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PROBLEM SOLVERS

The Western Pleasure 'Walk'; Reversing On The Longe Line

Andrea Simons on the importance of a good pleasure walk (and what *isn't* good); Robin Gollehon on how to teach a horse to reverse directions on a longe line.

PRODUCED BY ALANA HARRISON

Walk—This Way

Q I compete in Western pleasure on my Appaloosa gelding. When the judge calls for a walk in the show ring, I've noticed that a lot of competitors almost come to a complete stop on the rail; or, if we're asked to reverse directions, they creep along toward the new direction. Why are these exhibitors doing this? What, exactly, makes for a good walk in the eyes of a pleasure judge, and is there such a thing as an extended walk in Western pleasure?

MADDY CASEN, KANSAS

A Western pleasure competitors, who perform the walk as you've described, should be penalized for doing so. This trick, as I refer to it, is one of my major pet peeves as a judge.

Most of the time, exhibitors do this to hold a good position on the rail, or to stop and wait for that ideal position—believing rail position will get them noticed by the judge. Not in my book. When I ask exhibitors for a walk, I expect to see the characteristics I'm about to describe. I'll fault a rider for excessive slowness or an obvious delay in *any* gait, not just at the lope or jog, as many competitors believe.

In Western pleasure, your horse is judged on his quality of movement and consistency of gaits. These include the jog, lope, *and* the walk. Many pleasure exhibitors solely focus on achieving the perfect pleasure jog and lope, but neglect the walk.

The walk is defined as a natural, flat-footed, four-beat gait, with each leg



This rider is demonstrating an excellent Western pleasure walk: Her horse is moving in a flowing four-beat gait, with a level topline, and appears relaxed, with a bright and attentive expression. This is what you want your horse to look like at the walk in a pleasure class.

moving independently of the other and the feet touching the ground at different times. Pleasure judges appreciate an alert horse that walks straight, with a stride of reasonable length in keeping with its size and conformation. At the walk, a horse should cover a modest amount of ground with little effort, and with balanced, flowing motion.

I consider a *poor walk* one with little or no cadence, an uneven pace, and lacking fluid motion. Horses with a very poor walk may appear to march in place, or seem intimidated or hesitant to walk forward in a relaxed manner. A horse with an *average walk* displays a four-beat gait with a level topline, and appears relatively relaxed. A

truly *good walk* is one in which the horse demonstrates a flowing four-beat gait, with a level topline, and has a relaxed, but bright and attentive, expression. It should be evident the horse is happy to do his job.

In pleasure classes, horses must work both ways of the ring at all three gaits, and at the judge's discretion, exhibitors may be asked to extend the walk in one or both directions. If your horse can't perform a medium-stepping walk, your chances of achieving an extended walk are slim to none.

If your horse's walk needs improvement or a tune-up, incorporate more deliberate walking time into your training sessions. In doing so, however, make it clear to your

horse that you're walking with purpose, and not just aimlessly wandering between your work at the jog and lope. Do this by maintaining your performance position—sitting tall in the saddle, looking up, legs positioned correctly with your heels down, and so on.

Work along a fence line (as if you were showing on the rail), keeping your horse's body straight with your legs and reins. Ask him to maintain a level topline, as you would at the jog or lope; he should carry his head and neck in a relaxed, natural position with his poll level with or slightly above his withers.

To ask your horse to extend the walk, slightly move your rein hand forward and gently fan your legs against his sides (this is effective on many horses, but others may require different cues; seek help from a professional, if need be). Your cues should be subtle, but clear enough to encourage him to take a little bigger step. With practice, your cues will become increasingly subtle—and you'll receive bonus points in the show ring by exhibiting a pretty extended walk.

ANDREA SIMONS, Aubrey, Texas; as a multi-carded judge for more than 25 years in the U.S. and abroad, Andrea knows the qualities of a winning Western pleasure horse. For more information on Andrea and Simons Show Horses, go to **Horse andRider.com** and click on our Team H&R page.

Reversing On The Longe Line



I've been working with my yearling filly on the longe line for several weeks. She's done fairly well up to this point, but I can't get her to reverse directions. When I try, she gets anxious, throws up her head, and starts to race around me on the line. How can I teach her to quietly and obediently reverse directions while I'm longeing her?

MILLA SAVOY, FLORIDA



Reversing directions on a longe line is not only an important component for longe-line competition, but it's also a useful skill for anyone who longes a horse. Teaching your filly to reverse on the line, however, is not a maneuver to work on until both of you have mastered several basic, but important, skills. For the greatest chances of success:

- Your filly must be comfortable and confident with you standing in close proximity to her (on both sides).
- She should willingly allow you to touch



TOP: In preparing to teach a horse how to reverse on a long line, begin by standing perpendicular to her body, scratching her withers and back, until she willingly accepts your presence. **BOTTOM:** To cue a horse to reverse on the line, confidently step toward her head, then pull the long line directly to the right to redirect her to the new way of going.

her, specifically her withers, shoulders, and back.

- She must be responsive to your verbal and physical corrections. For example: If you're standing at her side and she turns her head and neck around to look at you, she should move her head and neck back to a forward position, with the guidance of your hand.
- Your filly must understand the verbal command "whoa"—especially important as you start to move away from her while holding the line.

- She must understand that she's to remain standing still, *until* you invite her to move forward.

(*Note:* For information on how to achieve these skills and on what equipment you'll need for the most success, see the Web icon at the end of this article.)

REVERSING PREP

The following steps are the building blocks in teaching your filly to reverse on the long line, so it's imperative that you

not progress until you've both mastered these. Now that your filly is comfortable with you touching her, you want her to be completely at ease with you moving all around her—to her sides, front, back, and everywhere in between.

While grasping the longe line in your left hand, stand perpendicular to your filly on her left side, so you're positioned in between her withers and hips—basically where the saddle would be if she were wearing one. (By *perpendicular*, I mean you should be facing the side of her body, as shown in the top photo on page 88.) Stand quietly in this position for a minute or two while scratching her back, withers, and shoulders with your hand or a soft body brush. Once she's accepted your presence and appears relaxed, calmly back away from her left side.

Slowly, but purposefully, walk around the front of her, so *you're* the one actually reversing directions by making a half circle around her. Once you're on her right side, repeat the steps above, then circle around the front of her body so you've reversed directions again and are now back on her left side. This will help your filly become comfortable with you walking in front of her—from either direction.

Repeat this exercise several times, each time stepping back farther from her, thus making your half circle (“reverse”) larger. Over time, this exercise will help your filly develop patience, and further promote her respect for you because she must wait for you to tell her what to do next.

If you experience difficulty with this exercise, or your filly just doesn't seem to be getting it, go back to something you know she can easily accomplish—even if it's as simple as her standing quietly while you touch her. Then, quit on that positive note for the day. The following day, return to working on the above exercise. Every horse's learning curve is different, but eventually your filly will progress.

THE REVERSE

Here, I'll teach you how to cue your filly to reverse from left to right—most common in longe-line classes. To ask her to reverse from the other direction, simply reverse the following instructions.

Starting from your perpendicular-to-her-body position, slowly, but confidently, back away, allowing plenty of space for her to maneuver through a turn. With energy (to make your body language clear), step toward your filly's head to begin redirecting her movement. If you're using a training whip, place it in

your left hand at this time, while continuing to hold the longe line with your right hand. Holding the whip in your left hand will reinforce your body cue of stepping toward her head.

(*Note:* In my program, whips are used *only* as training tools; in essence, the whip is merely an extension of your arm to reinforce your cues. Cracking the whip or whacking your horse with it will only yield negative results.)

Then, give a firm pull on the line directly to the right to guide your filly in the new direction. Once she's turned her head and neck the new way, reinforce her hind-end movement by stepping (with purpose) toward her hip area.

In your first few sessions, your filly will likely pivot one or two steps on her hindquarters, and then walk with all four feet through the rest of the turn. With practice, however, she'll eventually progress to pivoting all the way around on her hindquarters to reverse directions—just by your cue of stepping toward her head. This end result is the essential beauty of your work together as a team. I tell my students and clinic participants that in longe-line competition, you and your horse are dance partners—and with diligent practice, handler and horse appear to be extensions of one another, moving as one fluid entity.

When longeing your filly at the walk, trot, or lope, always bring her back to a standstill before asking her to reverse directions. She must be stopped before you can correctly cue her to reverse. With practice and repetition, you'll become more coordinated with your cues, and your filly will have an easier time following them.

ROBIN GOLLEHON, Versailles, Kentucky; as a multiple world and national champion in yearling longe-line competition, Robin is considered one of the premier longe-line authorities in the U.S. For more information on Robin, Gollehon Quarter Horses, and her world-famous Yearling Head Start Program, which she runs with her husband Roger, go to HorseandRider.com and click on our Team H&R page.



For more information on basic longe-line competition skills, see *Ask Team H&R*, "I Want to Do Yearling Longe Line," in the July 2008 issue of *Horse&Rider*, or online this month at HorseandRider.com. (Or, look into Robin's Yearling Head Start Program at gollehon.com.)