

The Joy of Riding with TTEAM Equipment

By Linda Tellington-Jones

As a child I used to take great pleasure in mounting my horse bareback, far out in the pasture, and galloping home with a wild feeling of abandon, surrounded by a herd of horses. My running rampant made me feel like an Indian on the plains surrounded by buffalo. As a teenager, I had a wonderful mare, Angel, who would jump a three and a half foot course with nothing but a string around her neck.

In 1969 at our Pacific Coast Equestrian Research Farm and School of Horsemanship, we took two stallions and two geldings to Kansas City, Devon and Syracuse and gave demonstrations of jumping without bridles.

In 1975 I first introduced the idea of bridleless riding to Europe at Equitana. With two other riders, I demonstrated jumping a complex course, bareback, without anything on the horses' heads. This display of riding inspired people with a sense of wonder at the ability to ride a horse with seemingly so little control. It was a lovely example of harmony between horse and rider. As a result of the Equitana demonstration, Ursula Bruns developed a method of teaching beginning adults to ride on an oval track, around the outside of a riding arena, with the neckring around their horses' necks. Ursula found it developed a rider's confidence in his seat and trust in the horse without resorting to holding his balance with the reins.

In 1988 we began using the neckring to improve the horse's balance, to encourage impulsion, freedom of movement and make a major shift in a horse's willingness to cooperate. In California, the Foxfield Riding Club had been demonstrating bridleless riding for years with a drill of a dozen or so horses, and the method of bridleless riding became popular in some parts of the country after an article appeared in several horse magazines.

Robyn says she remembers the "flash of inspiration" which prompted us to begin using the bridleless concept for improvement of performance. It was during an Advanced Training at the Equine Inn in New Hampshire. An Arab gelding, who was being ridden at second level dressage, had a serious problem with lack of impulsion and willingness to go forward. He had a slightly ewed neck and a dropped back. On the spur of the moment, while riding this horse and experiencing his unwillingness to go forward, I took a lead rope, put it around his neck, and reached forward from the saddle and removed his bridle.

After ten minutes, this gelding was moving forward with his back up, his neck soft and rounded, his focus forward. He was ridden that way by several people that week and had a dramatic change in attitude and balance. We did a whole advanced TTEAM and riding clinic with an entire group of so-called problem horses. We rode in pairs and fours and even sixes,

working with the neck ring. The joy to the horses and riders is hard to describe.

In the fall of 1989, Claus Erhorn, who rode Justyn Thyme for the Olympic gold medal team in three-day eventing, asked me to spend a couple of days with him working with Justyn. Claus had a feeling that TTEAM might be able to improve performance and reduce stress in the competitive horse. He was interested to see the potential for his own horse. For me, it was fun and inspiring to work with such a great team of horse and rider.

Justyn, thirteen at the time, was fantastic in the cross-country phase, but had never scored well in the dressage phase. He was a little tight in the back and lacked ideal freedom of movement in his shoulders. This is typical for the majority of three-day event horses. My first observation about Justyn as I worked on him was how strong and sound he was in the back and legs. When I saw him under saddle, I suggested getting him to lengthen his neck and extend his head at the walk and trot. However, Claus remarked that lengthening the neck was something that he had not been able to achieve with Justyn.

I rode him about five minutes at the walk/trot/canter with his normal snaffle bridle and then put a rope around his neck and took off the bridle. Within another five minutes, he was trotting with his nose almost as low as his knees, freeing up his shoulders and using himself in a very different way. After fifteen minutes at the walk, trot and canter, I replaced the rope around his neck with the Training rollerbit and was able to get much freer movement and a lengthened from with the bit in his mouth.

Since that time Claus would work Justyn out in the woods with just the rope around his neck. Using the neckring or the rollerbit and adding a PBM saddle pad, Claus found vast improvements in Justyn. A few months later in Burley, England, he won the dressage phase for the first time. Claus attributed his success to the use of the TTEAM work.

Shortly after working with Justyn Thyme, I gave a one-day seminar in England to a group of endurance riders. While working with a very jiggy, rather nervous endurance horse, I took off the bridle and rode him with the lead rope around his neck. Within minutes, he had a flat-footed walk and a much steadier trot. He was much quieter and less nervous.

Since then, after reading about our successes in the Newsletter or learning the concept at clinics, hundreds of TTEAM people have applied the technique. Here are details that we find useful.

LARIAT NECKRING - the TTEAM "Liberty" Neckring

We have a stiff lariat type neckrope that we call the "Liberty Neckring." I turn to the right by tapping the right side of the ring gently on the right shoulder and the left side of the ring

gently and repeatedly against the neck just behind the left ear. This encourages the horse to bend to the right and to move away from the touch of the ring on the left side of his neck. To discourage a horse's tendency to put his head too low or to stop and nibble grass, I move the bottom of the ring forward and lightly tap, lift, and release a few inches short of the throatlatch.

The lariat ring is light, and when not in use, it can rest on the horse's neck in front of the withers.

HALTING YOUR HORSE - Setting the Brakes

The most important aspect of riding without a bridle or a halter is establishing the signal for stopping. In other words, make sure your horse has brakes. Before taking off the bridle, I establish this signal by holding the reins in one hand and moving the neckring between halfway and two-thirds of the way up the horse's neck. Using my voice to whoaaa, I apply a light repeated pull and release. Do not just pull because the horse will tend to lean into it and probably pull against it. Also remember that the neckring is against the windpipe, a sensitive area, so you want to be sure that you signal rather than pull. When a horse refuses to stop, I move the ring up higher, a couple inches short of the throatlatch, and give the same slight pull and release signal. This raises the head, brings the center of gravity back, and as a rule, clearly signals the stop.

PREPARATORY STEPS FOR REMOVING THE BRIDLE

Before taking off the bridle and riding with the neckring only, we suggest the following steps. Work in an enclosed area.

1. Before mounting, put on the neck ring and lead your horse with it to avoid the possibility of the horse shying from the movement of the ring on his neck.
2. Leave the bridle on the horse, mount and ride with the reins in one hand and the neckring in the other. Signal for the halt with the reins and the neckring combined with your voice-c command for whoaaa.
3. In addition, teach your horse that the signal to stop includes a movement that closes your upper thighs on the horse as well as the rein aid, voice and the signal from the ring. Be very aware of keeping the lower leg below the mid calf off of your horse. We have seen several riders get nervous about the idea of riding with the neck ring and unconsciously close the lower leg when they ask the horse to stop. This will not be successful.
4. After your horse responds to stopping, introduce the concept of turning by using the neck

ring along with the rein aid. Use the neckring as described earlier in this article.

In the beginning, use two hands on the lariat neckring to turn. To turn right, ask with a little lift out to the right with the right side of the ring and bring the left side of the loop against the neck. At the same time, bend your horse around you leg with the inside mid-calf. Bring the outside leg back a few inches and, with an active vibrating motion, maintain the forward movement. In a very few minutes, most horses get the idea of t = turning easily with this softer ring. Then you can maneuver with only one hand. This is a particularly easy way to teach your horse to neck-rein.

5. Tie a knot in your reins and drop them on the neck. Use the neck ring, voice aids and upper thigh to stop and to turn.

We suggest that you take one more precautionary step before removing the bridle. Dismount. Tie one of the 21' driving ropes around the horse's neck, just behind the ears, with a non-slip knot. (We use only a bowline knot.) Remove the bridle and put a double half-hitch over the horse's nose. Remount. Have an assistant lead the horse by using the rope and a TEAM wand.

The horse, at this stage, should have been prepared with the ground exercises and would be clear about stopping from a signal of a light tap on the chest the end of the wand.

As another safety measure, have your assistant walk about six feet to the side, still using the rope and wand, until you are clear about your signals to stop and turn. It is during this step that we have seen riders, in a nervous reflex, clamp their lower legs. Ask your assistant to observe if you close your lower legs on your horse when you signal the stop.

When your horse responds consistently, have your assistant remove the half hitches from the nose and walk six to eight feet away, still holding the rope tied around the neck. Usually these steps can be accomplished in ten to fifteen minutes. If you feel confident and your horse is listening, you can remove the rope and continue on your own. I do a lot of serpentines, and when the horse is clearly listening at the walk, I introduce the trot, usually on a circle, and make a lots of transitions to the walk and halt. I do not recommend cantering until you and your horse have very definite signals at the walk and trot.

If you do not have anyone to help you, or still feel unsure about riding without any connection to the horse's head, use a Lindell or a halter with reins attached in place of a bit. You can leave the reins loose and use just the neckring, but you know that the reins are available. Removing the bit will change your horse's balance, relax him and help free-up movement. Some people may never feel safe about removing everything from a horse's head, but in this way, can still benefit from using the neckring.

7. The wand comes in very handy when you are riding with the neckring. Touch the horse on the side of the neck with the wand to reinforce the signal to turn. Touch him on the chest to stop. Stroke his sides and hindquarters to keep his confidence and your connection. If your horse is afraid of the wand, you have not done enough preparation to be riding with only a neckring. We find that stroking a nervous horse with the wand steadies him in a surprisingly short time.

It has been amazing over the past three years to see how many horses have changed and how many riders have lightened up by using the neckring training. Several years ago in a Colorado clinic, I worked a lower level dressage horse that was said to be dangerous. It was thought that he literally would fall down if the rider didn't hold him up. He could not be ridden forward no matter how much the rider "drove" him with seat and legs. At the end of the first session of the neckring riding, this horse was doing an extended trot, for the first time ever, with wonderful elevation and absolutely no sign of stumbling or falling down.

I have seen similar improvements in jumpers. Two years ago, I worked on a wonderful mare in Finland who was a very successful Grand Prix jumper. However, she had lost some of her scopiness. Her head set was "stuck" on the vertical and she wasn't using her head and neck enough. I suggested that the rider take off the bridle and ride with only the neck ring. Within six months, he won the jumper championship in Finland for the first time with this mare. As surprising as the improvement in top performance horses is the improvement of horses who are high headed, ewe-necked and unwilling to go forward.

If you haven't tried this neckring training technique, consider giving yourself and your horse the pleasure of this freedom and harmony. It's like speaking a new language with your horse.

THE BALANCE REIN

Another tool effective in rounding, steadying and balancing your horse is the Balance Rein. We use a 3/8" thick, 7'2" rope or a leather strap as a Balance Rein. It is used in conjunction with the snaffle rein. With the TEAM training bit that has two reins, it is combined with the top rein (or snaffle). The effects are usually marked immediately. Many times a rider tends to ride a particular horse off the bit or between the feet and hands. For horses who tend to come above the bit or to go behind the vertical, the combination of the snaffle rein and the Balance Rein, used approximately 50-50, collects the horse while keeping him in a state of balance. This technique effectively brings the back up and lengthens the neck so that horses who suck back or shorten their necks when ridden on contact, or under collection, no longer do so.

Horses who tend to pull on the bit stop pulling in a matter of minutes when they feel the contact around the base of the neck. In Germany, a twelve-year-old girl brought her sister's

16.2 hand Trakehner mare to a weeklong clinic to see if she could get any help. The mare would not walk; she jiggled or trotted flat out and was held back only with all the strength this rider had. When the mare broke into a gallop, the twelve year old completely lost control.

Because this rider was pulling on the mare's mouth for control, the horse shortened her neck, and her back became too sensitive. We added a PBM pad for protection and a Balance Rein for balance. In two 2 hour sessions the mare improved greatly. I had the rider practice the shortened walk that we call a half-walk. I had her practice slow, posting trots with a pressure of about 60% on the Balance Rein and 40% on the bit. The change in the mare was really exciting to see; and the rider was able to ride her home, a mile from the stable, with complete control and without hanging on her mouth.

Another difference of the Balance Rein is that it sits low on the chest, at the base of the horse's neck, whereas the lariat is moved up the horse's neck for the signal to stop. The Balance Rein at the base of the neck helps the horse to round his neck. Because of this, the conformation and carriage of ewe-necked horses can be changed. Interestingly enough, this softness and roundness in ewe-necked horses carries over from the use of the Balance Rein to the use of the lariat neck ring.

We have found the Balance Rein or the lariat neckring extremely useful for starting young horses. In combination with the Lindel and with a helper leading the horse, we use it the very first time the horse is ridden. During the following lessons, as the horse learns to work without a leader, we find that the horse stops more easily and in balance when we use the combined signal of the Lindel and the Balance Rein or lariat neckring. The Balance Rein or lariat ring also prevent the common problem of "rooting" with the nose that is so often seen with newly started horses. The same principles apply for unaware horses who walk through signals. They learn to listen, to pay attention to their riders and to stop IN BALANCE.

I consider the development of this combination of Balance Rein/snaffle rein revolutionary in its effects on a horse's mental, emotional and physical balance.

THE PROMISE ROPE

In the August '91 week-long training in New Mexico, we brain stormed for a name for the training aid that we use to improve a horse's engagement of the hindquarters and use of the back. We have found that the Body Rope (reference to Glossary if this is first time it's mentioned.) significantly influences the self-confidence and balance of a horse or a dog. We use the Body Rope during groundwork with animals who are afraid of noises behind them or other animals coming up from behind or who, in the case of horses, tend to kick. We find that the rope around the body eliminates these reactions because the animals are more confident

and steady.

Two years ago in Austria, TTEAM member Maria Meyer bought a lovely intermediary dressage prospect at the Verden auction sale in northern Germany. She did a great deal of ground exercises with him to improve his habit of shying and to redirect his over-exuberance, but under saddle she was challenged by his habit of spinning to the left and dropping his rider to the ground.

Maria improvised a Body Rope for riding. She used a Balance Rein on the neck. She then fastened a rope from each stirrup-keeper of the saddle flaps and knotted the ends so that the knot hung about eight inches above the hocks. This adapted Body Rope stopped his spinning and helped him focus.

Since then we have used a rope like this on many horse. We noticed improvement in horses who tended to be strung-out, to be poorly coordinated or disunited at the canter.

While trying to name this training aid, somebody said: "Well, it improves engagement and if someone is engaged then they are promised. So this is a Promise Rope for engagement." The humor of the name seems to increase a person's willingness to try it.

We use two seven and half foot Balance Reins tied together. You could take just as easily a fifteen foot, 3/8" thick rope and tie a knot in the middle so that there is a little extra weight above the hocks. We have discovered that some horses engage more with the rope set about eight inches above the hocks and other horses are better with the rope set above the top of the gaskin.

There is a major caution here. Do not use this Promise Rope without first preparing your horse from the ground. With the Body Rope on, walk and trot until you see that your horse has no fear or concern about the ropes around the hocks. Otherwise you could have a rodeo ride or your horse could become frightened and bolt.

To introduce the Promise Rope to a horse who is reasonable, I fasten the rope, with a release knot, to the right side (on the stirrup-keeper or on the billet strap under the saddle flap). I bring the rope around the hindquarters and hold it at the left side while I lead the horse forward. It is easier to have an assistant lead the horse with the reins off of the neck, but you can do it alone

Once I see that the horse is okay with the rope, I slide the end of the rope through the stirrup-keeper on the left flap of the saddle (or the back billet strap) and walk and trot with the rope held there. After a few minutes, I tie a quick release knot on the left side and lead the horse for another two or three minutes. After mounting, I walk and halt a few times to make sure that

the horse is not nervous with a rider in the saddle and the Promise Rope above the hocks.

After a cautious preparation, I think you will find some really useful improvements in most horses.

NOTE: TTEAM is an acronym of "Tellington TTouch Equine Awareness Method." Since 2009 when this article was written, Linda decided to use a brand name for all the facets of the TTouch organization. Currently, that is Tellington TTouch.