

Chestline Driving - A Hidden Gem of Tellington TTouch

By Robyn Hood

Would you like your horse to be more responsive, lighter and more balanced when you ask him to halt? Does your horse rush to be in front when riding in a group on the trail? Does he hurry through narrow spaces or kick out at other horses when they pass in the show ring or stable aisle? Are you starting a young horse or wish to teach your horse to drive? Read on-chestline driving is for you.

It's remarkable how neck line driving can help many horses. While this exercise can be used to troubleshoot individual problems, it can also be used to start any horse off on the right foot, to prevent training issues from arising, or simply to make a good horse even better. It's also useful for:

* Horses who exhibit fear of things behind them or who kick. Typical situations triggering this reaction include other horses coming up from behind; horses that want to be in front on the trail; horses with aggressive behavior; horses who refuse to back out of a trailer or who kick in the trailer. Most unbroken or green horses instinctively fear things behind them and will often kick reflexively when unsure. Chestline driving helps defuse these concerns, educate the youngster about his body and produce an all-around safer horse.

* Horses who travel above the bit, behind the bit or are ewe-necked benefit from neckline driving because they learn to stop through the body by shifting their weight back over the hindquarters instead of shortening the neck and tightening the back. The ropes around the base of the neck act like a balance rein and trigger the "seeking reflex," a passive neck reflex connected to the engagement of the belly and back.

* Horses who rush through narrow spaces or who swing around to face things they are afraid of lack awareness of their body. In other words, they don't know how much space they take up. Consider that horses cannot easily see their own feet, particularly the hind ones. The lines along the body help give clear information to the nervous system and help to change such horses' habitual response to things from behind or beside them.

* Horses who are afraid to cross water or that jump ditches rather than step through or over them often suck back through the neck and body. Neckline driving over poles and across plastic and plywood helps change the horse's habit and the way he responds to other situations.

* Horses who are blind in one eye or losing sight. We have found that using this driving technique gives the horse more awareness and information about the blind side of the body, making him a less fearful and safer companion both under saddle and in hand.

Chestline driving epitomizes the Tellington TTouch philosophy of creative problem-solving, teamwork and step-by-step success. Let's get started!

TOOLS OF THE TRADE Here is what you'll need:

- a well-fitting flat nylon halter • 4-foot stiff whip (wand)
- lead chain with nylon lead or Zephyr lead (has marine rope instead of chain)
- two 21-foot driving lines, 7 to 9 mm in diameter.
- a Chained Balance Rein (optional) but useful for nervous or sensitive horses

Chestline driving requires at least two people—one at the horse's head and the other holding the lines. In the how-to that follows, we'll assume that you will be the one holding the lines, and we'll call you "the driver." Your helper will be called the "front person" or "leader." From your position, you'll initiate the stop and go, and your "front person" will steer and reinforce your instructions. If you have a third person to help out, use the Homing Pigeon to help balance the horse and give a sense of boundary and information from both sides of the body.

Preparation

Before you begin, I recommend that you place a body wrap on the horse, either as a figure eight, chained, or with the bridge over the back. (for more information about Body Wraps please see "All Wrapped Up: For Horses" by Robyn Hood) Although this step is optional, it will give the horse a better connection through the body, improve his self-image and reduce the concern he may have about the lines touching the sides.

This is especially important for a young or green horse, as it helps defuse his concern about fear of things behind.

Stroke the Horse with Wand

Before you begin with the lines it is important that your horse is comfortable in his body. Have your helper stand at the horse's head, holding the lead and wand. Have her stroke the horse all over with the wand, starting with the underside of the neck and down the front legs. Use enough contact to have a slight flex in the wand to avoid tickling the horse. Stroke both sides. The horse's reaction will not only give you a sense of his level of concern, it will also start giving him a better sense of himself. Remember to pause every so often so the horse has a chance to integrate the information and know that it is not an endless exercise!

Familiarization with Motion from Behind

The second step is to make sure your horse associates movement behind them with something positive. A quick and easy way to check in with this is to use a scratch or a little bit of food as a reward for halting as a person briskly walks up behind and says "whoaaa".

Have the handler on the horse's head on the same side as the person who will be walking up to ask the horse to halt. The handler asks the horse to walk forward with Elegant Elephant or Grace of the Cheetah. The second person walks up from behind and slightly to the side of the horse, aim for the shoulder and stay clear of any place you could be kicked. As you walk towards the horse the second person says "and whoooooa" as the leader asks the horse to halt.



Photos: Walking up from behind your horse while saying "whoa" and giving a bit of food helps horses overcome fear of things behind. It replaces something of concern with a pleasant experience; helps to activate the parasympathetic nervous system and helps maintain breathing as it is difficult chew and hold his breath at the same time.

Ideally the horse turns his head back to take the food, without having to move his feet. Can he do this from both sides?

TIP: If you have the help, having your horse in a Homing Pigeon Leading configuration, a leader on each side, will mean that you can easily switch from left and right without switching the lead.

Once the horse has halted the walker will let the horse turn their head, keeping their feet still, and receive a scratch or small nibble of food.

Repeat this exercise until the horse is listening to the walker's voice and does not need to be asked to halt by the leader. Switch sides and make sure your horse is comfortable and can turn his head to both sides.

This is a great exercise to reinforce voice commands from behind and teach your horse to stop if something surprises them from behind. It may prove invaluable with a horse that will be trail ridden, in case they ever get away from you and you need them to stop from a voice cue.

TIP: If your horse is really comfortable with the voice cue try having the ground person come up from a greater distance, at more speed, working up to having the ground person jogging up from behind. Make sure to do this in small steps so you do not scare your horse.

PigTail

The Pig Tail is a small but important step to begin any work with lines around a horse's body and legs. This simple check in is great insurance to prevent any unnecessary drama or fearful reactions.

While a handler stands at the head, a second helper checks in with the driving line and calmly strokes the horse with the line folded in their hand to introduce the rope. Begin on the chest or shoulder on the same side as the handler and allow the horse to turn their head and sniff the rope.

Next, take a Wand and wind 3 or 4 feet of the driving line around it so that there is a 6"-18" tail hanging from the end. Should your horse seem concerned about this, make the tail shorter and chunk down the exercise into smaller steps. Use the combination of Wand and line to stroke the horse all over their body and legs, gently introducing the line.



Photo: Hang the end of the rope parallel to the wand and wind the rope around the wand, leave between 6 - 12" of 'tail' at the end.



Photo: Stroke the horse with the wand and allow the rope to make contact as well. The intention is to help familiarize, rather than desensitize., the horse with the rope contact

The Pig Tail allows the handler to stay a safe distance from the horse, should they react to the lines touching their legs, and provides a good indicator of how comfortable the horse is with ropes. Your horse should be comfortable with the Wand being stroked all over their body before trying this step.

Challenge Rope

Once your horse is comfortable with the rope itself, take the time to check in with the Challenge rope. With a leader still at the head, fold a driving line in half, or thirds for a smaller horse. Place the driving line around the base of the neck and hold it standing beside the horse's shoulder, facing forward. Your hand nearest the horse should rest at the wither; with your outside hand holding the line that comes around the base of the neck.



Photo: When on the left side of the horse the right hand holds the rope and rests the back of your hand against the horses shoulder; the left hand gives the signal with the rope to stop. When not giving a signal the rope should not have contact with the chest.



Photo: The leader must stay far enough forward so the handler can stay at the horse's shoulder. To stop the handler gives a signal 'up' the angle of the horse's shoulder, quarter turns towards the horse and releases the rope to stop.

The person at the horse's shoulder gives the verbal signals and makes the plan. The leader at the horse's head asks the horse to move forward and steer and helps reinforce the signal to halt until the horse understands the signal from the chest.

To Walk: The handler at the shoulder allows the lines to be slack, no pressure on the chest, and says "and waaaalk". The handler at the head uses the Wand, lead and body language to ask the horse to walk. It is important that the leader stays far enough ahead so that the person at the shoulder does not step on their heels.

Many horses will be hesitant, at least initially, to move forward with a person at their shoulder. Give the horse a moment to respond to the request. If necessary, the person at the shoulder may reach back and gently use their fingers to give a Dingo cue on the croup.

To Halt: As you ask the horse to halt, start by taking a breath and release through the back and begin to take up the slack in the line so it touches the chest right above the point of the shoulder. Clearly say "And Whoooooa" so that you are taking up the slack as you say "And", while adding the signal as you say "Whooooa". The signal should go up the line of the scapula rather than straight back, you don't want to create a plowing sensation, and allow your body to make a slight quarter turn towards the horse as you signal. Be sure to release a moment as you allow the horse to step into the halt.

Initially the handler at the head may need to help reinforce this new cue but most horses pick up on it very quickly.

To Back: Use the same cue as in the halt but really focus on thinking of an up and back motion through your signal so you imagine shifting the horse's weight up towards their croup.



Chained Balance Rein - with driving line threaded through the 'chain' but not tied is a safer option with young or nervous horses.

Adding the Lines

The easiest and safest option is to attach the driving line to the chained Balance Rein. Tie the Balance Rein around the horse's neck and loop the driving line a few times through the loops of the balance rein. The advantage of this configuration is that the line is not attached and will easily come off if the horse should startle or become frightened. Once checking in with the horse you can then tie the lines with a quick release knot.



Once you are confident your horse is comfortable with the lines along his side and behind you can tie the driving line with a quick release knot.

I highly recommend this safety feature for young or very nervous horses. The lines will not drag behind them if anything happens and it provides an excellent way to "Chunk Down" the process.

For safety reason it is best to have the handler on the same side as you are, or lead with the Homing Pigeon.



Photo: Stroke the line against the horse's side, you may want to start this process just behind the horse's shoulder. Stroke twice, with an overhand movement of your inside hand, pause and then give a signal with a 'wave' of your wrist towards the horse. Pause, and give your horse a couple of seconds to respond. At the same time say 'And Walk'



Photo: Move further back and repeat the signals. If the horse is concerned about the lines you might repeat coming up from this position and give your horse a little bite of food. Be sure there is a 'supported' slack in the line so there is no pull on the horse.

To stop - say "And.... As you take the slack out of the line; 'whoa' as you take contact with the halter and then give back the slack. It is on the 'release' of the pressure that the horse can come into the stop.

Photos by Darlene Ouellette

Take the line attached from to the neck and keep it in your hand closest to the horse's body. This will ensure that the line stays along the horse's sides and keeps the 'driver following the track of the inside hind leg. Start at the barrel and gently stroke the horse's sides. The handlers in the front should allow the horse to turn its head to look at you. Be sure to check in with your horse's ears, eyes and respiration as you continue with this exercise.

Make sure that your horse is comfortable being touched on both sides and around the hind quarters. It is important that you do not allow the lines to get caught under the tail or drop lower than the hocks. For safety, all handlers must be paying attention and watching the horse's reaction. If your horse seems to be exhibiting some anxiety you may want to offer a bite to eat. A little food keeps him breathing, activates the parasympathetic nervous system and replaces something he is concerned about with a pleasant experience. It is difficult to hold the breath and chew at the same time!

Once your horse is comfortable with you moving around them while the line is touching them, you may ask for a walk. With the line attached on the same side as your handler, but if you have two handlers in the Homing Pigeon position, stand so you are just to the inside of your horse's footfall. This ensures that you can observe your horse's eye and allows your horse to see you. Be sure to hold the line with your hand that is closest to the horse, so the line stays parallel to the barrel.

Standing safely back from kicking range, quietly stroke the line on the side of the barrel, this will prepare the horse for a signal but prevents hypersensitivity, remember that at this point they should still be standing quietly. If your horse starts to walk forward when you simply stroke the line on their sides, have the handler help to steady them with the lead and wand so the horse understands that it is not a signal to go forward. To ask for walk, stroke the barrel twice as you say "aaaand" then give a gentle "tap, tap" with the line, to simulate a light leg aid, as you say "waaaalk".

Many horses will not initially understand this signal to go forward. Be patient. Do not immediately repeat the signal, but give the horse a chance to process and respond to the request. If they do not start moving, ask one more time and have the handler help to reinforce the cue with a signal from the head and with the wand.

As you walk be mindful that you have no pressure around the neck and are thinking about maintaining "supported slack" on the lines. It can be useful to remember

the image of pushing a baby carriage or a lawn mower as you follow with your horse.



Once your horse understands the idea of going forward, ask for a halt. At this point you will only have one line attached so most of the signal may come from the handler at the head however it is a good place to practice. To halt; take a breath and gently pick up the slack from the line as you say "aaaand" then take a feel on the line as you say "whooooo". Remember to slow your feet into the halt rather than suddenly stop them and keep your joints and lower back released. Initially you may have to repeat the cue and have the handler help to reinforce it.

Once you have checked in with walk and halt a couple of times, and your horse has remained calm and confident in the exercise, change the line to the other side to check in. Horses can be very different about experiences on the right or left side of their body so it is worth the few extra minutes to do both sides before progressing. For some horses a single line is more challenging than having two lines so check in with your horse and adjust the exercise as necessary.



Photo: Walking behind with the lines crossed over the horse's back. The leader will be guiding the horse at this point.



Photo: To make sure the horse is okay with the lines touching him around the back bring the rope from the left side around the back of the horse. Be sure to pay attention to the response of the horse and to keep the lines from dropping down and getting caught.

After using a single line on both sides, add the second line by tying it in the same fashion on the other side. Before driving your horse from behind, take a few more moments to bring both lines to one side and walk beside the horse with the two lines along one side of his body. Move toward the back of the horse but stay just off to one side so you can still see his eye, and slide the second line over the opposite side of the horse.

When you and your horse are ready to add the second line, take a moment to ensure that you are comfortable with flipping the lines to one side in a single, smooth movement. If something were to scare your horse it is



Photo: The 'driver' now has both lines and can ask for forward and stop with reinforcement from the leader if necessary. The driver should stay on the inside of the turn so the horse can see her.

very important to be comfortable with getting both lines to the inside and stepping forward into a typical lunging position. This will allow you and the handler to diffuse the situation and regroup.

If you have a very sensitive horse, it can be a good idea to start with two lines crossed over the back. This will reduce how much line the horse feels on their side and give them a chance to get used to a line on either side without having them hang too low. In this configuration you are simply following the horse and letting the leader give all the signals.

Once you have both lines attached carry on with the walk, halt, and then backing signals as you practice driving through a variety of obstacles. With two lines you will still only ask for walk with one line at a time. It's not a Chuck Wagon race!

It is also a good idea to stay slightly to the inside track when driving with two lines. As with one line, it ensures that the horse can see you and that you can really watch their expression. Turning is not especially clear for horses when beginning Chest Line driving so the emphasis on the exercise is on walk, halt, and being completely relaxed and comfortable with the lines around them while maintaining freedom through their head and neck.

As the driver, it's your job to give the person leading the horse clear direction about where you want to go and enough time to execute the plan. Some horses take a moment or two to respond to the signal from behind. Be sure to wait at least two seconds before repeating. This holds



Above: The labyrinth is an excellent tool to use when introducing the horse to new exercises. It is predictable and familiar to the horse which helps them to relax and integrate the new part of the exercise, in this case the additional lines behind. It is also great practice for the driver and creates a clear focus with turns and halts.



Above—Even though the driver does not directly influence the horse in turns they are an important way to familiarize the horse with the feeling of the lines on their sides.

Below—When asking for halt it is important to plan ahead and signal a few steps before you actually want the horse to stop.



for work under saddle as well. Give your horse a chance to get the message and respond.

Try to maintain your lines with a supported slack—not too taut and not completely droopy. Just the weight of the lines gives a signal. If there is no slack, it gives a constant signal and can be confusing or trigger the horse to lean forward.

You are now ready to neckline drive. As before, to go forward, say, 'aaand walk" and give a signal with one line. Initiate your signal with a horizontal movement of your hand, which creates a wave along the horse's body. If necessary, your helper can then give a signal at the head, if necessary. To stop, say 'aaand whoa." (The "aaand" gives both the horse and the leader a chance to know something is coming, similar to a half halt.) On the "aaand," take the slack out of the line, give a signal back and then release. It is actually on the release—not on the pull—that the horse stops in balance. Your helper can follow with a signal from the wand and lead, but by now your horse should readily stop from your neckline signal.

Use the Playground for Higher Learning to engage your horse and give you and your partner clear destinations. One of the most challenging parts of Chest Line driving is communicating with your handler and making a plan. Making a plan helps to make you a better communicator with your horse and will go a long way in improving all of the ways you interact with your horse.

How to hold the driving lines

1. Hold the lines in your left hand with your index finger between the right and left line.
2. Pick up the dangling end of the line with the baby finger of your right hand and tuck it between your baby and ring finger or ring and middle finger, whichever is most comfortable for you.
3. Reach forward with your right hand to take the right rein from your left hand and create a bridge between the two lines. The bridge connects your hands and improves your balance. It allows you to keep a clearer connection to the horse and helps you to use the reins in unison.
4. Hold the lines on the right side of the horse in your right hand and the lines on the horse's left in your left hand. Keep your hands about as far apart as the width of your horse's hind end.

Note: Be sure that on the stop your "bridge" between your hands is wide enough to allow your hands to be wider than the horse's hindquarters. Otherwise, you may be giving him a signal to stop on the chest and go on the back end. Most horses actually get calmer and more focused as you go through the steps. If you find that your horse does not settle within about five minutes of each step, go back to where he was comfortable or use the obstacles.

