relax and stretch his whole body into the contact. True connection is more than just our hands connected to the bit. Connection describes a channel of energy that travels from the horse's mouth to our hands, interpreted by our minds, and communicated back to the horse again. That connection is mental as well as physical, a blending of wills. That connection can be learned and refined on the long lines.

The basic techniques described in this article are not the only way to long line; they are the ones taught by Clay Maier. Clay Maier teaches clinics on long reining and driving throughout the country. As with riding, there are many variations. Whatever method you use, when training horses, consistency is the key to success. You must be consistent and clear with your aids so the horse understands what you want.

- To start, you will need a halter, a 12 ft lead rope, and a 6 ft lunge whip.

To note, a smaller arena, or a round pen, is better than a large open area to begin. If needed, you can use PVC poles to mark boundaries in a larger space. Clay Maier recommends beginning in an enclosed area 120 ft by 80 ft, with the gate closed. It's important to have good fencing.

Use a horse you can handle. It's difficult to learn to long line with a horse that is difficult to manage.

Begin by desensitizing your horse to the feeling of the rope around him. Place the halter on him, with the 12 ft lead rope attached. Drape the rope across his back and neck and watch his reactions. When he is relaxed and comfortable with the feeling of the rope on his body, flip the rope over his back and neck, moving it around, working from both sides. Roll it around his legs. Move it behind his haunches. Remind him that everything is fine.

Do the same thing with the whip. Rub the whip over the horse's neck, his back, his haunches, move the lash around his legs. Your horse must remain relaxed and calm with both the whip and the rope going over his back and down his sides, with the rope low on his hips and around his haunches. Take your time with this step, allowing the horse to accept these experiences at his own speed with no pressure.

Continue to reassure him and build his confidence and trust in you. This may take a few minutes, a few days, or a few weeks. Take the time it takes before you progress to the next step.

- The Introduction to the Aids: Hands, Voice, Whip

In this step, you may be reviewing things your horse already knows, but you want them to be perfectly clear. Your horse should know how to walk on command, trot on command, and halt. Test his responses, in hand, on a circle, until there is no misunderstanding. He should be able to move on a large circle, at first with you, and later around you. Use your voice and the whip to encourage him to move forward. Use your voice and pressure on the lead rope, if needed, to halt. The horse needs to be accustomed to you working on both sides of him, so lead him from the right as well as the left. Make sure to reward and praise him frequently for correct responses.

In this training, we are simply layering one skill, one technique, on top of another, gradually increasing your horse's body of knowledge in a comfortable, non-threatening manner, setting him up for success.

Now is the time you might ask your horse to take on a challenge he might not be sure about. At some point in your training, you will encounter a situation where the horse must trust you to do something he is not comfortable with. Using a piece of plywood or a tarp, ask your horse to walk over this hazard. Continue to lead him back and forth over the hazard until he doesn't pay any attention to it at all.

This is also the time to work on patience. Ask your horse to stand quietly for longer periods of time. Help your horse to develop the discipline to stand still.

Introduce the rein back in the halter, asking him to take a few steps backward, and praise him. Always do everything from both sides.

When you are finished, your horse should clearly understand the aids for walk, trot, and halt. He should be comfortable being coaxed onto a hazard, proof of his confidence and trust in you. He should demonstrate discipline, being able to stand quietly, and he should rein back on demand.

- Adding On

It's now time to introduce your horse to the surcingle. Clay's preference is a surcingle that buckles from both sides, with a number of different rings. You will use the lower rings for younger horses, working up the rings as the training progresses.

You will also introduce the bridle, with a regular loose ring jointed snaffle.

Continue to do the same things in the same places until your horse gets comfortable with his new equipment.

When he is completely comfortable with the surcingle and the bridle, add on side reins. You want to use side reins that have some stretch to them. This will introduce your horse to the feeling of contact on his mouth. You want to keep the side reins loose to allow your horse to stretch and reach with his head and neck. (*Figure 1*)

With this new feeling of contact, put your horse right back into the same program, doing the same things in the same places. Keep him between your aids. Your whip drives him forward, your voice encourages. He moves into the contact of your hand through the lead rope. Expand the size of your circle, lunging him in both directions, over the hazard, practicing the responses to walk, trot, and stop.

- The Long Reins

Clay prefers 3/3 inch long reins made from marine or climbing rope; you can also use 1 inch flat cotton webbing or leather. He does not care for snap closures, for safety reasons, recommending leather buckles instead. A 30 ft length works well for a 16 h horse, while 24 ft is fine for a smaller horse.

In this step, we take away the halter and lead rope. We will begin by using just one of the long reins, threading the long rein through the inside snaffle ring, up over the poll, and fasten it to the opposite snaffle ring. (*Figure 2*) This will enable us to have direct hand contact with the horse, balancing him between the side reins and the long rein. And, yes, it's right back to the same program, the same things in the same places, working from both directions.

Take this opportunity to get used to adjusting the length of your long rein, walking up the rein and then allowing it to slide through your hand, shortening and lengthening the rein. You want to have soft hands and a light touch. Let your horse out on the circle, bring him in, increase and decrease the circle. Use a lot of your arena, circling in different places, always moving forward, developing cadence and communication.

By being consistent with your program every time you add something new, your horse continues to build his trust and confidence.

Next, you will change the positioning of your long rein. You will remove the inside side rein, and replace it with the long rein. Thread the long rein through the ring of the snaffle and attach it to one of the lower surcingle rings so that a horizontal line is created from bit to surcingle. (*Figure 3*) This long and low configuration will teach your horse to relax, to stretch his topline, and helps to create bend to the inside.

Always allow time between configurations to have your horse stand quietly, working on patience and discipline. Test the rein back, praise him and reassure him.

Work from both sides, on the same program, circling throughout your arena, over the hazard, focusing on creating a steady rhythm and tempo. Your horse should relax into the work. He is being introduced to connection.

For those of you familiar with The Training Scale, you will note that we are now working on the first phase, the Development of Understanding and Confidence, focusing on Rhythm, Relaxation, and Connection.

Work from a position near the horse's hip, and strive for as light of touch as possible, while still maintaining contact.

When this becomes effortless and easy, add in your second long rein. Replace your outside side rein with the other long rein. Attach the second long rein to the ring of the snaffle, then through the ring of the surcingle and over your horse's back. The rein on the outside directs the horse out, controlling the size of the circle and the degree of bend. With this configuration, practice handling two reins. Put the reins side by side in one hand, back to two hands, keeping your hands in front of you and always thinking about a light touch.

Begin a new exercise. On the circle, maintaining contact with the outside rein, move behind your horse. Keep him on the circle, allow the outside rein to fall off your horse's back to the outside, and then flip the rein back over his back again. Get your horse accustomed to the feeling, in motion, of the outside rein over his back, down on his side, around his back.

Practice walk, trot, and halt in both directions.

- The Dance

We are now ready to attach each long rein directly to the rings of the bit and through the lower rings of the surcingle. With the reins on either side of the horse's body we are able to do things such as changes of direction and figure eights. We can now do exercises to increase our "reinsmanship" skills, with infinite possibilities. "Ride" a serpentine through your arena, aiming for fluid changes of direction and equal loops. Spiral in and out, change direction. Halt, rein back, trot on. Strive for cadence, relaxation, stretch of the topline, and an elastic connection. Play with the marriage of the forward driving aids and the restraining aids with immediate visual reinforcement. "Ride" your dressage test, your equitation pattern, or create your own choreography. You are only limited by your own creativity.

Lateral movement, teaching your horse to move forwards and sideways, can be done on the long reins. Your inside rein acts as a direct rein to bend the horse. The outside rein is a supporting rein and defines how much bend you are given. The whip replaces the rider's seat and leg aids.

Walking down a fence line, you can ask your horse for three track positioning with the bend in the direction of the fence. His inside (relative to the bend) hind leg steps in to the outside front hoof print.

When you can move your horse forward on three tracks in both directions without the fence, you simply open up the supporting rein and turn the movement into a leg yield or sidepass.

No two horses are alike, some are naturally more forward, some need more encouragement. However, if you take your time, are clear and consistent and patient, they can all benefit from the addition of long line work to their regular training program, regardless of their primary discipline.

I had the opportunity to learn from Clay Maier at one of his Rein Dancing Clinics, held the the first weekend in June, at InStride Therapy Center in Nokomis. My dance partner for the weekend was Pik, an 18+ hand Hanoverian gelding owned and loved by Pam Houck of Ft Myers. Pik is big. I mean really BIG. Big gaits with big movement, and an equally big heart. While a perfect gentleman both on the ground

and under saddle, his size makes riding intimidating for most. My goal for the clinic was to improve MY long lining skills so that I could pass on that knowledge to Pam, as a way for her to continue to develop her partnership with her horse.

Pik was already comfortable with the long reins, as we had been working with him for several weeks prior to the clinic. We were comfortable with changes of gait and direction, and could easily navigate obstacles and hazards. What Clay taught me was finesse.

Just as in riding, how a movement is performed is just as important as if the movement was performed. A bracing, restricted circle may indicate an ability to steer, but a circle performed with suppleness, bend, and stretch through the topline is infinitely more beneficial.

In long lining, as in riding, you must think back to front. Clay worked with me on allowing the stretch into the transitions, both up and down. The neck must stay long, reaching toward the bit. He had me tighten up the rectangle created by the outside long line around the back of the horse and the inside long line to encourage lift. The gaits improved, relaxation increased, and elasticity and suppleness were encouraged.

Clay admonished me not to brace. Any tension in my arms and shoulders were communicated directly to the mouth of the horse. I had to think about relaxing. I could take momentarily, but then give. All familiar to me on the back of the horse, now applied in a slightly different context.

It became like riding. Half halt, release, supple, bend. I could feel my thoughts flowing through the reins and channeling directly to my horse. It became beautiful, it became art. It became Rein Dancing with my horse!

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