

Module 2- Rein Communication



Reins are the only physical communication you have with your horse – so having good rein communication is very important!

Holding the reins like English riding reins is very effective and comfortable for you as the driver. The reins come into your hand from the horse between your ring fingers and pinkies, and then up through your hand and out the top. Trap the end of the rein with your thumb on top of your fist. This way you never have to squeeze to hang on to the reins (tension that would be translated to your horse), they're secure and comfortable in your hand. Keep your wrists straight.

The first key concept to understand about rein communication is contact. Unlike with a ridden horse where you might have drooping reins, and no "contact" you never want to have no contact with your driving horse's mouth. It can be a very light contact, especially during certain movements, but it's like holding your horse's hand and it's scary for them when you suddenly disappear from the other end of those lines.

Contact doesn't mean pulling, and the weight of the contact will vary depending on the horse's preference, the movement, the level of training. Imagine you were walking through a busy parking lot with an independent toddler by the hand. You want to be darn sure they don't let go, but you also don't want to squeeze their little hand too hard. Secure, but soft: that's ideal contact. Another analogy that sometimes helps me: imagine that there is no crownpiece to your bridle, just the bit and reins (or noseband, if you're driving bitless). Your job is to keep that bit in the horse's mouth with the reins, so that communication is uninterrupted.

Contact also needs to be "following" – for example, at the walk, the horse uses their head and neck to balance. This head bobbing gesture is important to allow, so that your horse is comfortable and balanced and using themselves well, so a tight contact that doesn't follow the movement would be very uncomfortable and restrictive for the horse. So our contact needs to be soft enough to give through the elbow and follow the balancing gestures of the head and neck. In a Miniature Horse, this is very small, though we want to allow and encourage it as much as possible as it will improve the walk. Imagine you were driving a 17hh warmblood and how far you'd have to give with your hands on each step for their balancing gestures!

Try It:

Get a pair of reins and a friend. Sit on chairs facing each other and each hold the reins as though you were driving. Set up a nice soft contact and movement as though you are driving a walking horse; forward and back, following the balancing gestures of their head and neck. Then take turns closing your eyes, and having the other person suddenly drop the contact. When I first did this exercise at a Peggy Brown clinic, I felt like I was going to fall off my chair when that contact suddenly disappeared!

A removal of contact is not a release or reward for a driving horse. Softening is okay. No contact at all – especially abruptly – is scary and unsettling.

Our posture is also an important part of driving. Any asymmetries we have are passed on to our horse through the reins; it's no coincidence that my driving horses ALL tend to be stiff to the right! Think about your feet being squarely against the footboard, equal weight on your seatbones. Shrug your shoulders high up to your shoulders and roll them back before you let them settle. Your elbows should be slightly forward from your body, and a direct line from your hands to the horse's mouth. Try to keep your hands over your lap, and direct all rein movements towards your core.

Think of your reins and the horse's mouth as a circuit – the reins don't work independently, and a lot of balance and bend issues will go away if we stop trying to pull them in the direction we want them to go.

Instead of driving with our hands, we drive with our whole body. Once you have established good, consistent contact with your horse (again, soft contact is fine, we're not pulling) instead of steering with our hands, we're going to direct our horse using our core. Imagine you have a flashlight in your belly button. The beam of light extends out to cover your horse. When you want to turn, just turn the beam of light to where you'd like your horse to go.

Try It:

Using a reinboard (or just a bit with the reins attached thrown over a fence or the back of a chair) sit on a firm chair and work on your correct posture. Turn your core as described above and watch how your hands follow, lifting one side of the bit, and dropping the other. Play with how small a movement you can make and still see a change in the position of the bit.

This works because it keeps us from "overdriving" our horse, and keeps the outside rein engaged as well, which helps the horse balance. We don't want to pull our horse around a corner, we want to ask them to bend with the inside rein and control the degree of the curve with our outside rein: a tight turn would mean we give more with our outside rein (turn our "flashlight" a lot more into the turn) and a small turn we would give very little.

Inside rein: the rein on the inside of the current circle or path, the direction they are turning towards.

Outside rein: the rein on the outside of the current circle or path, the direction they are turning away from.

If you are in a situation where you aren't getting enough turn by turning your core, add a "finger wiggle" – we don't want to pull, as a steady pull is easy for a horse to brace against, and that's going to be their instinct due to their opposition reflex. Instead, "activate" the inside rein by wiggling or pulsing your ring finger to soften their jaw and encourage the bend.

Try It:

With your reinboard setup (again, a bit with reins attached thrown over a fence or chair will work great!) try activating a rein with a "finger wiggle" and watch the effect on the bit. Play with how small a movement you can make with your fingers and still see a movement translate to the bit. And remember your horse's mouth is going to be even more sensitive.

While you have the reinboard out, play with some bigger movements, and see the affect on the bit. Miniature Horses are very small and very sensitive – less is more.