



Work-in-hand and Longeing The Foundation for All

Here is your mantra: Direction, Rhythm, Bend, Lightness. It applies to everything we do with our horses. You must know your direction (where you are going in the ring), you should be sending the communication of the rhythm you want to your horse (counting in your head or out-loud, dancing to your tune), you must know the direction of your bend and be aware of the amount of the bend, and progressively you will do all these things with greater and greater lightness.

All of these things apply during our work-in-hand and on the longe. When we begin with a few steps of work-in-hand before we longe we are establishing a mental connection and we are checking to see how our horse feels. Is there resistance on one side or another? Is he moving his back legs well under himself and offering the crossing front and back easily?

When asked to trot on the longe is there nervousness or irregular rhythm? Is he dull or lazy? Is he rushing into canter rather than a relaxed trot when asked?

All of these things indicate that greater communication and clarity is needed. If your horse is lazy longeing, add more energy! (Not nervous energy...just impulsion.) Tell him, wake up! It's time to work and be happy in our dance. But remember you must be awake and happy in the dance in order to communicate that.

Is your horse rushing around on the circle with you tugging or skiing behind? Have you slowed your breathing and responded calmly, without anger or frustration? If this is a continual problem it indicates a lack of communication. Gather your horse, gather the longe, and walk with him along a wall. A few steps at a time and halt. Do this until you know that you are together and you have the feeling that you are communicating easily and without stress or nervous energy. Perhaps a few minutes is needed, perhaps a few days or a week. Whatever it takes is what you do. There are no short-cuts if you want a happy partner.

After your longeing, you can progress to more work-in-hand, asking for greater crossing and fluidity. Why do we work 'in-hand'? So many reasons! We are stretching and suppling muscles, we are developing new neurological pathways by encouraging the crossing, we are helping our horses to feel each of their four feet and know where they are, we are preparing them for taking the weight on their hind legs (the beginning of collection), we are helping him to free his thoracic cavity which will allow him to lift his front end. We are teaching him the position for the shoulder-in we will ask for when we begin to ride. And we are doing it all without interfering by squirming around in the saddle, shifting our weight, or compounding our lack of clarity by having to figure out what we do with our shoulders, legs, hands, length or rein, etc.

I could go on and on here. This is why the work-in-hand is so integral to all we do in our riding. It is the preparation for later movements but also the foundation for the quality in each of the gaits. A horse that has stuck shoulders and is not supple or strong in the back cannot offer refined, rhythmic gaits. To recap: the **quality** of time spent in our longeing and work-in-hand will be reflected later in the quality of all the gaits and movements.