

Lunging and the lunge Vaulting book - Blog 07 - Chapter 07

As mentioned in my introduction, my convictions about the best method of training a horse on the lunge line have changed somewhat over the past years. The main reason being that I do not agree with the ways most trainers use side-reins when lunging their horse. Also, sticking to one circle must be very boring to the horse – and in my opinion there can be no efficient learning going on, when the pupil is bored.

The use of side-reins:

However, as side reins are required for vaulting to prevent the horse from stretching his head down and losing the vaulters who are performing on his neck, I will repeat the chapter from the Handbook here as it was. Even then I stated that I disagree with fixing the lunge over the horse's head as shown at the bottom of page 41, as it is a very harsh way of giving an aid to the horse. If your horse is so unwilling to cooperate that hard aids like this are needed, then you are doing something wrong!! Please go to the H.E.M. Blogs and learn to motivate your beast in a better way. And go to the Lunge Blogs and learn to get him interested in games he might learn to like! In my Book "From Leading to Liberty" it is also Chapter 7 – full of lunging games! My horses loved them, so give them a try.

Forcing your horse into the correct "dressage position" with side-reins is as wrong as it is ineffective. Side-reins **cannot** collect a horse! And collection is most necessary in vaulting, if this sport is to be a healthy occupation for the horse. **Collection**, i.e. the arching upward of the horse's back, to bring the hind quarters more under his gravity point to better carry weight, must be learned under the rider. But in my book "From Leading to Liberty" there is also a whole chapter (Chapter 5, **Mobilisation**) dedicated to gymnastic games for your horse to prepare him for correct muscle use and body position. These Learning Games are very beneficial to your horse! He must be healthy to carry up to three persons on his back in canter!!

The use of the whip:

Learn to be really precise with your whip movements – the very long lash of our vaulting whips are a challenge for any beginner. Do the recommended pre-exercises (see the Lunge Blog) with a traffic cone, so as to not drive your horse mad with your first attempts. Once you are proficient, you should be able to touch your horse on the croup as light as a fly. Or at the hind legs without lassoing your horse or getting entangled in his tail – woe to you, if such things happen, while your vaulters are in a high exercise!

Which hand to perform on:

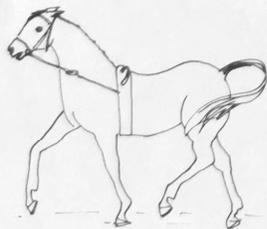
You will learn from the publications dealing with the vaulting competition rules applicable to your area/country/ or planned competition, whether your vaulters must perform on both the right and the left hand. **The rules have changed!** And much better for the horse too, much less one-sided strain for his legs. In any case, at home you should train both sides fairly evenly, for your horse's health as well as your vaulters' mental and physical flexibility.

7 *Lunging and the lunger*

Horses are worked on a lunge for various reasons: to learn certain things before being ridden, to learn or re-learn things while being ridden, to be exercised in ‘horse gymnastics’, to relax from being ridden – or to be vaulted on. Even if you have learned how to lunge a horse, you have to realize that lunging for vaulting is different in its requirements from lunging a horse as a training preparation for riding. In this chapter we assume the lunger to be a person with expertise, so we only have to point out the particularities applicable to vaulting.

Good lunging is an art in itself. It does not mean hanging on to a horse on a rope, so he does not run away! It is a way of controlling the horse *and* giving aids and commands to him, to ensure that the horse properly uses himself, stays attentive and understands and supports the activity carried out – on his back in the case of vaulting. Horses can be lunged with one or two lunge lines, and you may have seen films of the amazing feats the Lipizzaner horses perform on a lunge in the Vienna Royal Academy of Riding – exercises as difficult as piaffes and caprioles!

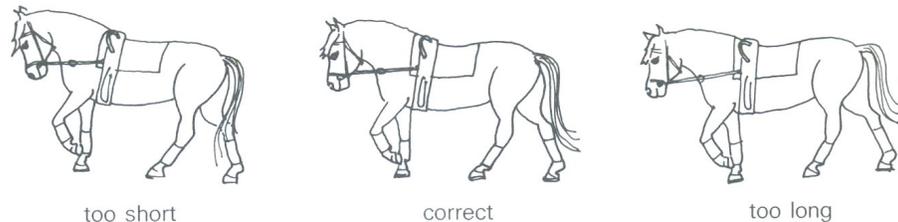
It is very important to remember that a horse expresses his state of mind in the way he uses his body, and that he can only use his body in an optimal way if he feels at ease in his mind. So wrong lunging can do great damage to your horse. For example, if a horse gets excited or frightened, he will swing up neck, head and tail steeply and cramp up his back muscles – the psychological tension leads to physical tension, which in turn will lead to pain in his back, especially when carrying three persons in canter!



Therefore it must always be wrong to try and force obedience by letting a horse run on the lunge until exhausted, or indeed train him in any way which challenges the horse's resistance and unwillingness to work. Tolerance and harmony with the horse is what the lunger must strive for, and this book can of course only touch the tip of the iceberg in terms of what a good lunger should know. There is ample literature available to study it in more depth.

A bad lunger, especially with a young horse, can do as much damage to him as a bad rider on his back. The basis of good lunge training consists in trust, attentiveness, willingness to work and a quiet relaxed atmosphere. If the lunge line is hanging in the sand, the lunger pulls back his arm to avoid stepping on it or guides it over his head to avoid turning in the circle, the horse can clearly not be on the aids.

First the equipment must be in order and fitted correctly: side reins must neither be too long (then they are useless) nor too short (this ruins the horse's ability to use good strides). They should be fitted so the horse's head is positioned just in front of the vertical, and if necessary for the bending of the horse on the circle line, the inner side rein will be shortened by one hole.

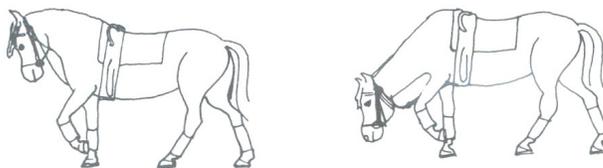


Side reins

For vaulting competitions, only side reins fastened from the bit to the surcingle as shown in the illustration are permissible. However these are by many people not considered the best solution for training. The apparent softness of the rubber rings inserted in these side reins is deceptive. The horse is really very fixed in his head's position in between them and pulls himself in his mouth when he moves his head up or down. So he will try

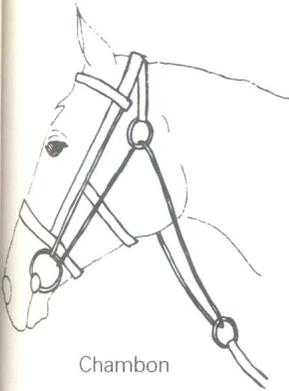
to avoid this ‘punishment’ and keep his head rather rigid, which again leads to cramped back musculature. If he tries to relax his neck and stretch downward, he has to do that in a backwards motion (to avoid pulling on the bit), which in turn hinders the shoulders and front legs from stepping out to the front as desired. But as you are trying to encourage your horse with the whip to use his hind legs to ‘step under’ as much as possible, his back results in a restrained, stressed position, and cannot swing with the motion as it should. Especially for young horses it is essential that they be able to stretch their neck downwards and to the front, as only like this can he develop his back musculature correctly.

Any kind of running, looped reins, where the horse can stretch downward and forward is preferable, and should at least be used when the horse is worked on the lunge without vaulters. The worst mistake in lunging is to induce the horse to ‘refuse’ his back – that is carry his head high and make a hollow back. Particularly in vaulting, where we rely so heavily on industrious ‘stepping under’ of the hind legs, and need strong back muscles for the load of two to three vaulters, correct training to develop this muscle strength and correct body posture in the horse is essential.



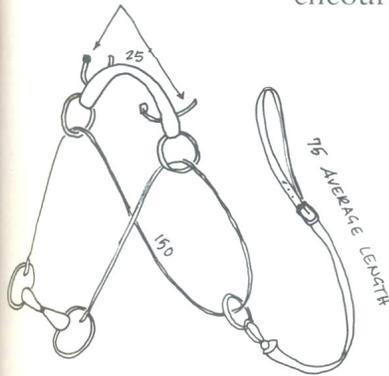
Effect of the chambon

For training a horse on the lunge we therefore recommend lunging with a chambon. As you can see in the illustrations, the basic idea behind this method is this: if the horse assumes the wrong body posture, that is, high head and hollow back, he punishes himself in the mouth and also feels a more or less strong pressure directly behind his ears. As soon as he starts to move his neck and head downward–forward, the connecting rein (which passes from the bottom of the surcingle in between



Chambon

the front legs to the head) becomes looser, and pressure on the head as well as in the mouth vanishes – the horse rewards himself for doing the right thing. Furthermore, most horses have the tendency to look down (which is positive for this stretching motion) when a strap comes up to the bridle from the belly, whereas sidereins flapping at the side of their head irritate them and lead to head-shaking and further tendencies to try and escape upwards. Working with a chambon leads to the desired posture by the horse correcting himself. The lunge may then concentrate on keeping him moving forward in an industrious gait with clean rhythm between the guiding hand and the encouraging whip.



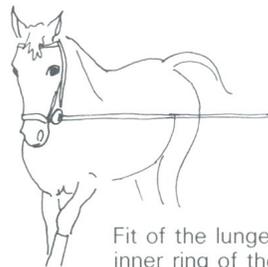
Chambon: how to attach it

Later in vaulting performances we are not keen on the horse stretching down so steeply, as we need the support of a level neck for many exercises. But remember that your horse will become unsuitable if he takes to refusing his back, as this leads to pain and therefore unwillingness to cooperate. By trying to ‘duck away from under the pain’ a horse can also become so disjointed that the hind legs literally don’t know any more what the front ones are doing, because the connecting back is missing. This way it is impossible to achieve a good canter with clean rhythm and a strong, freely swinging back, which is essential for vaulting, and your horse would be unhealthy and unhappy.

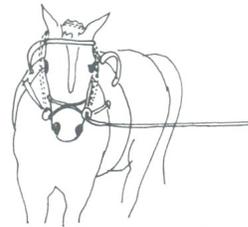


For performance a level neck

In vaulting we only use one lunge line, fitted into the inside ring of the bridle or passed through the inside

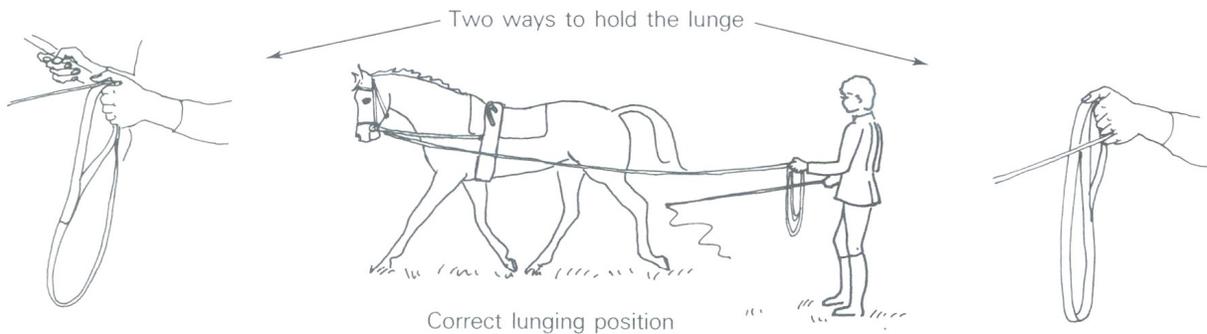


Fit of the lunge inner ring of the bit

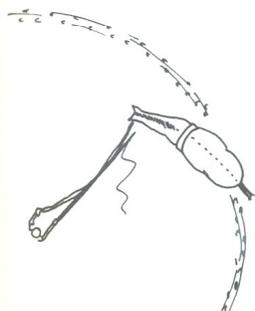


or over the head and into outer ring of bit

ring of the bit. Another way to affix the lunge, which is mentioned in almost all lunging literature, is to pass it through the inner ring over the head of the horse into the outer ring. An aid given over this kind of connection can be extremely harsh and *it is not recommended in the hands of an inexperienced lunger!* (Keep in mind that the horse has a very vulnerable spot at the poll; hence we protect him there when travelling). It is generally applied for truly spoiled horses where strong corrections are warranted, and the lunger can actually throw a horse down to the ground with a strong pull when the lunge is passed over the head like this! When used by the knowledgeable lunger this *can* enhance the effectiveness of the aid, as the pull of the lunge also presses on the top of the horse's head in the right direction for downward extension. It is *not* recommended for young horses, as a strong divergence from the circle line will have a powerful leverage effect of the lunge, through which the rings of the bit are pulled up. This might result in the horse's resistance and a 'hard mouth'. The lunge line should be about 7 metres long, so that if your horse goes on the prescribed circle of 6.5 metres, you will end up with one or two loops of lunge left in your hand.



A horse not yet introduced to lunging will have to be led out onto the circle by a helper, and if you do this calmly, the horse will almost always understand this lesson within the first ten minutes. Later, you let the horse move away from you, egging



Keep the horse
out with voice and
whip

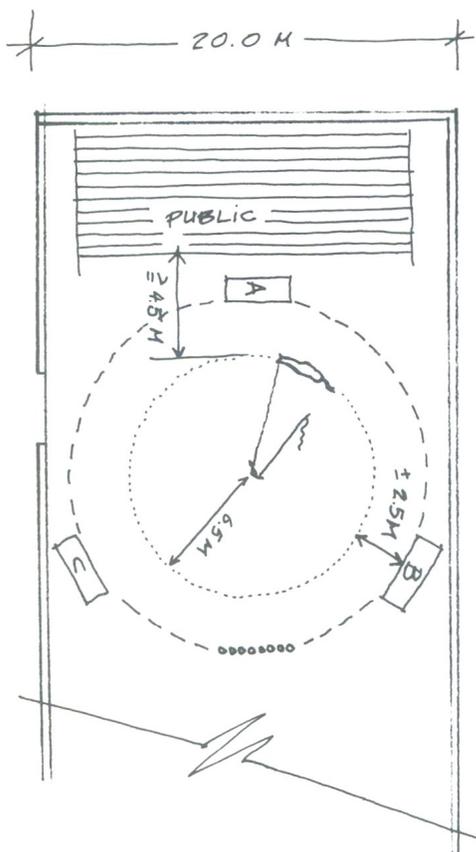
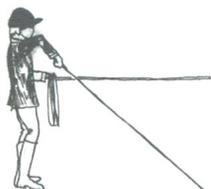
him on gently with the whip from behind and lengthening the lunge loop by loop until the horse has reached the desired circle diameter. Train your horse right from the start always to use the whole length of line given to him and to hold soft contact with the guiding hand. Be as gentle as possible with your aids to the bit to keep your horse 'soft' in the mouth and to not contradict the lesson, which the horse is teaching himself over the aid of the chambon. Do not ever let your horse come in toward you: anticipate this and be ready to point the whip to his head to prevent him, or lightly throw the lunge in a wave-like motion toward him. Also, always make him halt on the track of this circle, when the lesson is finished. Never give him his reward when he comes into the centre for it!

If you are training a young horse, which has the tendency to pull on the lunge, try to use a lunging cavesson (which must be correctly fitted) and get this bad habit out of him by giving him a good yank on the nose, before you use a lunge hooked into the ring of the bridle. A good vaulting horse must be able and willing to react to very slight aids on the lunge (no yanking is advisable when you have three vaulters in a high exercise!) and this cannot be achieved, if wrong lunge training has made him hard in the mouth.

If your inexperienced horse constantly pulls to the outside, start lunging him in one corner of the ring, or put visual barriers around. Don't shorten the inner side rein too much! The horse must not be bent in his neck more than the curve of the circle. If he pulls in combination with running away, it might mean that he is afraid of the whip: regain his confidence by calming him with your voice, with half-halts and patience. If he starts to canter on the wrong lead or disunited, he is still tense (not properly warmed up) or simply so young that he still has problems sorting out his legs. If he constantly falls into canter on the wrong lead, lunge him in a corner and step towards the wall, when giving the command to canter. This will make him lean toward the middle, and he will use the correct legs! Check the

adjustment of the side reins (and don't forget to re-adjust, when switching sides).

Take care to explain to your club that the lunger must be experienced, as he carries part of the responsibility for the success of the exercises performed, and consistent. The vaulting horse should be trained to the voice, as the aids on the lunge should be minimal and the whip only *shown* to the horse, but never 'used'. Therefore the vocal commands used should always be the same. Rather than using words to give those commands it is advisable to use sounds, such as clicking the tongue, because during a vaulting lesson a lot of talking is going on anyway, and it takes a smart horse to figure out which words are meant for him.

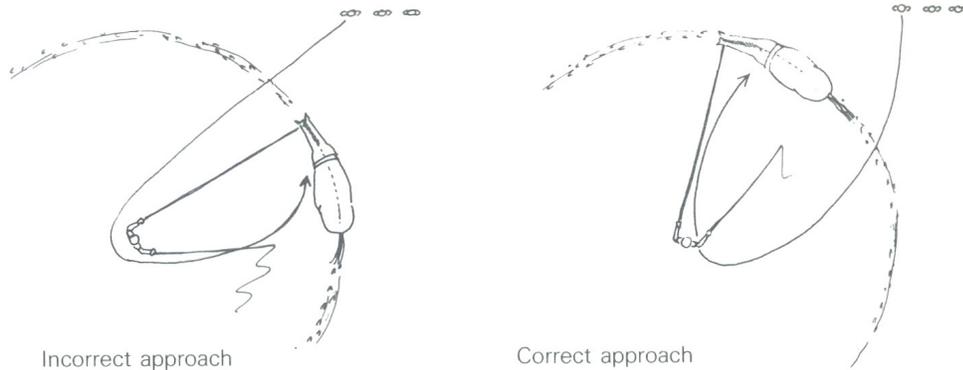


Later, in competition, 'word' commands are frowned upon anyhow. Try not to use the whip for punishment with a vaulting horse! If he learns to fear it, he will eye it nervously all through the performance and charge off every time you move it. And that means every time you have to let a vaulter through the 'gate'! If he has had bad experiences like that, make sure you always keep the whip pointed to the ground when letting vaulters through.

The circle must be regular, which can only be achieved if the lunger does not walk around and follow the horse. (Remember that in competitions the lunger also gets marked as part of the team.) The lunger's left arm (because you are vaulting on the left lead), which holds the end of the lunge in neat folds, should hang relaxed at his side, with the lower arm forming a right angle to the upper. The right hand holds the whip, which should point at the horse's hind-quarters. With most horses you have to take care to open the 'gate' for the vaulter slowly, by lifting your elbow but pointing the whip to the

ground, so the horse does not mistake your movement as a command directed toward him.

The vaulter then approaches the horse, after passing under the lunge's 'gate', along the lunge. The correct way to approach will be described under the basic exercises. The way to and from the horse, back to the group, must always be as shown in the illustration below.



Incorrect approach

Correct approach

Never allow a child to run in front of the lunge, and also don't let them approach the horse via hindquarters. Don't let them wave their arms as they run – not only do they have to learn how to behave correctly, you also have to make it clear to your horse what to expect. If the children and the lunge behave in a very consistent manner, the horse will pick up what is expected of him all the faster. *And* he will learn to react to *unexpected* situations – namely falls of the children. A good vaulting horse learns to help avoid accidents, but in order to do so, he must be able to recognize that what *is* happening *is* an unusual situation.

As mentioned before, the correct circle for vaulting has a 6.5 m radius. If your stable has jumps positioned in the ring permanently, as is the case in many hunter–jumper stables, it will be quite hard for you to fit in the correct size of your circle. Of course the horse will get used to the distance to the lunge, and if you train on a circle which is too small, it will later be hard to force him out to the correct path in competitions. Try to

explain to the stable management, how important it is to use the correct length of lunge and that around this 13 m circle you need an additional 2 m space as safety area for falls. Centrifugal force is not to be trifled with when you jump off at canter and you don't want your vaulters to smack into walls or jumps if they come off a bit out of control!

The lunger should turn on the same spot in the centre of that circle. If the horse 'falls in', he waves the whip in front of his face and uses his voice to direct him back to where he belongs. Pulling the left arm back or retreating, when the lunge goes slack, is a mistake. The horse draws conclusions out of the lunger's behaviour! He might just think it is his job to drive you around the ring in ever such neat spirals. . . . When he pulls, it is not the lunger's job to follow; don't 'herd' him around the show ring! In a freshly raked ring there should ideally be only one track with the lunger's footprint in the centre. (In competitions this centre may be marked for the lunger and he must stand on the mark.)

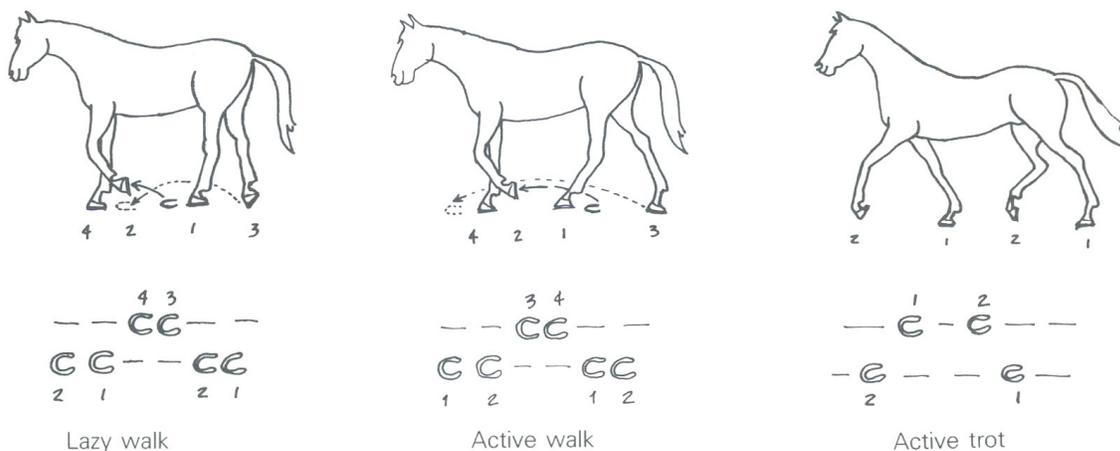
For effective training of your vaulters, it is always preferable to have a lunger who is *not* the trainer at the same time, although I realize that often vaulting still plays such a minor role among the equestrian disciplines that the owners of the stables, or the club, don't deem this extra employee necessary. As I pointed out before, the trainer should be able to instil confidence in the young vaulters by walking along and supporting them. As soon as that is not necessary any more, the children will get into more difficult and complex exercises, because they want to do doubles and triples. The compulsory exercises alone lose their attraction very soon (for little children the basic exercises do not yet take on the importance that they later have for competitors) and many of the single kur exercises which exist are still too hard for them, whereas doubles are fun (you work with a friend) and seem flashy. However, in their first experiences as doubles, they will need your support again. Later they get into triples and ever greater height, and into somersaults, saltos and

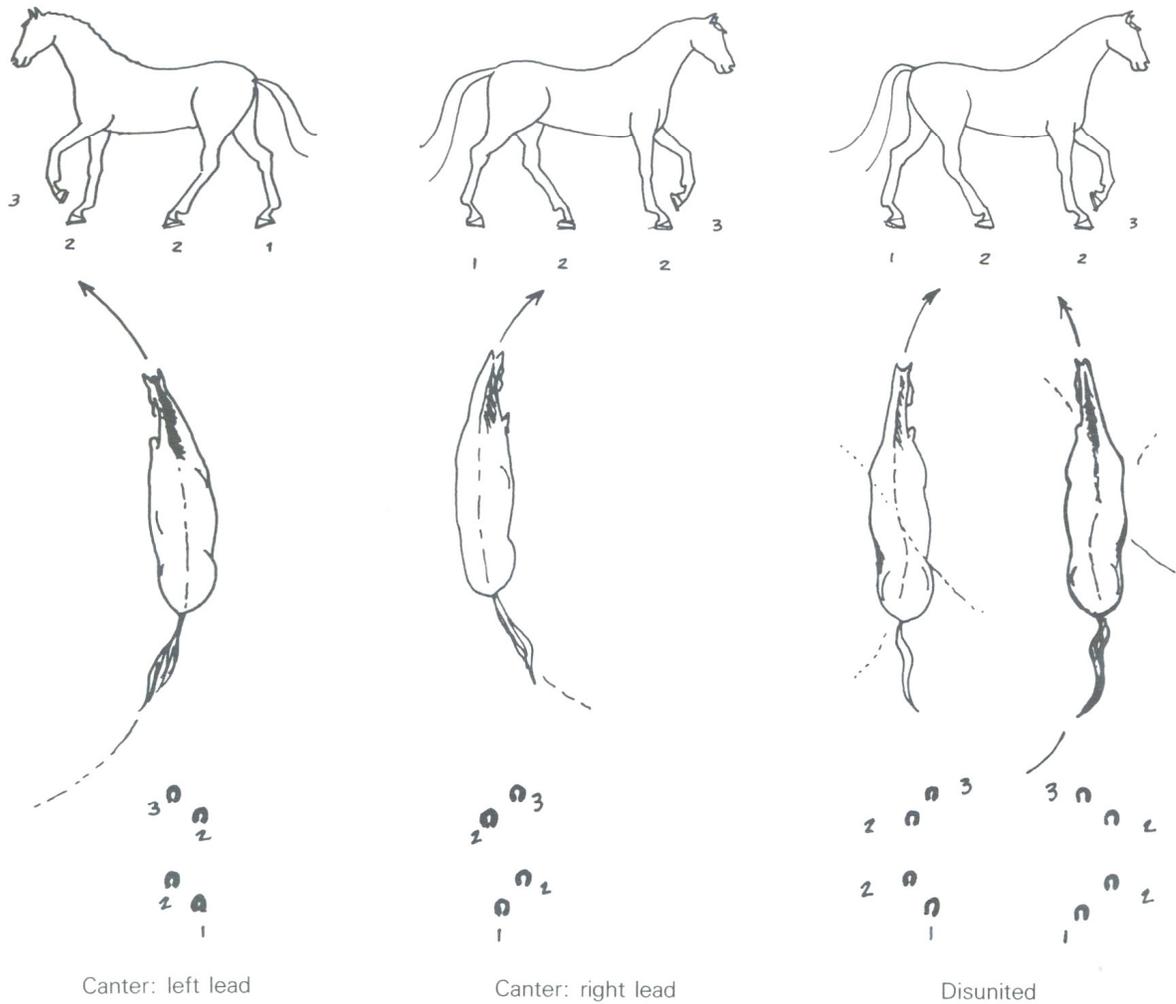
so on, and again you will support them.

The lunge warms up your horse on the right lead, then switches to the left lead for vaulting. A vaulting horse should never be allowed to run out of control, not even in the warm-up period. The horse must get a chance to loosen up, before the vaulting session begins, and for this you should set aside about ten to fifteen minutes. The horse will go in a strong and attentive walk as well as trot, at first without the side reins fastened. The lunge checks for soundness and whether the horse's back begins to swing, as he loosens up. At the end let him canter a few rounds, still with loose side reins. The lunge sets the pace, which will be regular and collected at all times. While the whip drives the horse forward, frequent soft half-halts stimulate him to seek contact with side reins and the lunge.

Correct lunging should achieve that the horse willingly seeks this contact and then moves diligently, in a relaxed and rhythmically even way. He will need this attentiveness and uncramped attitude and posture to counter-balance the difficult double and triple exercises. Apart from good balance, the following are the goal of correct lunging:

- *Rhythm:* Walk is a four-beat stride. When the horse moves in an awake and active way, the hind feet should step over the track of the front hooves. Trot is a two-beat stride: outside





Canter: left lead

Canter: right lead

Disunited

front and inside hind leg (and vice versa) are moving in a parallel and simultaneous motion and the horse's back swings up and down evenly. Canter is a three-beat rhythm, and it should be a clean three-beat! Many vaulting horses show some kind of 'tranter', where the front feet canter, while the rear trots. This is often a sign of an aching back! Canter is the only stride with a 'lead', i.e. the inner front leg must reach forward further than the outside one. If this is not the case, the horse is 'on the wrong lead' and can't balance himself

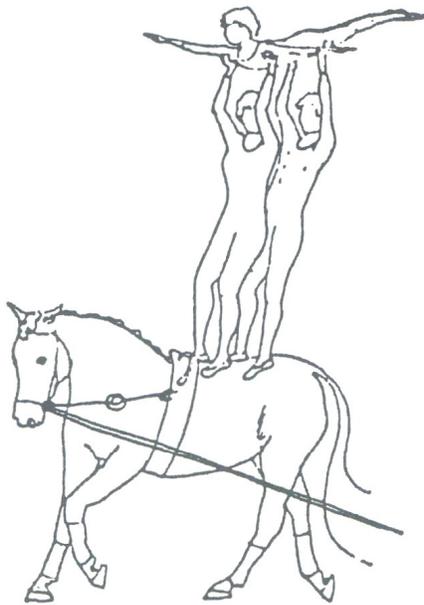
around the corner – let alone with several vaulters on his back. He may actually fall over. By ‘disunited’ canter we mean that the front feet are on a different lead from the hindquarters, obviously an unbalanced motion, which results in a wiggly line of the horse’s spine. This is bad for the horse and difficult for the vaulters – if a horse becomes disunited, the lunger must immediately bring him back to trot and start the canter anew.

- *Relaxed motion:* By this we mean that the horse has a loosely swinging back, with nicely carried tail and neck extending forward–downward. Real balance and getting to be one with the horse can only be achieved by the vaulter if the horse has reached this degree of looseness.
- *Contact:* By this we mean that there is a constant and even connection between lunger and the horse’s mouth, via the side reins and the lunge.
- *Animation:* We want to see energetic, but smooth movement in the horse, while keeping the even rhythm. Only then can a vaulter make the best use of the momentum of the canter stride.
- *Alignment:* The horse must be bent on the line of the circle, so his hind feet step into the tracks of the front ones. If the horse throws his hind feet further out, beyond the circle track of the front, it becomes very difficult for the vaulter to keep his balance and align his gravity point with the one of the horse.
- *Collection:* The opposite of a horse ‘falling apart’. It means that the hind feet step under, reaching for the front, so that the horse thus carries most of his weight (because he jumps under his own gravity point) on the hindquarters. Especially when carrying up to three vaulters on his back, this is very important to relieve his front legs, where he will otherwise soon show fatigue. Collection is achieved through urging the horse on to

animated strides with the whip, while restraining him with soft half-halts over the lunge. To know which aid is necessary at which moment, the lunger must constantly observe the horse's stride.

A good lunger, especially if you don't own the dream vaulting horse, must therefore be able to concentrate on the pace all the time. Often he will constantly have to correct the horse, to keep it from speeding up or slowing down or falling into trot...all of these things can really kill a vaulting exercise! The more difficult the exercises become, the more the lunger has to be there for lunging alone. I realize that many people disagree with me in this, but I also think it is the reason why vaulting progress takes so much longer in some clubs: divided engagement of the trainer can necessarily not show the same results.

A lunger for a vaulting team, especially as you get into higher exercises in canter, must be experienced and reliable. S/he must concentrate on the horse's gait instead of enjoying the vaulters' performance! But s/he must be aware of *what* is going on up there at any given moment to be a help in difficult exercises or in case of falls.



Lunging aids must be very gentle here

Dealing with a horse on the lunge when three children are moving around on top is more refined than the lunging most people seem to consider adequate for training young horses. Most of the aids must be softer, transitions gentler. Train your horse to the voice as much as you can. Make everyone use the same commands. Beating a vaulting horse with the whip is totally out of the question and will cause problems for a long time to come, as mentioned before. Even touching the legs with the whip should be avoided (and is unnecessary, if the voice-training is done consistently!) If it is at all necessary it should be done during the moments when the vaulters are not in precarious pos-

itions (like standing) or in the process of building up or dismantling high exercises. Such transition periods often harbour more potential danger than a fully built-up exercise (which in itself is quite a stable configuration, although high). If your lunger chooses to use the whip at the wrong moment, this can mean an accident to your team. If your lunger does not pay enough attention and can't anticipate what the horse will do next (within reason!) s/he should not lunge for vaulting sessions.

A good lunger must be able to react fast and in the correct way to falls: if a child ends up under the horse after sliding off – does your lunger know how to make the horse avoid stepping on him or her? Can s/he prepare the horse during training for such eventualities by teaching him to recognize falls? A horse which is kept attentive during the whole vaulting session (even in walk) will cooperate much better than a beast which is just taught to endure.

An expert, helpful and attentive lunger is a very valuable team member! If you have one, you are lucky. The trainer as well as the vaulting children should understand the importance of this and show their appreciation accordingly!