



TRAINING TIPS

The value of lunging

A correct approach to training is always vital. **RACHEL ROAN** asked José Mendez for his expert advice on lunging.

Horses have always been part of José Mendez' life. Growing up in Spain he began his journey with the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art. From the age of 12, he refined his skills in the art of classical horsemanship, and performed airs above ground with many Spanish Andalusian stallions.

Years later, he moved to Australia and continued training and performing with Spanish Andalusians in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Mexico and the United States. His experience in high school movements allowed him to successfully train and compete on many grand prix dressage horses, and he is particularly recognised for excellence in the piaffe, passage and work in-hand.

Over the years he has trained horses of all breeds and with all levels of ability, and has helped many overcome problems thanks to his expertise and commitment to kindness.

A classical dressage master, José first explains that the aim of dressage is to create an understanding between horse and rider, to become one with and work in partnership with your horse. His philosophy is to train with appreciation, sincerity and kindness (ASK) in all interactions with the horse, and lunging incorporated with working in-hand plays an important role in achieving this aim.

Lunging is a valuable tool that is underestimated and misunderstood by many equestrians. Many believe the purpose of lunging is to warm up or wear out the horse, which can become a mindless activity that's actually counterproductive. The real purpose of lunging is to study the horse and help them to develop balance and improve their muscle structure.

To study the horse while lunging is to gain insight and learn more about them from the ground, so that you can then transfer this knowledge to your training program under saddle.



Lunging allows you to study and observe the horse's body, their muscles, the biomechanics of their movement, and their behaviours. For example, you can observe their neck position – how are they carrying their neck? Is one hind leg tracking up less compared to the other? Is the tail sitting to one side? And why is the horse bucking on one side in the canter?

José studies each horse on the lunge and uses the information he gathers to tailor their training program. The knowledge acquired from the ground helps to determine which approach and exercises are appropriate for that particular horse's stage of training. Lunging helps you to create a mental image of how the horse moves, so that you better understand what you're feeling and experiencing while you're on their back.

FACING PAGE: Classical dressage master José Mendez.

LEFT: The handler does not step back, but instead steps forward.

BOTTOM: As the handler steps forward, the horse's shoulders respond by stepping outward.

All images by Melissa Goodson, Elegant Exposures

The concept of lunging is a progression from leading a horse; essentially the horse is learning to lead from a distance. When leading a horse the handler stands at the shoulder. The same principle is applied when teaching the horse to lunge and to maintaining the horse on the circle.

When sending the horse out onto the circle, the handler asks the horse to move their shoulders out toward the circle and then forward to create the start of the circle. The handler is positioned at the horse's shoulder and using the lunge lead and lunge whip (or bamboo) combined with their position, they ask the horse to move their shoulders outward. As you can see in Image 1, the handler does not step back, but instead steps forward and the horse's shoulders respond by stepping outward. The horse learns to move away from the handler instead of stepping into the handler's space.

The biggest mistake when lunging is for the handler to step back as they send the horse out onto the circle. José says that he has observed this happening on many occasions, adding that it's something the handler is probably not even consciously aware of.

However, the problem with taking a step back is that you're teaching the horse to move into your space. Once the horse has learned from experience that you will move out of their way, it sets a precedent. So if, for example, the horse gets a fright, they are very likely to jump into the handler's space, expecting the handler to move out of the way. Although this might not occur when the horse feels secure in a familiar environment, when they are out and about – at a competition, for example – and they begin to feel anxious, that pre-learned behaviour can become a danger for the handler who could easily be hurt.



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The second biggest mistake is when the handler asks the horse to move forward when they are standing towards the back of the horse. Commonly, the handler will walk towards the hindquarters of a standing horse to encourage them to move forward. This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, the handler is putting themselves in a position in which they could get kicked, particularly if they are also

asking the horse to move forward with the lunging whip. Secondly, when the handler stands behind the hindquarters it teaches the horse to turn in to face the handler, creating a situation that encourages them to cut into the circle and move into the handler's space.

If the horse cuts into the circle or drops their shoulder into the circle, the handler should stand about 10 degrees in front

of the shoulder, again communicating to the horse to move outward with the shoulders. At the same time, the handler holds the lunge whip straight out towards the horse's side (between their head and shoulder) to gently reinforce the message of moving outward. Here the lunge whip acts as an extension of the arm, and is not being used to punish the horse. Knowing how to apply this approach teaches the horse to stay out on the circle. Once this lesson is understood in the walk, it should follow in the trot and then the canter, which will help build the horse's confidence and understanding of how to lunge.

José also explains the importance of understanding how the horse's balance and tempo are correlated. Studying their tempo at each gait on the lunge will help you determine how much energy is required to maintain a good balance – and for this, the law of gravity should be considered.

Let's take the metaphor of a racing motorbike: when a motorbike takes a corner at speed, the rider does not turn the handlebars as such, but instead leans into the corner. The faster the rider takes the corner the more the motorbike will lean. The horse does the same; the faster they go on the circle, the more they will lean and consequently drop their shoulder inward. Therefore, the tempo or speed at which you lunge the horse is vital in helping them maintain the circle and their balance.

Too small a circle on the lunge will not help the horse maintain good balance and build their confidence as they learn how to lunge correctly. So start with a circle no smaller than 15 meters. As the horse achieves better balance, they will find it easier to maintain the shape of the circle.

It takes time and patience to teach your horse to lunge. Learning how to lunge effectively will benefit your horse's training and build your knowledge of their biomechanics.

For more on José and his training, visit José Mendez Equestrian and follow him on Facebook and Instagram.  