

## Building a Partnership with Your Horse

# "Golden Rules of Ground Training, Part I"

By Lynn Palm

No matter what your horse's age, ground training will make him a more responsive, obedient partner. Ground training is a must for young horses; and with older horses, it adds variety to your schooling and provides another opportunity to spend time together. Ground training is not mentally or physically fatiguing for a horse, so if you keep the lessons short and interesting, you can do it every day.

Start with the proper equipment: a properly fitting halter, longe line with or without a "stud chain," leg protection, and a three- to four-foot dressage whip. (I prefer using a longe line instead of a lead when ground training horses.)

Carefully select the training location. No matter what the horse's age, I recommend starting in the horse's stall or another small, familiar enclosed area. This will help him stay focused and relaxed. As a lesson is mastered, your horse can graduate to repeating it in a slightly less secure area, such as a paddock or round pen. Also, it helps to have a lesson plan on paper for each training session.

### Golden Rule #1: Respect Your Position

Make sure that your position in relationship to your horse gives you safety and control. Always stand with your shoulder at the middle of your horse's neck. Never position yourself further forward than his throatlatch (the area where his head and neck meet), or behind his shoulder.

Standing too far forward, at the horse's head or in front of his head, is unsafe. Even if a horse is very quiet, a handler standing too far in front of a horse can be trampled if the horse spooks. Standing too far forward will cause you to lose control of the horse's head and neck.

Always stand a minimum distance of one arm's length away from your horse. The most common fault is standing too close. This unsafe position increases your chance of being hit by the horse's legs or stepped on.

Your hand position controls the horse's head, which is the most important part of the horse to control. Whether you are standing on the near (left) or off (right) side of the horse, the hand closest to the horse holds the longe line attached to the halter. If you are standing on the horse's near side, this will be your right hand; if standing on the off side, this will be your left hand. The hand holding the line should be positioned at the middle of the horse's head, below the jaw and above the mouth.



LYNN PALM & LARK  
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The other hand holds the excess longe line in organized, loose coils, so that it does not become wrapped around your hand and therefore become a safety risk.

Grasp the longe line no closer than five inches from the halter. Your arm should have a slight bend at the elbow for flexibility. Holding the longe line too tight or too close to the bottom of the halter and steering the horse from underneath his head are common problems.

### Golden Rule #2: Make Straightness a Goal

Straightness in ground training movements is the key to getting quick and correct responses from your horse.

Learn how to evaluate if your horse is straight. Start by standing at your horse's side and ask him to stop. When he is stopped and relaxed, move at least 10 to 15 feet in front of him. Evaluate his top line to determine if his body segments are aligned so that his spine is straight. His poll (the point between his ears which is the beginning of his spine) should be in a straight line through the crest of his neck, withers, back, loin, croup (top part of the hip), to his dock (the top of his tail, which is the end of his spine). If he is straight, his shoulders and front legs will line up straight to the hip and hind legs. You will barely see his hind legs while looking at him from the front.

Straightness comes first by properly positioning your horse's head. Handlers can cause a horse to become crooked. One fault is pulling on the longe line or lead shank, which swings the horse's head out of alignment. Another is standing too close or "crowding" the horse. Handlers with the habit of looking down at their horse's feet while asking for a maneuver also have difficulty. They are not focusing on the right body parts to evaluate straightness, nor can they see what position changes need to be done to achieve it.

A horse that is standing straight can give you a lighter, quicker response because he is in balance. He can respond more easily than a horse that is out of alignment.

In the next article, I will give you the final two "golden rules" of ground training.

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