
SECTION 2: Training the Horse

A guide to the training of vaulting horses would take many chapters, not to say volumes - far more than can be dealt with here. However, here are two areas that must be dealt with in the training of vaulting horses and some random pointers that may help to deal with the most common problems and answer the most common questions: 1) Longeing and 2) Introducing the vaulters. Some references available through the USPC bookstore are *USPC Manuals of Horsemanship* (Volumes 1, 2 and 3), *USPC Guide to Longeing and Ground Training* and *Equestrian Vaulting* by Jutta Wiemers.

A. Training on the Longe

The three main longeing problems encountered by most vaulting horse trainers are: 1) Speed of the gait, 2) Maintaining the circle and 3) Carriage of the horse (acceptance of the bit).

1. Speed of Gait

Control of the speed of the gait begins with the teaching of voice commands on the halter with chain (lead shank) and whip. With the lead shank in the left hand and the whip in the right hand (which rests on top of the horse's back), the trainer clucks with the tongue once (or at the most twice) and immediately taps the horse smartly on the top of the croup until it trots forward. To teach the restraining command (whoa), the trainer says whoa once - crisply and authoritatively, then commences to loosely jerk the chain until the horse stops and backs up a step. This lesson should be repeated until the horse trots and halts at the very instant the voice aid is given. Next the lesson should be repeated on the longe line, but with the line held only 2 or 3 feet long. The line can be lengthened as the lesson is correctly repeated until a circle of a full 13 meters is used. This close proximity to the horse at first gives much greater control.

The voice aids (sounds) as opposed to voice commands (words) of the trainer must elicit exact and reliable responses, particularly as the horse goes out onto the larger circle where he is decreasingly under the direct physical control of the trainer. It must be remembered that the requirements of obedience and exactitude for a vaulting horse considerably exceed those of a riding horse receiving longe training. That is why voice aids, rather than voice commands become necessary. If the demands on the horse's attention and obedience are not very great (a riding horse being longed as opposed to a vaulting horse), voice commands may suffice (e.g., "Walk, Trot, Canter, Easy, Out, Slow, etc.") But for the greater demands placed on the vaulting horse, this simply will not do. It must be remembered that it is extremely difficult for the horse to

distinguish one word from another, even with appropriate voice inflection - much the same difficulty that an American would have in trying to distinguish voice commands in Chinese, no matter how carefully the inflections were standardized. Therefore, the thoughtful and empathic trainer adapts his training methods to the perceptual capabilities of the horse. Clucking, trilling of the tongue, smacking of the lips, shushing sounds and booming commands of Whoa! and Hup! are readily distinguishable by the horse and easily differentiated from conversation and general words of encouragement or approval. If the inexperienced trainer insists upon using words as opposed to sounds, it is only fair to the horse to disallow any conversations in the near vicinity and to make no other sounds than the voice commands during the longeing sessions. There are obvious complications when the vaulting lessons begin, as the vaulters must be spoken to.

The vaulters need to realize they do not give commands to the horse. Only the longer gives commands to insure that the horse does not respond to vaulters when they interact while on the horse.

2. Maintaining the Circle

To train the horse to maintain the circle at the end of the line without falling-in, a similar "short line" technique is used, as above. On a 2' line, the trainer pokes the horse on the shoulder with the handle end of the whip, holding him in walk with short sharp actions on the longe line and walking with him so the circle isn't too small, until he side-steps away from the trainer to enlarge the circle. Gradually the line is lengthened until the whip can be turned around and pointed or flicked toward the horse's shoulder for the same result.

For the horse which bears out on the circle (usually rubber necked with a popped outside shoulder) and pulls on the line, the correction is effected with the hand. Most trainers make the mistake in this instance of holding on to the line with all their strength and trying to "hold the horse on the circle," or trying to wiggle the fingers to lighten the horse. Both are nearly always ineffective. The correction must displace the horse's shoulders into the circle by bringing his head so far in (the trainer may have to reel in the line and back up) that his body alignment and direction of movement are changed as he veers sharply across the circle in response to increasingly subtle aids. The line must be released the instant the shoulders are displaced.

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3. Carriage of the Horse

Teaching the horse to carry itself correctly can be especially difficult as many of the horses used for vaulting have already learned bad habits during faulty previous training. The most universally useful correction for a horse which goes "above the bit" (head too high or nose thrust forward), is accomplished automatically through adjustment of the side reins.

The side reins should be extremely long at first so that no matter how high or violently the horse may throw his head, he cannot really tighten the side reins. They should be attached around the girth at mid-shoulder on the horse. Given a little time (and vibrating fingers on the longe line), most horses will stretch down with the head, raising the base of the neck and the back. The side reins should not be raised until the horse is established in this carriage (if ever!). If the low side reins do not induce the horse to stretch after a few days, the side reins (still low) can be shortened **WITH THE UTMOST CAUTION** - 1 or 2 holes at a time, every third day until the horse starts to notice and adjust calmly.

B. Training with Vaulters

When and only when, the horse longes reliably and shows absolutely no trace of panic or resistance to the side reins (at any length!), can it be introduced to the work with vaulters. If this part of the work is pursued in a methodical and progressive fashion, it need not be the great stumbling block that it so often is to the trainers. With the same considerations in mind, the stress to the horse, which so often accompanies this part of the

work, can be much reduced, or dispensed with altogether.

It is at this stage, however, that some prospective vaulting horses flunk out. The trainer's determination to "win" or his desperate need of a vaulting horse right now, must not affect his clearheaded evaluation of the suitability of the horse's temperament for this kind of work. If, after much careful and methodical preparation, the horse still spooks, or worse, kicks, good sense must dictate the abandonment of that particular horse for this purpose.

The byword for this part of the horse's training must be **THOROUGHNESS**. No stone may be unturned to discover any point of sensitivity, ticklishness, balance problem, touch-me-not area, length of fuse, degree of patience, cleverness, treachery, etc., of the horse.

Work should **NEVER** begin at the halt. It should begin with leading at the walk then the jog and if all is well, culminate with work on the longe circle. It is kinder to the horse if all exercises are performed on the horse while he is moving. The trainer's ingenuity should be taxed to probe every limitation and extremity of the horse's physical sensitivity, patience and goodwill.

For specific pointers about introducing the vaulters to the horse, see Appendix 2.