

Experience the Joy of Riding using the Lariat Neck

As a child, you may have enjoyed riding bareback with just a rope or piece of twine around your horse's neck. It was part of the fun and sense of freedom of riding. For more than four decades, riding with a neck ring or just a rope around the neck – often with nothing on the horse's head – has been one of the foundation exercises of the TTEAM method. Riding without a bridle gives the rider a feeling of riding as one with her horse. More specifically, it

- Gives both horse and rider a new sense of trust and partnership
- Develops a rider's confidence in his or her seat
- Develops a rider's balance without depending on the reins
- Improves balance and general performance with a bridle
- Allows a horse to have freedom in head and neck, to stretch his back which encourages belly swing and hind-quarter activation

Riding without a bridle isn't new, nor is it a gimmick. Over 40 years ago at our Pacific Coast School of Horsemanship, we toured the US giving demonstration of bridleless drill jumping with two stallion, a mare and a gelding. This display of riding inspired people with a sense of wonder at the ability to ride a horse with seemingly so little control.

In 1975, I introduced the concept of bridleless riding to Europe at Equitana in Germany. Three of us jumped a course bareback and bridleless. Europeans were incredulous, and the major German horse magazine wrote an article stating how impossible and dangerous this was, and adding that there must be a special secret. However, in the ensuing three decades, thousands of riders in Europe and North America have discovered the joy and advantages of deepening their relationship with their horse with this Pegasus-like feeling.

You may be wondering?

How do I safely begin?

What if my stable does not allow bridleless riding because of insurance?

Is it advisable to ride bridleless with a spooky horse?

How soon in the course of training can I ride a green horse bridleless?

There are many instances in which you may not want to take off the bridle. Perhaps you are starting a young horse; insurance at your stable will not allow it; or you simply do not feel it would be a safe thing to do. Can using the neck ring with a bridle still have benefit? Absolutely! You needn't ever take off the bridle completely to get the benefits of riding with a neck lariat.

How to hold the neck ring

Start with whatever bridle you are already using. We normally use a stiff, adjustable ring made of lariat rope that the horse can feel readily (the rings are available through the office and websites). The stiffness also makes it easy for the rider to reach the top of the neck for turning. We occasionally use a wooden neck ring, as shown in photo 4 page 19, especially for horses who are particularly unwilling to bend.

You can experiment with different ways of holding the reins and neck ring. You can hold the neck ring in both hands, much like a second rein. You can hold the reins in one hand and the neck ring in the other. Or you may find it easier in the beginning to pick up the reins with a signal from the neck to turn or stop. You should quickly find that using the neck ring will reduce your dependency on the reins, giving you an improved sense of balance over your feet.

Now let's look at some of the basic movements, stopping and circling with the neck lariat.

How to Use the Neck Ring

If you ride Western, it may be easier for stopping and turning to hold the reins in one hand and the neck ring in the other. If you ride English, give a light signal on the turning rein at the same time that you signal the turn with the neck ring.

To give the signal to stop, pick-up the neck ring to make a light signal-and-release contact two-thirds of the way up the horse's neck while using a long, tone, verbal 'whoaaaa'. Follow the angle of the shoulder rather than pull straight back. You may have to use your rein along with the neck ring to reinforce the signal as you and your horse learn these new dance steps. Signal and release two or three times to accomplish a complete halt while closing your inner thigh and exhaling deeply. Remember, the horse will actually respond on the 'release' rather than the pull – if you constantly pull on the reins many horses will simply lean into it. Be aware, too, that you are pulling against the sensitive windpipe, so be sure only to signal for the stop and avoid pulling.

The neck ring lightens a horse's front end and shifts his weight back to produce a balanced halt. In order to stop and turn the horse, you will almost automatically use your seat and legs in a more effective way. Your balance, as well as your horse's, will improve as you both start to "smile" at the new sense of connection.

When riding in a circle, initiate the turn by imagining a searchlight in the middle of your chest. Look around with your eyes in the direction of the turn and swivel your body to

follow. This will keep you from leaning into the turn and help you stay in better balance with your horse.

The neck ring will quickly reveal your horse's tendency to lean into the circle in one direction or the other. It simultaneously gives you the means to pick up his shoulder and neck and encourage him to stay on the outside of the circle's perimeter. For instance, say you are traveling to the left and

your horse tends to pop his left shoulder to the inside, with his body stiff rather than softly following the arc of the circle. In this situation the horse will tend to make smaller and smaller circles. Hold the neck ring so that it touches the neck near the shoulder on the inside and close to the poll on the outside. At the same time, open your inside thigh and 'flutter' your leg at the girth to encourage him to bend around it.



Photo 1: The neck ring can be held together with the reins in both hands. Try holding the rein between your middle and ring fingers and the neck ring around the little finger. You can position the neck ring near the base of the neck or up toward the throatlatch. Be careful to only make contact with the neck ring when you are giving a clear signal, such as to turn, slow down or halt.



Photo 3: In this photo, Linda demonstrates a turn with neck ring and wand. Notice how her torso is swiveling toward the inside and how the mare is following Linda's signals. Linda helps her follow the turn by touching the inside gaskin/stifle area lightly with the wand to help connect her hindquarters to her front and stay balance.



Photo 2: As Robyn demonstrates, you may find it easier to hold the reins in one hand and the neck ring in the other for stopping and turning. Here, the ring has been lifted halfway up the neck, a good position for signaling the halt.



Photo 4: If your horse ignores the neck lariat, you may find that a wooden neck ring can give a stronger signal in the early stages of training. Here the rider demonstrates positioning the neck ring for a turn. Notice how much like neck reining the signal is.



Photo 5: Scarlett is a 5-year-old mare who, with warm-up, goes in a rounder frame than the above-the-bit, hollow-backed frame. But it takes time to get it and then she is often heavy in her rider Valerie's hand.



Photo 6: Within a few minutes of adding the neck ring, Scarlett lifts her withers, lengthens and rounds her topline from withers to poll and engages her hindquarters. Valerie's position is more stable and balanced.

How the neck ring can help your horse

Encourage collection: Most people talk about starting collection through the engagement of the hindquarters. Often what you see is quite the opposite – the horse's head is set in the front and the rider pushes the horse into the hand. It's a little like trying to drive a car with the emergency brake on. There is a passive reflex at the base of a horse's neck called the seeking reflex. When this is triggered—which can be encouraged with the balance rein or neck ring touching at the base of the neck – the horse's wither will rise and the neck rounds from the withers to poll. That is what is happening with Scarlet in photo 6. As this is happening, the horse's belly muscle engages and the back comes up.

Teach a horse to back: The neck ring is an excellent tool for teaching a horse to back. Pick up the neck ring and use it in combination with your reins. It encourages the horse to back in balance, without dropping the withers and hollowing his back.

Improve gaited horses: We have found the neck ring helps a horse pick up his neck from the withers to improve the gait with Icelandics, Peruvians, Walkers, Paso Finos and other gaited breeds. Some riders are taught to just pull up the horse's head to gait, which may work in the short run, but is physically hard on the horse in the long run. The lariat aids in the connection necessary to free the horse's front end. It is important to use a light touch-and-release about two-thirds of the way up the horse's neck, and to avoid pulling.

Teach a horse to neck rein: Making turns with the neck ring is a great way to start a horse neck reining. The outside of the neck ring touches on the horse's neck about six inches behind the ear, and the inside of the neck ring touches just in front of the shoulder. Use a touch-and-release signal rather than holding the pressure. If you use this approach in combination with your reins it will help transfer the signal to neck reining.

Calm horses on the trail: Horses that rush or jig when they turn back for the barn can be steadied by using the neck ring low on the neck along with your reins. If you ride one-handed, pick up the lariat with your free hand and use the touch-and-release signal just about the base of your horse's neck. If you ride two-handed, hold the lariat with your little fingers and the reins between the ring and middle fingers, as if you were riding with double reins, or pick up the reins with your ring fingers and the stiff neck ring with your middle fingers. This technique also can be used for horses with a tendency to shy. Pick up the neck ring as needed and allow it to rest on the horse's neck when it is not needed.

Start Young horses: We start our young horses under saddle with a Lindell side-pull hackamore along with the lariat neck ring. By using the combination, horses learn to shift their weight back onto the hindquarters when stopping. Turning is aided with the neck ring helping horses stay more balanced through turns.

Slow horses that rush jumps: Using the neck ring along with the reins can help to steady a horse that tends to rush. Engage the neck ring from the base of the neck to about halfway up it.

As you ride, try out different positions of the neck ring, from near the base of the neck all the way up to near the throat-latch. Be careful to only make contact with the neck ring when you are giving a clear signal, such as to turn, slow down or halt.

Practice turning and stopping at a walk first. Once you feel comfortable with the horse's response, you can pick up a trot. Most people find that the trot and the canter will also improve with the use of the neck ring. Experiment to see what happens when you hold the neck ring with your inside hand, then your outside hand, then both hands. Do you lean more or less with one or the other? How does your horse feel? Is the circle rounder holding the neck ring one way or the other? Once your horse stops and turns to a light signal, tie the reins in a knot halfway up the neck and practice with the ring only or hold the reins at the buckle along with the neck ring – the reins will hang loose but are there should you need them.

Taking Off the Bridle

It has been amazing to see how horses and riders of all disciplines have changed using a neck ring in their training. We saw a lower-level dressage horse who was said to be dangerous on a circle. It was thought he would literally fall down if you didn't hold him up with the reins. He could not be ridden forward no matter how much he rider "drove" him with the seat and legs. At the end of the first session of the neck ring and going bridleless, this horse was doing an extended trot for the first time ever. He had wonderful elevation and extensions, with no sign of stumbling or falling down.

Similar improvements have been seen in jumpers. Several years ago in Finland, Linda worked on a talented mare, who was a very successful Grand Prix jumper. However, she had lost some of her scopininess. Her head set was "stuck" on the vertical and she wasn't using her head and neck enough. Removing the bridle helped to trigger the "seeking reflex", raise the withers and free the neck. Within six months, her rider won the jumper championship in Finland for the first time with this mare.

Many years ago at a demonstration Linda gave as a fundraiser for the U.S. Equestrian Team Anne Kursinski rode her horse Suddenly, who tended to rush before and after fences. After riding with various TTEAM equipment, she jumped a four-foot oxer with just the neck ring. The difference in the horse was noticeable. Suddenly was steady and slower before and after the jump.

Bridleless riding is a staple of our clinics, and it's amazing to witness the transformation of horses and riders time after time. Shedding your bit and bridle is a great way to improve the balance of both you and your horse, gain a new level of cooperation from your equine partner and experience a new level of joy and trust. In addition, we see horses naturally produce those qualities sought after in collection, including

lengthening of the neck, raising the withers, lifting the back, and freeing and engaging the hindquarters.

While bridleless riding has gained popularity in the past years, many riders do not feel safe riding in a large group of horses with nothing on the horse's head and little to guide him other than their seat and legs. We find that use of the lariat or wooden neck ring, or even a lead rope around the neck, used first in combination with a bridle or halter, helps rider and horse gain trust, safety and the aids necessary for successful communication and safe passage.

While we don't expect you to ride a 100-mile endurance ride with only a neck ring as Bob and Brooke Sample did in the Quilty, Australia's toughest and most famous endurance ride. (Brooke won and Bob was third.) You can achieve results at whatever level you choose, plus it is fun for you and your horse. Even a few sessions riding bridleless should pay dividends when you go back to the bridle.

Chunk It Down Into Easy Steps

In order for you to feel safe about taking these steps we are giving you several illustrated steps to "chunk down" the process. As shown in the accompanying photos, start with a light, 21-foot rope fastened with a non-slip knot (such as a bowline) around the horse's neck, just behind the ears. Remove the bridle and put a double half hitch over the horse's nose, making a rope halter. Have an assistant stand about 10 feet from the horse, holding the rope and a wand. You'll give the signals to the horse while your ground person acts as a backup and 'safety net'.

Practice stopping and turning first at the walk and then at the trot. We want you to be confident that you've got good 'brakes' before going on to the trot.

To stop, use these specific signals:

1. Slide the ring higher on the horse's neck and give two or three gentle ask-and-release signals for him to stop. The secret to success is the release.
2. At the same time, close your upper thighs around the barrel make yourself lighter in the saddle. If your horse does not come to a complete stop within a few strides, having your ground person observe what you are doing with your lower leg – you may be inadvertently giving your horse a signal to go forward.
3. Combine your leg signal with a long, toned verbal cue, "whoaaaa". If your horse still does not stop, go back to working with the bridle in combination with the neck ring.

When your horse stops easily and consistently from these signals, have your helper remove the loops from his nose and continue to hold the rope loosely from about 10 feet away. Repeat the steps above and confirm that your horse comes to

a complete halt from your signals alone.

These steps can usually be accomplished in about 10-15 minutes. If you feel confident about your progress and your horse is listening, it's a good time to quietly remove the rope and continue riding bridleless on your own.

Ride your horse in various patterns, such as serpentine and circles, at the walk. Besides using the neck ring, remember to allow your seat and legs to give signals – not only your calves, which might give a signal to speed up. Generally, your inside leg will naturally stay at the girth and your outside leg will move back slightly on the turns.

Once you feel your horse is responsive at the walk, you may want to try an easy trot. You may find that “steering” is actually easier at this gait. Stay light and balanced in the saddle and remember to give press-and-release signals rather than steady pressure. Relax, breathe, sit up straight and enjoy!



Photo 7: Before taking off the bridle, here is the preparation starting with a light rope halter for the safest in-between step. We use a 21 foot long, 3/8 inch wide (7 mm) driving line. First tie a bowline around the horse's neck – this is safe and won't tighten like a noose around the neck. Next make a loop for the nose by bringing the free end of the rope through the neck loop as shown. You can secure the first loop around the nose by making a half-hitch with your remaining rope and placing it above the first loop.



Photo 8: Have your ground helper walk five to ten feet away from the horse and assist by reinforcing the signal from you as necessary. Walk, halt, turn and trot with the loop over the nose.



Photo 9: Once the horse is responding to your aids alone and you feel safe, the nose loops can be taken off, leaving only the loop around the neck. At this point, ask your handler to move further away from the horse.

Tip

Use the Wand effectively

Your wand can come in handy when riding with the neck ring. Use it to touch the horse on the side of the neck for turning, tap it on the chest to stop; and stroke the sides and hindquarters to maintain the connection with your horse through the turns. If your horse is new to the wand, introduce it from the ground first and ride with the bridle on before riding without the bridle. You'll find that stroking a nervous horse with the wand steadies him in a surprisingly



Photo 12: July 1991: Copper Love working with a student from Eagle Mountain Therapeutic Riding program in Montana.

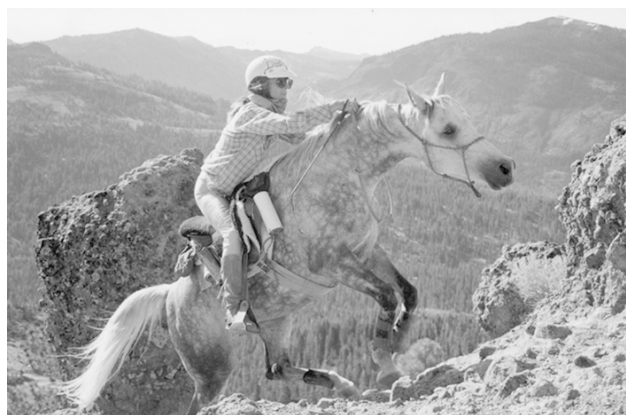


Photo 13: Using the lariat neck ring on the Tevis Cup, coming up Cougar Rock, shows ultimate trust between horse and rider.

Photo 10-11: Once the rope is removed completely, practice walk-halt transitions and turning, all at the walk. Once comfortable at the walk and halt, you can start trotting in circles and serpentines. Don't be afraid to use the entire arena. Breathe deeply, sit up straight and stay relaxed in the saddle.

If you are comfortable with cantering many people report a huge change in their horse's canter as shown by Val and Scarlett. Val was feeling so comfortable and safe that she decided to try a few low jumps. The difference in the way of going was very positive and it carried over once the bridle was back on.



Photo 14: Left: 1994– Judy Whipple riding Noble's Trim (Homer). A 3rd level dressage horse at the time of the photo. Homer had been purchased, out of shape, a former breeding stallion who had just been gelded. The neck ring helped him increase the swing in his back and develop his self-carriage.

As you can see there are many applications for the lariat neck ring. Even if you eventually choose not to remove the bridle, the lariat neck ring is a great tool for both you and your horse. If you have as much fun and success with it as we think you will, add a lariat neck ring to your TTEAM tool kit and enjoy "that Pegasus feeling."