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# LONGEING YOUR HORSE: WHY AND HOW

by Deb Bennett, Ph.D.

**I** recently attended a Buck Brannaman clinic in California. I don't see Buck often enough and it was a real pleasure to watch both the colt-starting and horsemanship classes. There is a great deal of sophistication in what Buck is asking students to concentrate on, and it's obvious to me that, since our days with Ray Hunt, Buck has thought a great deal about how best to teach the skills required for good horsemanship and real progress in training.

One of the things Buck mentioned was “lungeing”—he says the word with a sneer, because what he's thinking of is the low-quality version of it that we all too often see. To begin with, the proper term is not “lungeing” but “longeing”, a word derived from a French phrase that means “work on a long rein.” There is a world of difference between “lungeing” and work a longée, and what I heard Buck saying is that if “lungeing” is all a person knows to do, then it would be better if they rode instead.

Based on my own forty years in the industry, I completely agree with Buck; only rarely do I see any horse worked correctly or profitably on a long rein, whether that rein be an 8-foot lead tied to a rope halter, a McCarty outfit, or an English-type setup with a thirty-foot longe line and either a standard halter or a longeing cavesson. In discussing this problem with veterinarians, I've heard several of them say that they, too, would prefer never to see horses “lunged,” because they feel that it causes injuries, including bruises from interfering and speedy-cutting, splints, bruised or cut heels, shoes stepped off, ankle sprains, and suspensory pulls. I not only agree that this is true, but find that film analysis of the biomechanics involved in “lungeing” makes it easy to pinpoint exactly what it is about this bad technique that causes injury (see Fig. 2, side view).

## REASONS TO LONGE (NOT LUNGE)

Having made the distinction between “lungeing” and “longeing,” we have reason not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. There are, in fact, lots of reasons to learn how to longe. In longeing, we retain the ability to physically tug on or vibrate the halter or longeing cavesson should that be necessary; we cannot offer this support if the horse is fully at liberty. Longeing can likewise support the horse in learning to pay attention, untrack, hook on and come at call; to give the head and neck while moving vigorously forward; to leg-yield

by expanding the circle; to reverse through the circle; to roll back over the outside hock; and to jump. The most important function of longeing is to teach the horse to move anatomically straight; in other words, in proper alignment with himself, with correct weight distribution and in balance, when moving on a circle. All of this with the advantage to the green horse of not also having to deal with balancing a rider on his back. One thing at a time please!

I incorporate longeing into most horsemanship classes and clinics, and I consider it not only a necessary skill but one which can be of great benefit to the horse. The illustrations accompanying this article are grouped into three sets to illustrate (1) what people commonly do wrong in their attempts to “lunge”; (2) how to longe; in other words, the exact steps to working correctly on a long rein; and (3) the crucial transition between work on a short rein or “close-handling” and longeing.

## THE HORSE MUST BE IN FRONT OF THE LEG

All riding, ground handling, longeing, and long-reining are actually forms of driving. It is crucial, as François Baucher taught long ago, that the horse be “in front of the leg.” But for the horse to be in front of the leg, the leg (or whatever driving aid) must be behind the horse! In order to longe correctly, the handler must learn to be aware of the position of his or her body with respect to that of the horse. Specifically, in order to drive the horse on, the handler must always be in or behind the green zone marked in the illustrations. In my opinion, longeing teaches students this awareness better than anything other than cattle work, which hopefully would come later.

## ERROR NO. 1: OVER-DRIVING

The aid most commonly misapplied in “lungeing” is the whip—99% of horses I see are grossly over-driven. My goal is

# GROUP 1: “LUNGEING”

**Fig. 1:** Figs. 1-3 show “lungeing”; in other words, how to work wrong with a horse on a long strap or rope. This horse is moving “wrongside-out,” in other words, going from left to right but bent in the opposite direction. The “lunge line” is shown as a black arrow, to emphasize the fact that the handler continually pulls back on the line while he over-drives the hindquarters.

The blue arrows show that the handler is working off the wrong foot; i.e. he is chasing the hindquarters with his whip. The continuously tight line pulls the horse in onto its inside shoulder; this is what “falling in” means. At the same time, the haunches are forced to displace outward, so that an axis of rotation develops in the horse’s body in the area marked by the purple circle.

This horse is essentially fleeing the rider, looking outside the circle and the pen, searching for any moment when he might be able to pull away in order to escape. I’ve seen handlers who know no better than to “lunge” in this manner literally get pulled off their feet and dragged through the dirt.

**Fig. 2** (top and side views). This is the commonest “lungeing” scenario, called “countercircling.” While the horse is not obviously wrong-side out, you’ll easily pick out that he isn’t truly flexed to the circle, either; he’s high-headed and stiff. The handler is still working off the wrong foot, still over-driving the haunches, and still pulling back all the time to maintain a tight rein. The net result is that the axis of spin (marked in purple) falls at a point in the rein about halfway between handler and horse.

It is this scenario that Buck says he despises, and that the veterinarian considers dangerous. Note the blue arrows that show the horse’s hindquarters “flipping” outward as the tight rein holds its forehand in. What’s a little more subtle to realize is that when the handler compels her horse to move crookedly like this, she also forces him to carry himself on the forehand.

Most people I see doing this try to compensate for it by encouraging the horse to hustle (to move “above tempo”). This puts the horse in danger of injury, because it causes him to pseudo-trot; i.e. the feet come out of time due to the contacting fore hoof breaking over late. In short, the handler is teaching her horse to crawl around with most of its weight upon its forelimbs while merely tapping with the hindlimbs – hardly how we want our bridle horse or our High School horse to work.

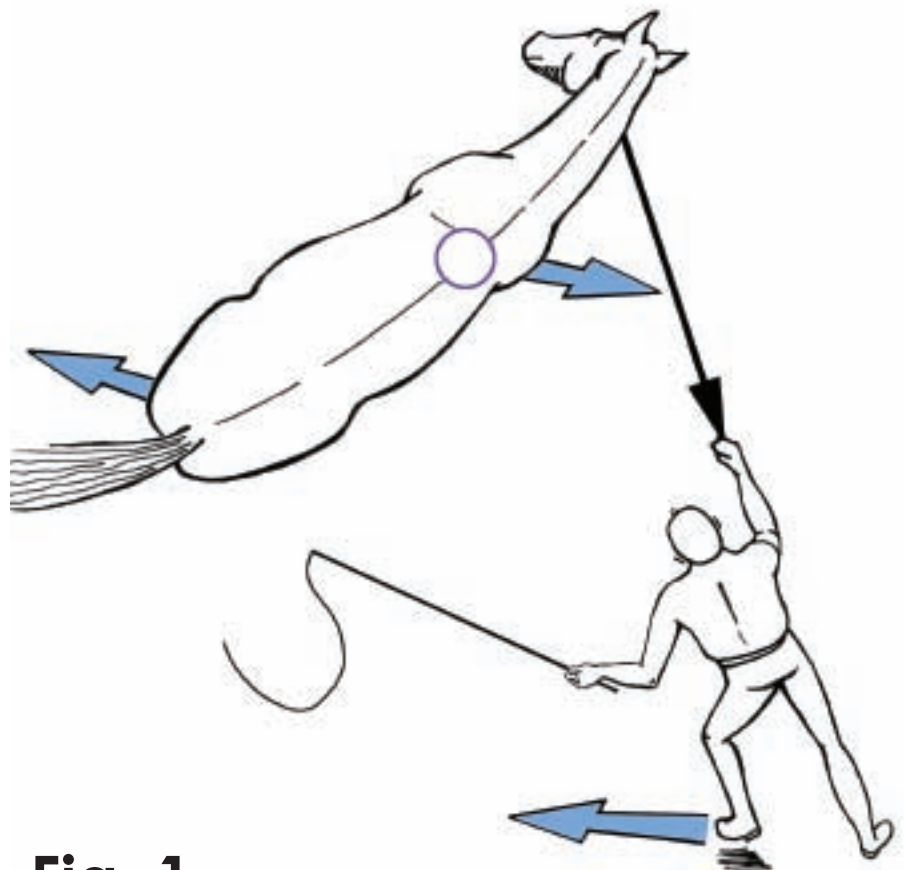
The handler is also teaching her horse to go crooked, which sets the horse up for “splint” injuries and sprains because as the hindquarter pinwheels around the weighted forelimb, that limb gets torqued with several hundred pounds of pressure. That’s plenty enough to rip the ligaments that hold the splint bone to the shaft of the cannon bone, or to sprain an ankle or even fracture a sesamoid.

While trimming/shoeing errors such as

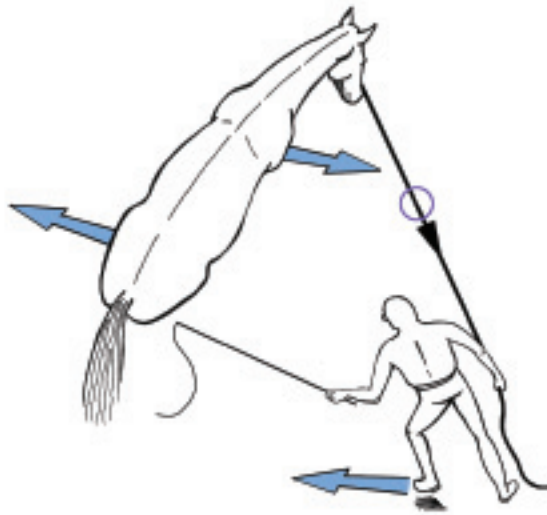
long-toe/low heel will make late breakover worse, the hoof balance can be perfect and yet the horse will still break over late when “lunged” like this. This is the cause for bruised tendons/speedy cutting, bruised/cut heels, and shoes stepped off. And it gets worse: many horses seek to relieve the stress on their flexor tendons that late breakover causes by flexing the knee of the weightbearing forelimb (see red arrows). While this posture does slack the flexors, it also simultaneously over-tensions the suspensory apparatus. Anyone who “lunges” (or rides) in this manner is begging for torn suspensories.

**Fig. 3** (top and side views). The one thing that this handler is doing right is to work off (step forward from) her hind foot. This makes her blue arrows go in the right direction. The problem is that she still doesn’t really believe in her ability to move the horse off her personal energy, so she “cheats” by positioning too far forward so that she can pull the horse along. Most horses, when they see the handler out of position in this way, will stop – unless a big long whip is used to keep them moving.

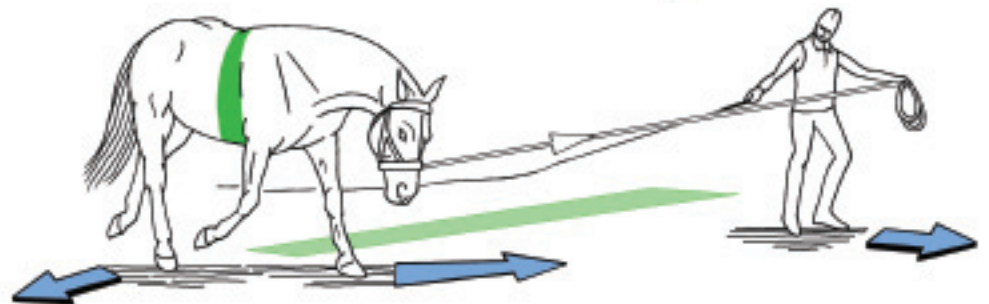
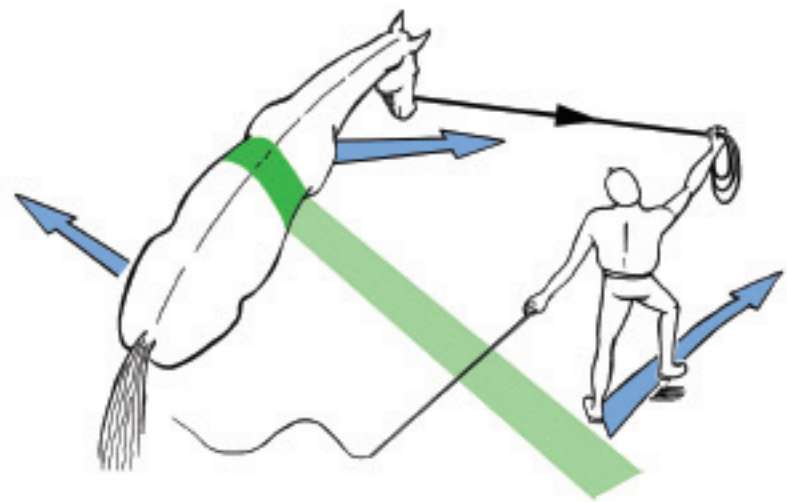
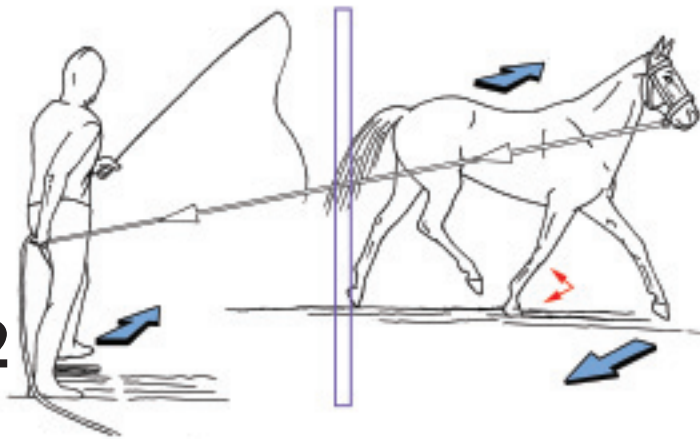
The idea is to drive the horse, not drag him along. The horse must be in front of the leg, or whatever driving aid; and this means that the handler’s body must always be within or behind the green zone. Once again we see the stiff rein-arm and the taut line, with the “energy arrow” going the wrong way – toward the handler rather than toward the horse. As a result, the horse is pinwheeling; note the outside hind leg landing far outside the track of the outside foreleg.



**Fig. 1**



**Fig. 2**



**Fig. 3**



## HOW HORSES WORK

to get students to where they will never need a whip or even a gentle flag again. I want them to be able to have all kinds of long-distance influence over their horses by just tilting their heads, softly raising a hand, or pointing with a finger. In order to get to this point, the student must first learn how to create “response with respect.” In a nutshell, when the horse is green, we continue to apply the same pressure until we see a try and a change, and then promptly release, which rewards the try. And then we play a game for the rest of our lives with that horse, to see how small a driving stimulus he will give an equal response to. Horses love being asked to work from tiny amounts of pressure, and the ultimate result is “invisible aids.”

I believe that one of the main causes of over-driving in “lungeing” is confusion about what the different parts of a horse’s body do. By analogy with an automobile, it is true that

***"L***ungeing is a great way to introduce students to the concept of non-physical push, and to get them to believe in their own powers involving their 'personal bubble' or 'body aura,' especially including the ability to project, enlarge, reshape, move, or intensify/diminish their bubble as needed. Body-bubble awareness is an essential aspect of 'feel'—those without this awareness by definition have no feel."

the haunches or hindquarters are the “motor.” But when you drive your truck, I imagine that you address the motor only initially, i.e., when you put the key in and turn it in order to start the truck up. That’s the only time I allow my students to address the horse’s hindquarters—a tap over the top of the butt, behind the thighs, or on the hocks—or all three—the purpose of which is to raise the life and thus “start the horse up.”

Once you’ve started your truck, though, I know you don’t drive it down the street by continually re-cranking the engine. What you do instead after the truck is in gear and has started rolling, is you step on the gas pedal. The gas pedal and the motor are two different parts, located in different areas. The “gas pedal” of a horse is the zone marked green in the illustrations. Once the horse has started up and is thinking and moving forward, there is no further call to address his rear end, and the

handler must learn the moment to shift from tapping the butt to addressing the horse’s gas-pedal zone.

### ERROR NO. 2: HANDLER WORKING OFF THE WRONG FOOT

Buck talks about skillful riding being a “dance,” and this is also true of lungeing. In order to dance well, shouldn’t the dancer be aware not only of her position relative to her dancing partner, but of the position and action of every part of her own body? In lungeing, it is particularly important that the handler work off of her rear foot. The rear foot is the foot that’s beneath the arm holding the driving aid; the foot that’s closer to the horse’s haunches. The handler is to weight this leg and foot, then push off of it forward-and-toward-the-horse with every step.

This is similar to a Waltz step—if the horse is lungeing to the right, the handler will begin by having most of her weight on her left foot. Then she steps forward with the right foot, it lands, and then the left foot catches up but does not pass the right foot. This is repeated so long as the handler desires the horse to move forward-and-outward.

As the illustrations show, the result of incorrect footwork (as well as incorrect hand-work, see below) is that the axis of spin of the “system” formed by handler plus horse (purple circle/pole in Fig. 2) falls somewhere between the handler and the horse. This means that handler and horse are actually counter-circling each other (Fig. 2). By contrast, when the footwork is correct, the axis of spin will lie beneath the handler’s rear heel or at some point behind this (Fig. 4).

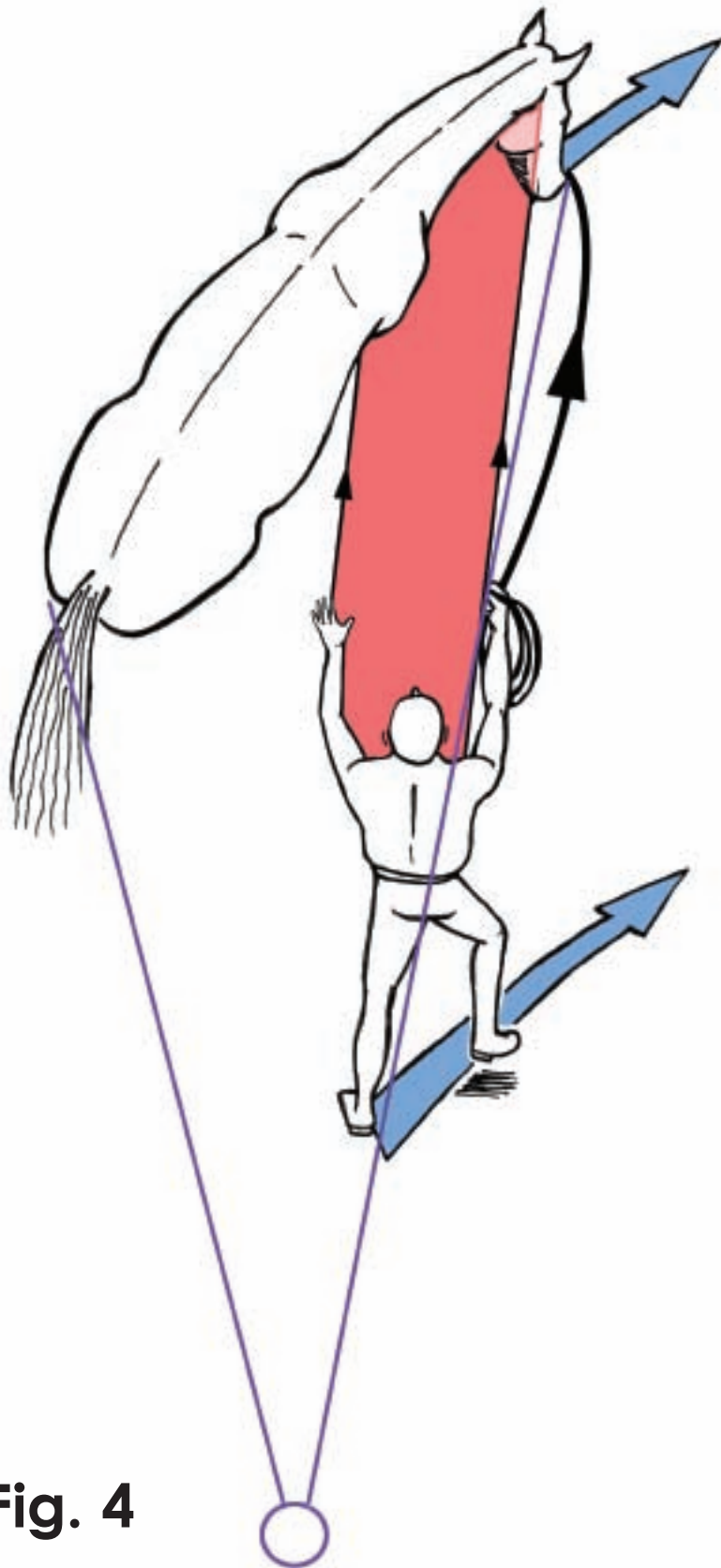
In other words, in correct lungeing both handler and horse move parallel to each other at all times. Instead of countercircling, the horse is driven; it is always in front of the aids. The animal never gets a chance to fall onto the inside shoulder, finds it difficult to creep in or crowd the handler, tends to carry itself in longitudinal balance instead of on the forehead, and most importantly, learns to move anatomically straight on a curved track.

### ERROR NO. 3: CONTINUALLY PULLING WITH THE REIN HAND

The other bodypart most often out of control is the student’s leading or rein hand. Most handlers want to hold this arm stiff, angling it downward or even backwards behind their butt. I call this “crypto-pulling,” and the student who does it in ground-handling is also sure to continue to do it when mounted.



## GROUP 2: HOW TO LONGE



**Fig. 4**

**Fig. 4.** This series of images adds a new color, red, to symbolize the rush of energy that can come forward out of the handler's body. You have an "inner body" that is made of pure energy, and from this, you have the ability to project the life in your body outward. The primary point from which you project the energy is the area of your heart, near the center of your chest. In longeing, additional "push" can be provided by beams of energy that you can project from the centers of the palms of your hands.

An academic behaviorist will pooh-pooh all of this as a New Age hallucination, and will instead tell you that what is "really" happening is that the horse is reading your body position, movements, and intentions. Fine with me if you want to think about it that way, though in my observation if this were all that were going on, it would be difficult to account for results obtainable by skillful horsemen who can influence horses over great distances.

Whatever your belief, I advise that you memorize this picture, because everything in it is right: (1) the handler works off his rear foot, so that he steps forward with his blue arrow parallel to that of the horse; (2) he remains positioned behind the green line, so that he maintains the horse in front of the driving aid; (3) he aims no energy at the horse's hindquarter, but rather at its girth area, shoulder, neck, and even the jawl – this is what keeps the horse moving forward-and-outward on its blue-arrow track; (4) the handler's elbows are softly bent; (5) he pushes slack into the line, so that the "arrow" in the line points toward the horse.

The only time the handler takes the slack out of the line is when the horse needs a little tap on the nose to maintain his attention on the handler and/or to twirl the head or flex the neck. Even in downward transitions and in coming to a stop, the skillful handler does not take the slack out of the line; he just lowers the intensity of his red energy, steps less vigorously forward, and "settles" – and the horse follows suit. Trained this way, the horse quickly learns – and is grateful to learn – that he doesn't have to crash into the line (take the slack out of it) either. As Buck says, "this offers him the dignity of always moving in balance."

Note that the axis around which this handler-horse "system" turns lies under or even behind the handler's rear foot. The horse is not pinwheeling, but rather being driven forward-and-outward on a curved track. This is the definition of a horse moving anatomically straight on a curved track.



## HOW HORSES WORK

To get over this terrible habit, the handler needs to realize that, to begin with, the horse is already caught; presumably he's not only in a halter or cavesson tied to the handler by a line, but usually he's also in some kind of pen or fenced arena. Why hold him in all the time when he's got nowhere to go but around? The handler's proper job is to step toward the horse, to impose his body-bubble onto the horse, to push his rein-holding arm toward the horse, and indeed generally to push slack into the line. Exactly as when in the saddle, I want to see the elbow of the rein hand softly bent, so that it is always ready to give forward to create additional release. One does not see Buck riding around with his arms held stiffly downward or (as Ray used to say) "doing the dishes behind his butt." Neither does one see any good horseman of any style doing this, neither now nor at any time in the past.

The business of pushing slack into the line is important, because over time and as trust and understanding increase between handler and horse, it can evolve into something very sophisticated and beautiful. A horse that is longed on slack is essentially already at liberty—except that we retain the ability to influence him with subtle support when needed—especially to encourage him to twirl his head and to flex his neck inward rather than look outside the pen. Again, this is exactly what we want the rider to realize, too—that unless a moment of support is needed, the inside rein should be draping.

The student's ability to know what the minimum influence necessary to accomplish this is—and actually be able to be subtle enough to do the minimum—increases with practice. In the beginning, I will coach the student saying, "Walk toward the horse"—but this may be very difficult for her to do, because she is so deeply in the habit of pulling all the time that she doesn't even realize she's doing it. A great coaching technique is to tie a bow into the handler's line at about the halfway point between the handler and the horse's head. "Whatever you do now, make the bow go toward the horse's head," I will tell them. Remember the dance step mentioned above? The moment the student figures out how to make the bow go toward the horse's head—the moment she discovers that her job is to push slack into the line—then in that moment, her feet will also automatically start tracking correctly.

### BODY BUBBLE: INVISIBLE DRIVING "FORCE"

Longeing is a great way to introduce students to the concept of non-physical push, and to get them to believe in their own powers involving their "personal bubble" or "body aura," especially including the ability to project, enlarge, reshape, move, or intensify/diminish their bubble as needed. Body-bubble awareness is an essential aspect of "feel"—those without this awareness by definition have no feel.

Longeing is intimately related to free-schooling. The greater

separation between handler and horse which characterizes longeing gives the horse the opportunity to realize that we will reward him for performing correctly at a distance, too. Likewise, it gives the handler a chance to explore and develop his aura-projecting abilities—many people simply do not believe that a horse can be influenced by projected energy over a distance (although I saw both Ray Hunt and Tom Dorrance do this many times; the farthest I ever saw it was about a quarter-mile).

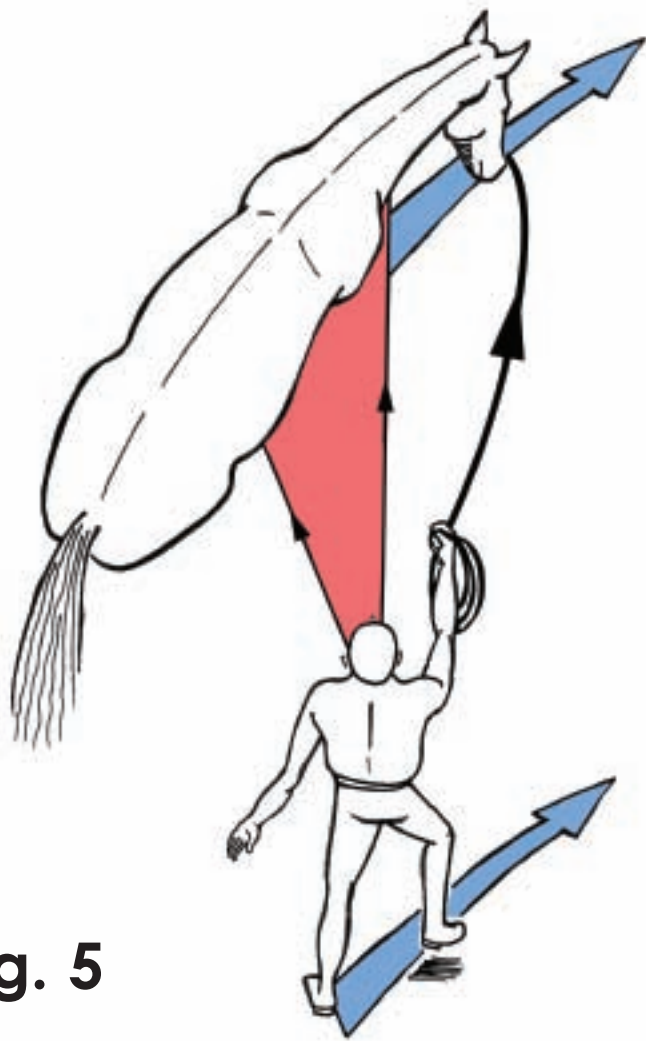
### THE MOMENT OF TRANSITION FROM SHORT REIN TO LONGEING

In longeing a horse, there is a very important moment of transition between the initial "starting up" phase which is done on a short rein, and the later "moving out" phase. Initially, the handler approaches the horse, adjusts the amount of slack between herself and the horse, minds her coils, checks to be sure she has the horse's attention, and then starts the horse up by raising the life and directing the life into untracking and forward movement. In doing this, she primarily addresses the horse's hindquarters. Several moments later comes the "moving out" phase where the horse has reached the desired speed in the desired gait, and moves forward-and-outward away from the handler; this is the point at which any observer would say, "that horse is longeing."

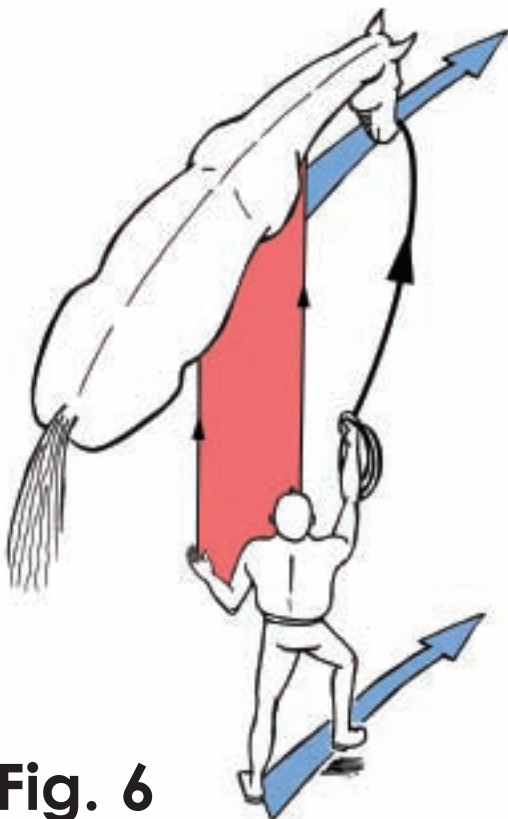
Between the two phases, however, there lies a crucial moment of transition during which the horse, in response to the driving aids, goes by (passes) the handler's leading shoulder. It is in this moment that the handler shifts from addressing the horse's "motor" to addressing the "gas pedal zone." Horses that are only close-handled on the ground but not longed are often confused about this, because the handler has inadvertently taught the horse never to go past his leading shoulder. Likewise, handlers who have not got this part separated frequently get frustrated because it seems that their horse, even though he may be quite soft, continues to crowd in on them. A horse that won't go past the handler's shoulder will also have difficulty loading into a horse trailer.

To summarize: everything the student learns about himself, about technique, and about timing when learning to longe will be applicable, and of great use, once they mount. Longeing offers the student the chance to see what the whole horse looks like (not just the front half) when moving freely forward straight and in balance.

Life is long, and many of our students intend to keep and train their horses over a span of twenty years or more. We thus need to master every known way of working with the horse, so that we have the largest possible variety of activities that contribute positively to the horse's education and physical well-being.



**Fig. 5**



**Fig. 6**

**Fig. 5 and Fig. 6.** These two drawings allow you to visualize how the handler can vary the application of his driving red energy, metering it to the horse's moment-to-moment needs. In Fig. 5, the handler uses only the chest-energy as he pushes his "personal bubble" toward the horse's body. In Fig. 6, he adds energy coming from the "whip" hand (except there's no need for a whip, or ultimately even a flag).

Let's talk a moment about hand-held driving aids. I forbid students to use a "lunge whip" during the initial phases of their learning. The reason for this is that the bigger the stick you hold in your hand, the more that "weapon" will substitute for your own energy, and the less likely you will be to ever discover your true potentials for energy projection. The same goes for the flag, even though a flag is far more gentle than a whip.

I also forbid the use of the stick-lash (stiff rod or thin broomstick with a leather thong attached), and of the dressage whip. The reason for these proscriptions is that these tools are both far too sharp, and in my observation horses do not respond to them – they flee from them.

What driving aids do I permit? The first is available to those using rope halters so that the handler can make a "spinner" out of the tail of the lead. I allow students to swing the tail of the lead to gently tap the hock when starting the horse up, and a little "spinning" is also OK, especially when the horse is so used to being flogged with whips or stick-lashes that he ignores projected energy. It's absolutely true that the floppy lead-rope is difficult to use – much more difficult to coordinate than a stick – and that's exactly why I teach with it. Once the student masters all the nuances of the rope "spinner," they can move into a flag or stick and they will then be able to use them beautifully, in a subtle and nuanced manner.

The ball-stick is the invention of our friend, Texas trainer Allen Pogue, and it's a tool I've come to use much of the time, both in ground-handling and in riding, for it has the advantages of lengthening the handler's reach (like the flag or dressage whip), but is even more gentle than the flag and is far less sharp than a dressage whip. Make your own ball-stick by selecting an appropriate length of bamboo, or else a stiff whipstock. The ball is lightweight foam or styrofoam; push it onto the end of the stick and secure with "gorilla glue" and/or duct tape.



## GROUP 3: TRANSITION TO SHORT REIN

**Fig. 7.** Figs. 7-10 show work on a short rein and the all-important transition from short to long rein. The purpose of twirling the head, flexing the neck, and untracking is to supple the horse more and more, until we can “get to the middle.” The “middle” is the rib cage, and especially the green zone, over which the saddle sits and the rider’s legs fall. Horses often “brace” in this zone which prevents them from flexing laterally. It is precisely because we are sitting on the green zone and we tighten the girth around it that the horse braces there; it’s a penalty we pay for not riding, as the ancients did, upon the croup.

Fearful or suspicious horses, and those that are “girthy” – especially mares – often need the type of close-up help shown here; there’s a photo in Buck’s ground-handling book showing him applying this same technique. Such horses often come to us having been mis-handled by somebody that had a stick in their hand, but no idea about softness or suppleness. This is a way of dropping back to Square One to clarify to the mare that she does not need to brace up and that we want her to give, not flee. Of course, as with all ground-handling, the good practitioner will take care to do this from both sides and to take mental notes, comparing the response on the left side to that on the right.

The handler in this image is doing everything right. Her position is within the green zone, not ahead of it. She’s moving her chest and hips toward the horse, crowding it a little. I draw the handler with a ball-stick but a flag would be OK too; I would not, in this case, have nothing in my driving hand.

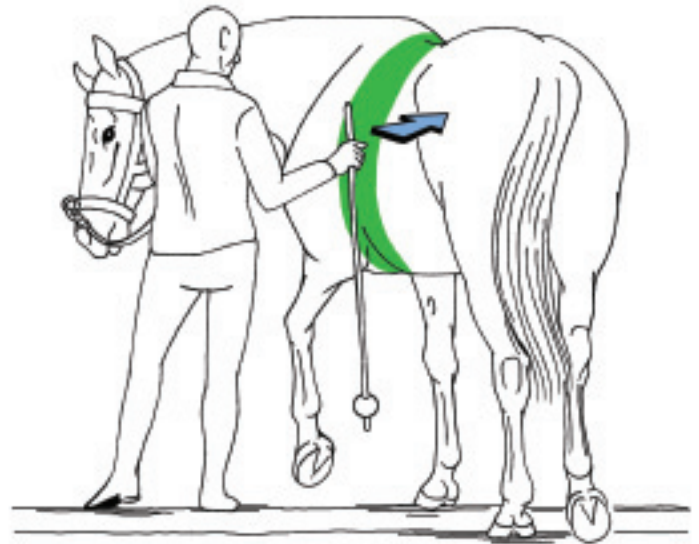
Note the slack in the lead-line. There’s about two feet of slack between her left fist, held in front of her body, and the horse’s nose. This fairly close hold ensures that she can instantly pull the horse’s head back toward her, should the animal decide to whip around to its right and take off. The handler thus protects herself from being kicked in the chest, but yet offers all the slack she can.

The handler also keeps her right hand up, and has enough of the butt-end of the stick protruding that, should the animal suddenly stiffen its body and bull into her with its shoulder, she can defend herself with a very firm poke in the ribs or shoulder, and/or (with the lower end of the stick) a whack against the shoulder or the inside hock.

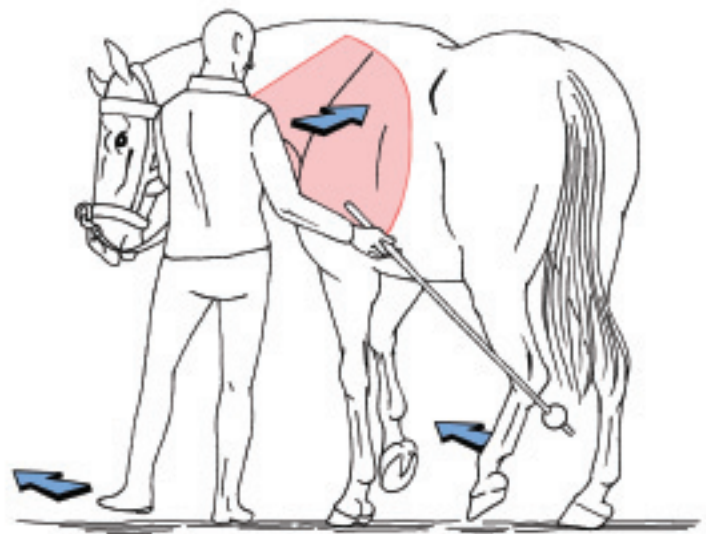
The handler is shown in the act of poking the horse in the ribs with her knuckles. She could also use her thumb, or even the butt end of the stick. The touch required is a short series of firm bumps, repeated at about half-second intervals, that clearly request the horse to flex through this body zone. The handler should poke the horse with less firmness than would provoke irritation or anger – but just less – and take care to release and stop and pet every time the mare responds by grunting or sighing and softening up.

At no time (other than should the horse try to turn right out) does the handler pull the slack out of the line. The horse is not to be made to bend by pulling with the hand, but rather, always given a free, slack place to go forward into.

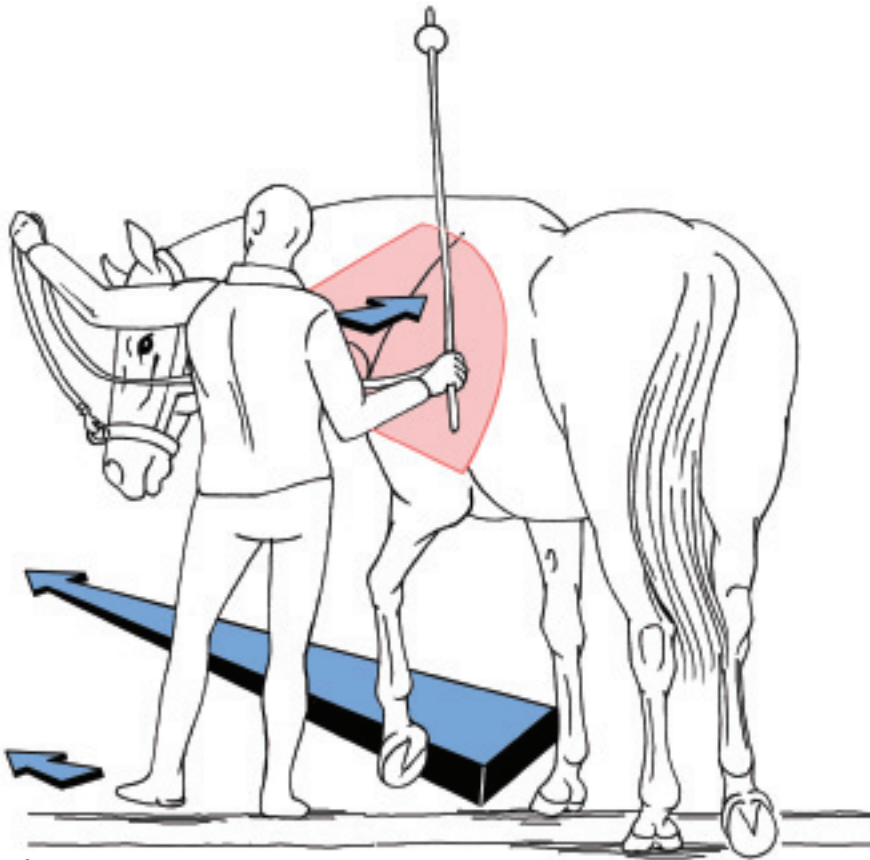
**Fig. 8.** For clarity’s sake I have shown the green zone in Fig. 7 and the push from the handler’s chest-energy in this image. Of course the chest-energy should be “on” all the time, as needed. This image also shows the rider tapping the inside hock, and the mare beginning to softly respond. Note that as the horse has now begun to move more forward as well as flex its body outward, the handler’s blue arrow follows suit, so that handler and horse move in parallel. This is the action that “starts the horse’s motor,” and this is how longeing should always be initiated – from the back to the front, never by pulling inward or backward with the rein!



**Fig. 7**



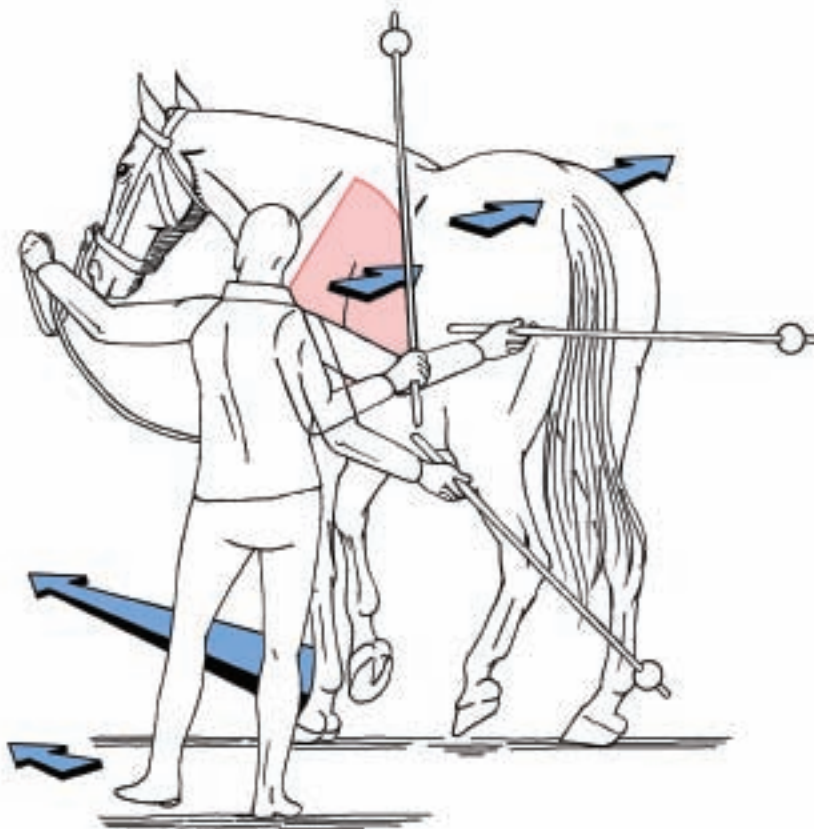
**Fig. 8**



**Fig. 9**

**Fig. 9.** This is the crucial moment of transition between short and long rein. The big blue arrow is to indicate that the horse has now got the idea to go freely forward. The handler invites the horse to go past her left shoulder by raising her left arm. There is still slack in the line; the handler stays within the green zone, does not get ahead of the horse, and does not make any attempt to pull the horse forward. The stick is momentarily raised, because it may be needed at any instant either to tap the horse on the shoulder or neck – to remind it to move outward – or else upon the top of the butt – to raise the energy – or else upon the inside hock – to encourage untracking.

As the horse begins to speed up and travel more strongly forward, the rider permits the line to slip through the fingers of her left hand. The technique is similar to “playing” a big fish; the handler maintains a feel of the line without in any way restricting the horse’s ability to increase its distance from her.



**Fig. 10**

**Fig. 10.** The stick may need to be pretty busy! It may be used to point at, or actually tap, any point of the horse’s body from the jowl back to the hock. The handler continues to use projected energy to help the horse maintain a lateral bend through its rib cage and the rest of its spine, and she continues to invite the horse to pass her left shoulder by keeping her left hand high with slack for the horse to move into. Note that the horse in this image has already mostly moved past the handler’s left shoulder, and has straightened its head and neck some. It is still paying attention to the handler but its ears and eyes reveal that it is thinking about moving forward on the longe circle.

From this point, the rider can continue to let the horse pass by and position itself in the lead. The horse can be longed – that is to say, driven -- from any position within or behind the green zone, including ultimately directly behind its body. When this stage is reached, the horse no longer needs to be longed just on a circle but can be driven accurately from one point to the next in a large arena, or taken from one jump to any other in the same direction. It’s a short step from this to line-driving. More importantly, lessons learned by correct work on a long rein teach the rider the correct balance between leg and hand in the saddle and illuminate for the rider what having the horse “in front of the aids” and “on contact on draping reins” means.