

Lunging Troubles

By Marie Hoffman

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I met Marcy at a 5 day TT.E.A.M. clinic. She had a wonderful gray gelding called Dandy. She had a problem with him, when ever anyone tried to lunge him he would go around a few times then bolt away. No one had been able to hold on to him when he bolted away.

Dandy was a calm riding horse, but there were times Marcy wanted to give him some exercise by lunging and that was impossible. During the week at the clinic before I worked with him, we (the other participants and myself) discovered several things. He had been trained by a "round pen method". He would face you at all times. He felt that he was not safe anywhere but facing the handler. He became very nervous when he was asked to move any distance away from the handlers. He acted in a way that indicated to us that he learned he was "bad", as though he would be punished if he stayed away from the handler. Marcy had owned him for about a year and he was like that when she purchased him.

During the course of the clinic, he was lead by several of the participants in the many TT.E.A.M. leading positions. The ones that were particularly useful for him was the Homing Pigeon and Dolphins Flickering Through the Waves. Dolphins Flickering Through the Waves has the handler leading in the Grace of the Cheetah (one person Homing Pigeon). The leader switches hand, wand and lead. Then moving away from the horse, the handler uses the wand to remind the horse to stay away. The wand is used to signal the horse on the croup, withers, top of neck 4 inches behind the ears, and on the halter noseband/chain by the halter and/or softly the muzzle. The idea is to be active with the wand rather than hard. The four places the wand signals the horse to stay away help to keep the horse parallel to the leader but at a specific distance. Both positions helped Dandy gain confidence while he was walking several feet away yet parallel to the handlers.

The morning before the fourth day of the clinic started, I gave Dandy and Marcy a lesson on lunging. I set up the situation to be successful. I have shoulders that easily dislocate and Marcy also has bad shoulders. So Dandy could not hurt either of us should he bolt off, I put a chain on him in this manner.

Facing Dandy, I ran a chain through the near ring going from my right to left threading the snap down like diving through a ring into water. I then ran the chain through his mouth like a bit and up through the other lower ring on his off side. I then snapped the chain to itself under his chin. The halter has to be adjusted high enough that the horse's lips cannot be pinched between the chain and the halter ring. I made sure when it tightened, that as soon as he quit pulling against it, it would easily and quickly loosen. I made sure the chain was tight enough it would not pull out from under his chin should he pull directly back away from me. I attached the lunge line to the dangling end of the chain.

I asked Dandy to walk around me on the lunge. He did okay and so we asked for a trot. He went around at a trot a few times. He was tense but obedient. Marcy and her husband commented that they had never seen him go more than six times around before he bolted off. I felt him slightly pull toward the middle of the arena toward the gate. I asked him to speed up before he got to that spot so I could keep his mind on me instead of the gate. This worked for a few more times around. Then he bolted. He took off directly away from the handler. I was able to hold him with the chain set up the way it was using both hands on the lunge line. He punished himself. I did not jerk on the line I only held it as soon as he stopped, I released all pressure on the line.

I calmly went up to him because now he was very tense. I proceeded to lunge him again as if nothing had happened. I realized working him he thought he was in deep trouble if he stayed out on the circle. His previous training taught him to always face his handler. I would not let him come toward me so he could not do what he thought he was supposed to do. So he totally went into his instinctive state of flight, bolting to flee the perceived danger, me. The only way to install confidence in Dandy was by staying calm and reassuring him. He could then relax out of his instinctive state and could think again and learn what I wanted. He needed to realize that if he became scared and made a mistake I would not punish him.

Dandy was a very smart horse. With the chain set up through his mouth, he quickly realized that when he went to pull away or bolt the harder he did it the more uncomfortable he was. He tried to bolted away hard only once. Two more times he tested it. One more time with me, and once with Marcy. Marcy was thrilled. She was able to hold him while he lunged and could now build his confidence back up on the end of the lunge line. It would take time to build up his confidence. The initial training a horse has is his foundation for all else he learns. Changing that foundation usually takes time.

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Dandy was doing so well I told Marcy that after a couple of more lunging sessions when Dandy did not try to bolt off, she could take the chain out of his mouth.

I instructed her to run a chain through the near ring going from my right to left threading the snap down like diving through a ring into water. Then do the same on the off lower ring of his halter threading the chain through the first ring. Then instead of going up to the ring by the throatlatch like she would when she normally put the chain on for leading, she went under his chin groove. She then snapped the chain to itself so it encircled his muzzle. I showed her how to make sure it was loose enough he had several fingers slack and tight enough that if she pulled the line directly in front of him it would not slip out from under his chin. With the TT.E.A.M. work and his one lunging session with me, neither Marcy nor I anticipated how fast he would change. Marcy was able to take the chain out of his mouth after two more lunging sessions. He never tried to bolt away again after that first session. He realized that bolting away no longer gave him the release of pressure he was looking for. Instead he found that he made himself more uncomfortable in his attempts to bolt away. More importantly, because he was trained with understanding and with steps he could accept, first with the TT.E.A.M. leading positions and then lunging, Dandy built up his confidence to where he no longer felt the need to "Flee" to get away from his handler when he couldn't be facing her/him. With his added confidence to look to his handler for direction from a distance, lunging was no longer traumatic for Dandy. Thus he was able to be in his thinking state instead of his instinctive state of flight. This enabled him to learn quickly and retain what was taught instead of moving around in a circle in a state of panic.

Some might think that the chain through his mouth would be enough to stop this unwanted behavior. I probably would as long as you have the chain in his mouth, but he would still have the desire to bolt away. Because he no longer wanted to escape, Marcy was able to lunge him with a milder arrangement of the chain. Eventually Marcy will be able to lunge him without the chain. The TT.E.A.M. leading exercises are what enabled Dandy to LEARN and accept that he was safe when he was worked at a distance away from his handler, thus making lunging enjoyable for both Dandy and Marcy. Finding the underlying problem, in this case fear and initial training. Resolve that problem. Then problem behavior often disappears forever, as in this case bolting on the lunge.