

Auxiliary Reins and Gadgets

Are they useful devices or evil contraptions?

BY GERHARD POLITZ

AS YOU PROBABLY KNOW IF you've browsed through a tack shop or an equestrian-products catalog, there are many varieties of auxiliary reins and training "gadgets." Some of these devices can be useful if applied correctly, but many times they are misused or overused. In this article, I'll describe the purposes of and differences among the most commonly used devices: standard side reins, sliding side reins, draw reins, the chamber, the Gogue, and the overcheck.

Before We Begin

A properly fitted bridle is of the utmost importance when using any type of auxiliary rein. Pay particular attention to the placement of the bit, which, as in starting a young horse, should sit a little higher in the mouth instead of too low; and to the snugness of the noseband. These considerations are especially important if the horse is a reschooling project with a faulty connection over the topline, a tongue problem, or both. Familiarize the horse with any auxiliary reins very gradually, and adjust them such that they do not constrict him or create a "head set," as this may cause panic and the resulting short- or even long-term disastrous results. The purpose of auxiliary reins is to encourage, not to force!

Always use auxiliary reins when you lunge your horse. I strongly recommend using a special lunging cavesson instead of attaching the lunge line

to the bit and bridle because doing so is kinder on the horse's mouth. Your horse's conformation and his response to the auxiliary rein—as well as the handler's experience—will determine which type is best for him. If you're not sure, check with a knowledgeable trainer.

It is not the devices themselves that cause problems, but rather the people who use them incorrectly.

Be aware that standard side reins (which I'll describe in a minute) are the only type of auxiliary reins legal for use when lunging on the grounds of a USA Equestrian/USDF-recognized dressage show. The reason for this is that, properly used, other types of auxiliary reins eventually develop the horse to the point that he goes correctly in ordinary side reins and—most important—that he goes better under saddle.

Instructors are advised to use either traditional or sliding side reins on horses piloted by beginner riders in order to protect the horses' mouths and to encourage the horses to use their topline. Thus aided, the rider can concentrate on the driving aids and not become preoccupied with the horse's

mouth in order to "get him on the bit." The instructor can then ask the rider to gradually take a light contact and to feel the way the horse responds to the driving aids by going more into the connection. In this way, the rider gains a rudimentary understanding of the coordination of the aids without causing the horse discomfort by pulling on the reins.

Use of auxiliary reins is recommended for seat and position lessons as well. Even when beginner riders have had a good preliminary education on the lunge line, it's wise for the instructor to outfit the horse with side reins and a safety strap attached to the pommel or a breastplate so that the rider has something other than the horse's mouth to grab if he or she becomes insecure in the saddle.

Types of Auxiliary Reins

Standard side reins, which attach to the bit rings and to the sides of the girth or surcingle, are the correct choice for horses with normal conformation and those that do not require specialized work. Some riders attach them to the girth between the horse's front legs, a practice that is both unsafe—a horse could catch a leg in them—and illegal under USA Equestrian rules. What's more, the between-the-legs arrangement actually can be detrimental to the training because it can cause the muscles in the horse's lower neck to tighten or the horse to brace against the contact or to resist accepting the bit.

Standard side reins with *elastic inserts* are useful only while the young or green horse is being accustomed to bit-

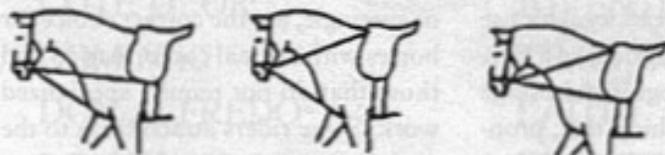
Adapted from the *USDF Dressage Manual*. Lexington, KY: U.S. Dressage Federation, 1996. Available from USDF at www.usdf.org (click on the "Store" link) or by calling (859) 271-7892.

ting and lunging and should no longer be used after he has begun to accept some form of contact. The connection achieved with elastic-insert side reins is too volatile to be of use in advanced work, and some horses even learn to lean or poke their noses against them.

Side reins with *rubber donuts* are the most popular type of standard side reins and are quite appropriate for any ordinary work. The buffer effect of the donuts makes them useful in lessons with beginner riders as well. However, when a horse becomes more advanced and learns to accept the bit without reservation, only plain side reins, with neither elastic nor rubber donuts, should be used. This is especially important for work in hand.

There are two versions of another type of side reins, known as *sliding side reins*. One is Y-shaped and attaches at the girth between the front legs, then divides and runs through the bit rings to the sides of the girth or surcingle. The other consists of two separate pieces, which allows for a variety of triangular methods of attachment. Because sliding side reins are not fixed at the bit rings and therefore do not tighten as the horse tries to change the position of his head and neck, they encourage him to stretch forward and down.

Sliding side reins can be invaluable in developing the musculature of horses with conformational shortcomings and in the training of reschooling projects that refuse to use their backs correctly. Especially if they are used in conjunction with work over ground poles, sliding side reins are excellent devices for teaching horses to work over their topline. The two-piece type is suitable for a number of other purposes as well, including beginner lessons and in-hand work.



The accommodating action of sliding side reins

Draw reins are much maligned and indeed can cause damage if they are used for the wrong reasons. To quote a European authority: "Draw reins are like a razor in the hands of a monkey." Nevertheless, they can be helpful in training horses with conformation problems, with overly developed muscles on the underside of their necks, or with locked backs as a result of faulty riding. Properly fitted between the front legs, draw reins encourage the horse to arch his back and loins, stretching over his topline and developing correct neck musculature. It is very important that the rider who uses draw reins create sufficient impulsion for

this process to have the desired effect. Used in this manner, draw reins and sliding side reins pursue the same goals and can be beneficial in the training of the horse.

If you use draw reins to "pull your horse together," however, you will cause serious damage to your horse's way of going. Not only will he become set in his jaw and hard in his mouth, which may result in tongue problems, but his neck also will develop a broken line between the third and fourth vertebrae.

Even more damaging is to ride with draw reins attached to the sides of the girth instead of between the horse's front legs. This arrangement, which usually is used to "keep the horse together in a frame," teaches him to brace against the device and to go in false elevation, with the muscles on the underside of his neck bulging. This "frame" prevents him from using his topline and also allows him to seek a multitude of subtle evasions that eventually will prohibit true collection.

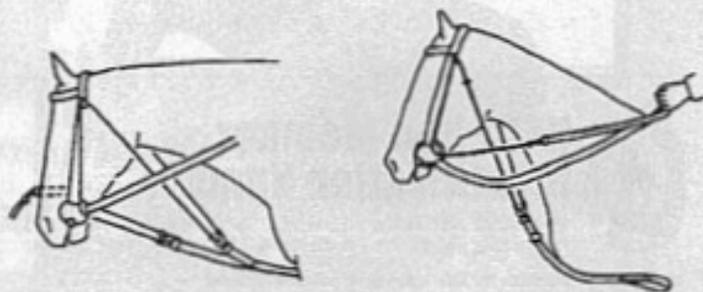
"Gadgets"

Whereas the auxiliary reins I've discussed act directly on the bit and therefore only on the horse's mouth, the *chambon* and the *Gogue* (named for its inventor, the Frenchman René de Gogue) also exert pressure on the poll. Some horses respond well to this, but these gadgets must be introduced very carefully because a horse may panic the first time he feels poll pressure.

Both the chambon and the Gogue are designed to stretch the horse over his topline and to strengthen his back. They can be particularly helpful used in combination with work over ground poles. (In Europe, these gadgets are used primarily in schooling jumpers.) One serious drawback to their use is the fact that, because of the lack of sideways restriction, horses may develop a tendency to "fall through" the outside shoulder while being lunged.

The chambon runs through the reins from the headpiece at the poll and snaps on to the bit rings. When the horse lifts his head, the bit acts as a gag; and the combined pressure on the poll and on the corners of the mouth induce him to stretch forward and down. One drawback to the chambon's use is that, when the horse stretches forward and down, there is no contact with the bit. Therefore, chambon use is not recommended while riding.

Because the Gogue has no fixed attachment to the bit, its action on the mouth is different. According to René de Gogue, one can maintain contact with the bit while using this device, and the Gogue also offers a greater degree of sideways restriction than does the chambon.



Gogue attached for lungeing

Independent Gogue as used in riding

When the Gogue is used independently (as a second rein, as pictured above), its action is similar to that of the draw rein. Used in this manner, the Gogue has a big advantage over the draw rein. Because the stretching effect is obtained chiefly through poll pressure, the contact with the snaffle rein stays a great deal lighter and the horse responds by becoming softer in his mouth, making him more sensitive to the rider's weight and leg aids as well. The independent Gogue provides the rider with many variables that allow its effect to be increased, decreased, or even eliminated.

For more on using the chambon and the Gogue, see the German National Equestrian Federation's book, *Lungeing* (Half Halt Press). *The USDF Lungeing Manual* (available from USDF) is another excellent source of information on lungeing and lungeing technique. Both books are required reading for the USDF Instructor Certification Program.

Sliding side reins, draw reins, the chambon, and the Gogue all aim at stretching the horse's topline forward and down; in contrast, the *overcheck* has quite a different purpose. It attaches to the D-rings on the pommel or the top of the surcingle, runs through the rings of the headpiece at the poll, and then attaches to the bit rings. Horses that bore down on the forehead by leaning heavily on the bit, or that try to jerk their riders forward by setting their molars on

the bit, can be cured with this device. It is commonly used on driving horses to prevent them from grabbing the bit and pulling with their mouths only.

Because the overcheck requires the horse to keep his head in a more or less fixed position, the handler must be very proficient in lungeing before ever considering using this gadget. As with draw reins, the handler who uses the overcheck must maintain good impulsion so as not to create stiffness in the horse's back.

The overcheck also can be useful in the case of the horse that wants to go behind the bit (with his nose tucked behind the vertical) and to "roll himself up" to avoid the rein contact. However, only the most experienced of trainers should use the overcheck in reschooling this problem, and even then with great caution. The horse must be lunged very forward in the overcheck so that he remains active behind and does not simply raise his head and hollow his back. Use of the overcheck is not recommended for use under saddle because of the danger that he could panic, rear, and flip over.

All of the auxiliary reins and gadgets I've discussed in this article have their merits and demerits and should be used with circumspection and expertise. The use of draw reins in particular is inherently risky because it appears to provide a training shortcut, and also because it tends to make bad riding less obvious. However, keep in mind that it is not the devices themselves that cause problems but rather the people who use them incorrectly and without guidance from a knowledgeable professional. ▲

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