

The Balance Rein

By Robyn Hood

Have you ever ridden a horse who sucks back from the rein? Comes above or behind the bit; shies or jigs on the trail? A TTEAM tool that can be readily used to help these and other riding situations is the Balance Rein. For years many people have used a neck strap or stirrup leather when teaching beginners to jump. Linda has designed a balance rein that combines a rein – for ease of holding and a rope to give a broader contact on the horse and weight to help it hang in place.

The Balance Rein can be used with any bridle and acts like a second rein except that it lies around the base of the horse's neck instead of coming from the bridle. The effects are usually immediate. **It helps with horses that;**

- ◆ Are above the bit
- ◆ Pull on the reins
- ◆ Suck back behind the vertical
- ◆ Have difficulty slowing down
- ◆ Shy on the trail
- ◆ Jig
- ◆ Rush fences when jumping
- ◆ Shorten the neck when ridden on contact
- ◆ Are out of balance
- ◆ Stumble or trip
- ◆ Rush downhill
- ◆ Are learning to back
- ◆ Are being started under saddle

Riders benefit as well from the Balance Rein:

- Prevents a rider from balancing off the horse's mouth
- Keeps hands quiet and steady

How To Use the Balance Rein

The balance rein sits at the base of the neck and is held as a second rein. The proportional contact on the balance rein and the bit can be 50/50; 60/40 or 40/60. The light pressure on the base of the neck helps to trigger the "seeking reflex", a passive muscle which encourages the withers to lift and

the neck to telescope from the withers to the poll. The seeking reflex is the third part in the 'ring of muscles', which must be activated to achieve engagement. This helps horses who have a tendency to brace at the base of the neck.

The Balance Rein should not be held against the horse's neck with steady contact or it may invite the horse to lean or brace more. Having one to three fingers in between the balance rein and bit rein will



Photo 1: Shows one way to hold the balance rope– the bit rein is around the little finger and the balance rope in the index finger.

allow you to differentiate the use of the reins. Use the balance rein with an 'ask and release' signal in a slightly diagonal direction following the angle of the horse's shoulder, rather than a backward direction - the rebalance comes on the release not the ask.

Why Use the Balance Rein

There are horses who are fine if you give them a loose rein but as soon as any contact is taken they come **above the bit**. Many people interpret this response as 'resistance' to contact. It is our experience that there is a physiological response rather than just a psychological response. When contact is taken that causes a backward pull, the neck shortens and tightens which then tightens the back and hindquarters- this can trigger the flight instinct and may also cause discomfort. The balance rein helps teach the rider to maintain her own balance, which prevents pulling on the reins and helps to 'show' the horse a posture that will be more functional and comfortable.



Photos 2 & 3: Top photo without the balance rein, the horse is strung out and above the bit.

Bottom photo: with chained balance rein the horse is lifting his withers and back and telescoping his neck from withers to the poll.

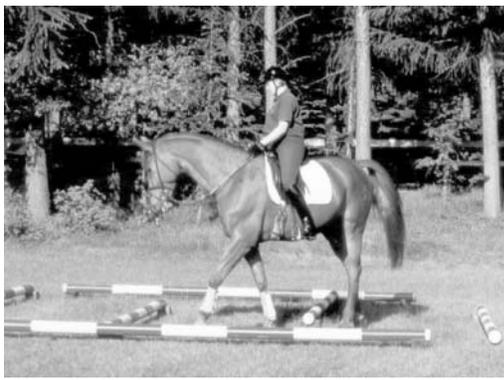


Photo 4: Shows going through the labyrinth using a flat rein as the balance rein—the bit rein is loose and the signaling is coming from the balance rein and the rider’s body. This horse has a tendency to get behind the vertical and the balance rein helped to release his neck.

Sucking **behind the vertical** has become more common as many horses are ridden quite ‘deep’ in an effort to either prevent shying or to stretch their backs and encourage engagement. Unfortunately the downside to the horse can be tension in the poll, neck and pelvis. Once a horse has learned to go behind the vertical it can be challenging to undo it. The balance rein is very effective for this issue as long as the rider uses a light, rather than steady pressure, on the rein.

Horses who have difficulty with **downward transitions** are often out of balance and falling forward, pulling on the reins generally triggers the head to come up and the back to drop. The balance rein helps signal the horse to shift his weight off the forehead and steadies him without tightening the horse’s neck and back.



Photo 5: Combining the Lindell with the Balance Rein helps young horses learn to carry themselves in balance. In this photo the Lindell rein is held on the outside of the little finger and the ring finger holds the balance rein.

Jigging can be frustrating because many horses suck their neck’s back and get stronger if you use more rein. The balance rein steadies the horse from the chest, which encourages him to stretch and round the neck and usually produces

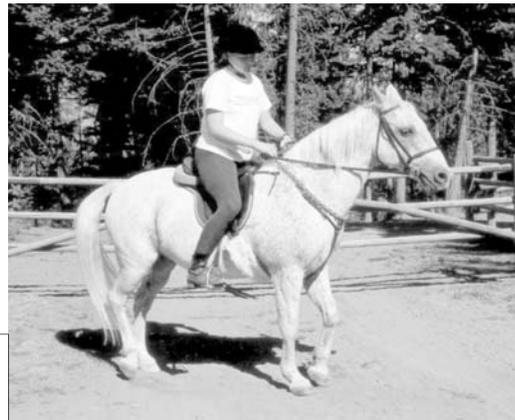


Photo 6: Using a balance rein can help when teaching a horse to back - Mandy has lightened her seat and is giving a diagonal up and back signal on the balance rein along with a signal on the bit.



Photo 7: This is from the Let’s Ride book and shows the use of the balance rein to steady the rider’s hand and prevent balancing on the horse’s mouth.

a walk.

Young horses benefit from the connection between a signal from their head, either with a Lindell or a bit, and the signal of asking from the chest with the balance rein. This is beneficial in teaching a horse to stop, lightly and in balance.

Horses who **rush downhill** are generally out of balance. More contact on the rein may simply trigger a raised head and dropped back. The balance rein, used with a 60/40 percent ration with the balance rein helps encourage more hindquarter engagement, which shows horses how to negotiate down hills.

Horses with a tendency to **pull** on the reins stop pulling in a matter of minutes with the second ‘rein’ around the base of the neck. One of our practitioners was taking a jumping lesson on a horse who was known for rushing fences. After several jumps she asked the instructor if she could use a balance rein. As she approached the jump she was able to steady the horse using a light contact on the balance rein – the horse was more rateable, his head was lower and he was much steadier.

Teaching a horse to **back** using the balance rein helps avoid a raised head and dropped back posture which sometimes happens.

Shying horses are generally tense in the neck and back. The more the rider takes contact the worse this can be.

Balance Leash For Dogs

Maintaining a light contact with the balance rein allows the rider to have less contact on the bit, the horse will be more relaxed and the rider can still feel safe.

The balance rein can help the rider avoid balancing on the horse's mouth as she is developing an independent seat.

Case history

The last Dressage Symposium that Dr. Reiner Klimke gave before he died was in Los Angeles. Linda and a group of practitioners used TTEAM with the horses and riders before and between their lessons with Dr. Klimke. One of the riders, whose horse had a strong tendency to come behind the vertical while rushing forward, had her warm-up shortened due to a photo session. We gave her a balance rein to use while warming up and she found such an improvement she asked Dr. Klimke if she could use it in the lesson. He agreed and after watching the horse a few minutes commented that the rider should use the balance rein for the next few months during her warm-up because the change was so dramatic. The horse opened his throatlatch, was no longer behind the vertical and became much steadier and less rushed in all his gaits.

Balance Rein Options

When we first started using the concept of the balance rein in the 80's we used either a single rope or a leather rein. As time went on, and necessity dictated, we tried a variety of variations and materials resulting in a number of choices.

In the 90's Linda designed a balance rein that has a flat rein with a 12 mm nylon rope. (shown in photo 5) It has the advantage of having a flat rein that is easy for the rider to hold combined with a rope which gives some weight so it hangs around the base of the horse's neck. This makes it easier to move up the horse's neck a bit if needed.

Rope balance rein: we also use climbing rope – either 7 mm chained (as beginning crochet) or 9 mm as a single rope (shown photo 1); or you can make one using a rein or lead rope. Most people have an old rein or martingale strap somewhere in their barn. You can simply tie the rein around the horse's neck so that it can be picked up as a second rein without having it drop too low and getting caught on the horse's shoulder should you let it go.

You can make a balance rope from a 7-8' lead rope from which the snap is gone or a piece of climbing rope. Tie the ends together around the horses neck with enough length to allow you to hold it as a rein. If the rope is too thick it may be difficult to hold.

The balance rein/ rope has made a significant difference to many horses and people. The next time you ride try it and see what happens.

Pulling on the leash is a common problem for dogs and their people. Generally the more pressure you have on the dog's collar the more it triggers him to pull and pulling causes many dogs to be more reactive. This is not intentional on the part of the dog but rather a reflex – for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.

Taking the pressure off the neck and onto the chest puts a dog in better balance and brings his weight back over his feet instead of leaning forward.

You can use nearly any leash as a 'balance leash' which is simple and very effective to stop pulling. If you are on the right side of your dog the leash is attached to the dog's collar as usual and held in your left hand with thumb pointing towards the dog's collar. With your right hand holding the end of the leash, drop the middle of the leash across the chest of the dog from the left shoulder to the right.

Make sure that the part of the lead running directly from the collar to your left hand is slightly slack and keep the portion of the leash across the chest with little or no tension. The feel of the leash across the chest is enough to keep many dogs from pulling.

When your dog pulls take the slack out of the leash and gently pull and release on the line around his chest. Take care not to pull the line upward onto the dog's neck. This is especially effective on medium to large sized dogs.

In the case of small dogs or dogs that back out of the balance leash we use a slight variation called the Balance leash plus. Instead of dropping straight across the chest the leash goes behind the elbow, on the opposite side from where you are standing, and comes up between the dog's front legs and on your side of the dog's head (see drawing). A second variation of the balance leash plus brings the leash between the front legs as described and then up through the dog's collar which helps keep the balance leash in place.

The Balance Leash is useful in the shelter or vet hospital for leading dogs to and from their run as so many dogs pull in excitement and end up choking from pressure on their neck. It is also effective if you are sitting in the vet waiting room and your dog is pulling towards other dogs or people. Just drop the line around the dog's chest and presto you can



Drawing: Shows the balance leash—the middle of the leash is dropped around the chest of the dog to take pressure off of the neck.



Photo: Shows the balance leash on a small dog. Sometimes the leash will slide up with a small dog, or a dog that is quite strong. In those cases use the Balance Leash plus as shown below.



Photos & drawing show the Balance Leash plus. The leash goes behind the elbow from the side you are standing and comes up in between the dog's front legs.

The drawing shows the leash coming straight up and the photo upper left shows the leash coming up and through the dog's collar which keeps the leash in place.



The intent is to keep the leash relaxed. Bring the dog into balance and relax the contact.



felt the closeness of the dog physically would make it unfeasible. Regardless, I wanted to thank you once again for taking the time and interest to convey the alternative techniques in leash use.

Since that day I have experimented with this, and on many of the more difficult dogs. Quite frankly I was rather surprised, no, amazed with the results. Dogs that were pulling (and thus choking themselves) were much more willing to walk in an orderly manner when this technique was used. Furthermore, it seemed to me that after walking for some distance in this manner on the street, that when I reverted to the standard technique for wild paths, that the dogs were still far more cooperative than normal.

As I stated, after my initial experimentation, I tested this with some of the most difficult dogs at the shelter, and found that in all but one case I was able to get the dog to accept the technique within 1-4 attempts (persistence is key with strong willed dogs...). Only one dog (A very large Akita with limitless energy) continued to struggle, and even jump out of the more advanced form that you showed me. Still, I was persistent, and after many attempts he started to accept the technique for longer periods. I am confident that if I continue to work with him, and do not give in, he will come to accept it in time.

I was extremely pleased with the realization of the potential of this technique. I have never liked "choke-chains", and I use them rarely. However, I had thought them a necessary evil for dog that were either extremely difficult to control, dogs that I did not trust, or dogs that I was unfamiliar with. I now see choke-chain use as almost completely unnecessary. I cannot emphasize enough how much that meant to me. Now I would only see choke chains as being legitimate to use on dogs that are potentially dangerous...and I choose not to deal with such dogs.

Be assured that I will continue to use this technique on all dogs who "pull" while walking on street/sidewalk. I will continue to use the standard technique when walking in the wilderness or on trails since it allows them more freedom (I allow them to walk me in these situations). However, as I stated, even using the T-Touch method first greatly improves their behaviour once we reach the trail...and they do not choke themselves or pull me. I am looking forward to seeing if there is a long-term impact in their behaviour. If this is the case, then your gift is truly great, for it would mean that you are not just saving my arm and back as well as the dog from temporary pain...but doing a long term good, and perhaps saving dogs lives...for the better behaved the dog becomes, the better it's chances for eventual adoption.

Both I and the dogs of the Western Quebec SPCA thank you.
Regards, Paul

Part of our TTouch Training for Companion animals includes spending time in local shelters to work with the dogs to help make them more adoptable. Helen McGraw assists in the training in Quebec. One day when we were at the shelter she approached a volunteer to show him the balance leash. The following is a letter that he sent the next day.

Greetings,

On Monday of this week, while I was walking dogs for the SPCA, a person approached me regarding T-touch and offered to demonstrate to me an alternative method/technique for leash management and controlling the dog while walking.

I am not certain if you are the correct person or not. If not, I would appreciate help in locating that person, and the presenting of this letter to them.

I wanted to begin by apologizing. When you approached me offering unsolicited advice, if I appeared cold and or skeptical, please accept my humble apologies. I was tired, both physically and mentally, and so perhaps my pride was more easily bruised. My initial reaction was to very skeptical, and I