

# TRAINING & RETRAINING HORSES

THE TELLINGTON WAY



LINDA  
TELLINGTON-JONES  
with  
Mandy Pretty



— STARTING RIGHT OR STARTING OVER —  
with Enlightened Methods and Hands-On Techniques

# Contents

Foreword by Magali Delgado  
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## **PART I STARTING POINTS 1**

### **1 Introduction 3**

And So It Began 5

Developing My Own Method 7

Seeing with New Eyes:  
The Feldenkrais Influence 11

Breakthroughs in Retraining Horses 12

The Birth of the TTouch® Circle 13

Three Decades of Young  
Horse Training in Wyoming 15

### **2 The Heart of the Tellington TTouch Method 17**

The Cornerstone 18

From Instinct to Intelligence: Self-  
Carriage, Self-Confidence, Self-Control 18

Learning to Act Instead of React 20

Chunking It Down 20

Keys to Success 23

## **PART II SENSIBLE STEPS 29**

### **3 Start Where You Can 31**

Plan to Be Flexible 32

Remember: You Have Choices 35

Keep a Record 36



**4 Groundwork Equipment 39**  
Tools for Trust and Clarity 40

### **5 Observation and Trust Exercises 53**

Be Your Own Detective! 54

Body Exploration 56

Introducing the *Wand* 62

Lowering the Head 65

Taming the Tiger 68

*Case Study: The Story of Parytet* 72

### **6 The Tellington TTouces 77**

Bodywork—Releasing Tension  
and Building Trust 78

The Collection of TTouces 81

The Nine Components of TTouch 83

Circular TTouces 89

Slide and Lift TTouces 95

Extremity TTouces 105

*Case Study: The Story of Indus* 129

|   |            |   |            |
|---|------------|---|------------|
| <b>7 Dance Steps</b>                                  | <b>131</b> | <b>PART III HAPPY PROGRESS</b>            | <b>239</b> |
| Leading Exercises                                     | 132        | <b>10 Time to Saddle Up!</b>              | <b>241</b> |
| Elegant Elephant                                      | 138        | Introducing a Rider Calmly<br>and Quietly | 242        |
| Grace of the Cheetah                                  | 141        | Saddling for the First Time               | 243        |
| Homing Pigeon   | 143        | Sliding the Saddle Pad Exercise           | 243        |
| Dingo   | 148        | Introducing the Saddle                    | 246        |
| Cha Cha   | 156        | Introducing the Bridle                    | 253        |
| Trotting in Hand                                      | 160        | Mounting for the First Time               | 256        |
| Dolphins Flickering<br>Through the Waves              | 162        | First Steps Under the Saddle              | 262        |
| <i>Case Study: The Story of<br/>    Lord Wendland</i> | 172        | Signal to Step Forward                    | 263        |
|   |            | Signals for Stopping                      | 264        |
| <b>8 Playground for<br/>    Higher Learning</b>       | <b>175</b> | First Trot                                | 266        |
| Navigating the Elements                               | 176        | Riding Through the Elements               | 269        |
| The Elements  | 179        | Trail Riding                              | 270        |
| The Labyrinth   | 179        | First Canter                              | 272        |
| The Zebra   | 183        | Riding Equipment for Success              | 274        |
| The Fan   | 183        |   |            |
| Pick-Up Sticks  | 185        | <b>Parting Words</b>                      | <b>283</b> |
| Poles and Cavalletti                                  | 187        | Tellington Training Checklist             | 285        |
| The Platform and the Bridge                           | 187        | Acknowledgments                           | 289        |
| Working with Plastic                                  | 190        | Index                                     | 293        |
| Walking Between People<br>and Under Objects           | 201        |   |            |
| <i>Case Study: The Story of Heartbreaker</i>          | 206        |   |            |
|   |            |   |            |
| <b>9 Ground Driving</b>                               | <b>209</b> |   |            |
| In the Driver's Seat                                  | 210        |   |            |
| Chest Line Driving                                    | 213        |   |            |
| Ground Driving from the Halter                        | 226        |   |            |
| <i>Case Study: The Story of Big Surprise</i>          | 234        |   |            |

## Leading Exercises

7.1 Leading a horse from both sides as shown here is called the *Homing Pigeon* (p. 143) because it gets the horse to “home in” (focus), and it ends the flight reflex by giving the horse boundaries. With this horse, Big Surprise (see p. 234), the weight of the chain on the left side helps him *Lower the Head* (p. 65); on his right, the *Zephyr* lead helps provide that boundary.

How you handle a horse on the ground has direct influence on habits and tendencies under saddle. Each of the following *Leading Exercises* is designed to help you become a clearer, more mindful leader, while bringing your horse into balance. A well-balanced horse with good self-carriage should be able to master each exercise, and the exercises in themselves help achieve this goal (fig. 7.1). If one exercise seems difficult for your horse, try another one, change which side you are leading from, incorporate some of the Elements from the *Playground for Higher Learning* (see chapter 8, p. 175), or take a moment to do a quick *TTouch* bodywork session.

It is a widely accepted fact that groundwork is an integral step in the preparation of any horse going under saddle. The Tellington Method uses a





7.2 Find a willing friend and practice your leading techniques on a human. This will provide valuable verbal feedback, as well as give you an opportunity to put yourself in the horse's shoes when you are the one being "led." This can be an eye-opening experience.

variety of *Leading Exercises* that are designed to logically prepare the horse for the skills he will need to safely and confidently carry a rider. All the exercises encourage healthy, functional postural habits that will physically and mentally prepare the horse for any discipline. A healthy posture helps horses maintain balance in the body, mind, and spirit, and reduces the instances of fear, reactivity, and tension.

These exercises do not necessarily need to be done repeatedly. They are steps in the learning process, teaching horses how to think and understand signals in a balanced way rather than simply be trained to do a specific exercise. They are best done with a considerable level of mindfulness on the handler's part. Every time you lead your horse you have the opportunity to provide him with positive—or negative—information. Paying attention to how you ask, how you allow for a response, and how you use your body language will improve communication, cooperation, and support a balance, relaxed posture (fig. 7.2).

Working with different leading positions allows you and your horse to be safer in difficult situations and become a harmonious unit. The



7.3 A–D Each of the leading positions are designed to help your horse develop balance and self-carriage: *Elegant Elephant* (A); *Grace of the Cheetah* (B); *Dingo* (C); and *Homing Pigeon* (D). Learning to respond to these light cues prepares the horse to understand your aids under saddle.

variations of the leading positions will challenge your own as well as your horse's coordination. All of them are used on both sides of the horse to promote straightness, concentration, and non-habitual movement. Whenever you lead a horse you can take the opportunity to promote a healthy, functional posture and begin to establish positive muscle memory for ridden work (figs. 7.3 A–D). It is important that the handler be as conscious of her own movement and posture as she is of the horse. The quality and subtlety of the signal and communication is as important as the cooperation and result. Each exercise incorporates a clear signal, use of body language and voice to teach the horse and build a level of communication that will transfer to being ridden. The more precise you can become, the more acutely and quickly your horse will respond to you in all scenarios. If at first you feel uncoordinated, do not fret! Remember that throughout a horse's life he will have handlers who give slightly unclear signals. It is an educational

experience in patience and tolerance for your horse to have a handler who is learning something new while he is.

In all of the *Leading Exercises*, use verbal cues as well. Verbal cues are extremely useful for young horses because they can be transferred to later use under saddle. I use “And...” before each request because it lets the horse know that a signal is coming and is less abrupt than simply saying, “Whoa,” or “Walk on.”

Once you are comfortable with each exercise, you can seamlessly change between any of them depending on the situation and what you are asking your horse to do. Remember that these exercises are not listed in any particular order. Each horse is an individual and should not be trained by one set recipe. Let your horse and your intuition lead you through the positions in the best order for you. If one exercise is too challenging or you or your horse feel unsuccessful, simply change which position you start with. Each one will highlight a horse’s strengths or perhaps challenge him to learn balance, focus, and posture.

Here are a few specific recommendations, depending on your horse’s stage of training:

### FOAL OR WEANLING

- 1 For very young horses, the most useful and effective *Leading Exercise* is usually *Elegant Elephant* (p. 138) for getting from points A to B. The clear use of the *Wand*, your body position, and signal on the lead help the foal learn how to make smooth, balanced transitions from walk to halt and back again.
- 2 In some cases, it can be useful to teach a foal *Dingo* (p. 148); however, if you are not doing a lot of leading, you will probably find that *Elegant Elephant* is all you need.
- 3 Most foals will find *Homing Pigeon* (p. 143) to be too much stimulation, but if you feel the need to try it, have the second handler start by just walking in the position without a lead actually attached. This allows the foal to get used to the idea of people on both sides.
- 4 I do not recommend lungeing very young horses. It is more likely to do harm than provide benefit.

### UNSTARTED THREE- OR FOUR-YEAR-OLD

- 1 Depending on how much your horse has been led already, you will probably find *Elegant Elephant* (p. 138) the easiest starting point. This Leading Exercise provides clear, concise signals and can be easy for the handler to master as well. Of course, there are exceptions to everything, so if the exercise feels “discombobulated,” try a different position!
- 2 Establishing a clear understanding of *Dingo* (p. 148) will be invaluable for working in a variety of situations—on the ground and under saddle. Taking this skill to the *Cha Cha* (p. 156) will begin to create more self-carriage and increase the horse’s ability to shift his weight in any direction.

## Becoming an Ambidextrous Handler

Why is it considered “correct” to lead a horse from the left? Anyone who has gone through Pony Club or 4-H knows that leading a horse from the “far” or right side is considered incorrect. Horses are to be handled primarily from the “near” or left side. Unfortunately, this leftover military tradition is not particularly useful for your horse’s overall straightness, flexibility, and balance. Leading horses from the left originated from the right-hand dominant military tradition of having the sword scabbard on the left side of the body. Leading and mounting horses from the left side meant that the sword was not in the way.

The result is that many horses are very one-sided and have a difficult time stopping without a left bend, or they might not

be able to be led from the right at all. This tendency can be seen in unhandled foals, as they mimic their dam’s posture, and is reinforced as they are primarily handled from the left side. Horses that rush on the lead will generally be turned in a circle as a way to slow them down, which increases imbalance to the left and often results in a tendency to drop the left shoulder and fall toward the handler.

Practicing leading and handling from *both* sides will go a long way to improve overall balance in posture and mentally accustom your horse to having a person on either side. It is also an excellent non-habitual exercise for handlers who, more often than not, are much less comfortable leading from the right.

- 3 If you have a second person to help, the *Homing Pigeon* (p. 143), even if only done once or twice, can have a huge impact. You will gain insight about how straight (or crooked) your horse is and help him develop confidence by giving him a positive, non-habitual experience in an unfamiliar situation.
- 4 As your horse gets more balanced and tuned in to your signals, work toward increasing the distance in *Grace of the Cheetah* (p. 141) and eventually *Dolphins Flickering Through the Waves* (p. 162). Trotting in hand once your horse is clear on the basics and calm about being asked to show different skills is an important step before lungeing and trotting under saddle.
- 5 It can be very interesting for you and your three- or four-year-old horse to practice these different *Dance Steps* as you incorporate Elements from the *Playground for Higher Learning* (p. 175). Each Element encourages you to practice halt, walk, turn, and wait—simple, effective ways to enhance balance and communication.
- 6 Once you can maintain distance in these positions and the walk cue is clear, work at even more of a distance on the lunge line. Consider lungeing to be a way to practice transitions and voice cues at a distance, and eventually, more trot work. Remember, it has been said that horses have a finite number of circles in them, so going around and around mindlessly is not productive. Keep the lunge work short and interesting.

#### REEDUCATING THE MATURE HORSE

- 1 For horses with a lot of history of being led, the *Leading Exercises* give them a new perspective on how they move in balance and use their body on the lead line. Regardless of which *Leading Exercise* you are practicing, pay attention to the older horse's posture in transitions and his overall demeanor.
- 2 The *Dingo* (p. 148) is useful, especially when the horse has a history of difficulty loading onto the trailer, going over obstacles, or moving forward easily under saddle.

- 3 Taking advantage of a friend to help you lead your horse in *Homing Pigeon* (p. 143) can be a fantastic experience for the horse. It is a very non-habitual exercise and shifts the horse's expectation of what being led is all about.
- 4 Some older horses have had unpleasant experiences being lunged, such as excessive stress and boring repetition. Change their perspective and incorporate some of the *Playground for Higher Learning* (p. 175) as you work at a distance with *Dolphins Flickering Through the Waves* (p. 162). Be sure to vary how you lead and what you ask for so you do not become repetitive or predictable.

### Elegant Elephant

Named after the resemblance to the way an elephant handler might guide the animal's trunk with a small stick, this leading position is an excellent choice when first working with a horse on the ground. It allows the handler to provide clear, precise signals, and begins to show the horse how to move in balance and self-carriage through transitions and turns (fig. 7.4). This position will provide the most direct influence over the horse and the most control.

### Basic Position

When first learning any *Leading Exercise*, it is often easiest to begin on the near (left) side of the horse because you are most accustomed to it. Once you are comfortable with the mechanics on the left, try it on the right.

*Elegant Elephant* places the handler near the horse's head, level with his eye. With the *Zephyr* lead attached over the noseband or up the side of the halter, the handler holds the knot end of the lead in her outside hand, with the excess line folded between the index and middle finger, as you might a lunge line.

Hold the *Wand* in your outside hand, resting in your palm, with the button end pointing up. Find the point where the *Wand* is best balanced in your hand with approximately one-third between your hand and the button end.

Take your hand nearest the horse and gently clasp the rope part of the *Zephyr* lead between your thumb and forefinger. You will be anywhere from very close to the side hardware of the halter to 12 inches away.



### Moving Forward

To ask the horse to come forward, move the *Wand*, which you hold level with the horse's nose, in a fluid motion forward in the direction you would like the horse to go. Allow your body to open as you make this movement.

Use the line to give a forward signal by gently sliding your fingers down the line as you say, "And waaalk." Give your horse a moment to respond to the signal before you start walking off so you do not just drag him forward. Ideally, the motion of your body and the *Wand*, combined with the signal on the lead and your voice, allows the horse to move forward without raising his head and tightening his back. Let the end of the *Wand* guide the horse where you would like him to go and at what level you would like his head. Be aware that the lead line does not tighten as you are walking.

### Halting

To halt, begin by making a very small signal with the *Wand* to warn your horse that a cue is coming. Staying level with your horse's head, begin

7.4 The *Elegant Elephant* is usually the easiest position to influence posture and straightness from the ground. The handler creates a clear signal with the *Wand*, lead, body position, and voice. The horse follows you, rather than being slightly ahead of you with you back by his shoulder, as is typically taught. In *Elegant Elephant*, the horse can actually see you.

to quarter-turn your body slightly toward the horse as you say, “And whoooooa.”

As you make the quarter-turn with your body and give the verbal cue, allow the *Wand* to quietly swoop toward the horse’s off side shoulder as you give a slight up-and-outward signal and release on the lead. Touching the outside shoulder will help the horse halt by shifting his weight through his entire body and keeping him straight. Showing the horse how to halt by shifting his weight back in addition to a gentle signal on the lead begins to teach him halt without raising his head and neck, which is a key skill for later ridden work.

Be aware that your feet will likely be very obedient and halt as soon as you say, “And whoa.” Override this habit and stay in motion until you feel your horse walking into the halt. If you simply stop your feet before your horse is organized enough to actually stop his forward motion, you will create crookedness by inadvertently turning the horse around you as a pivot point. The quarter-turn motion will help you stay level with his head to better achieve straightness and balance. As your horse becomes more balanced and tuned into your body language, your voice command will be more in sync with the actual halt.

### *Troubleshooting*

If your horse is not halting easily, try touching him gently on the nose with the *Wand* before you bring it to his chest, and check that you are not falling too far back in your leading position. You may also check to see that your signal on the line is not too abrupt and that you give a clear ask and smooth release motion. Making some large turns left and right or using some of the obstacles in the *Playground for Higher Learning* (p. 175) will also help your horse find enough balance to stop in harmony. If none of these suggestions help your horse find a smooth halt, try one of the other *Leading Exercises* first, and come back to the *Elegant Elephant* later.

### **Turning**

When guiding the horse through turns left and right in this position, think of yourself as the pencil on a compass in a geometry set. Staying level or slightly ahead of the horse’s nose as you turn the horse away from you will create a correct, whole-body bend in your horse and avoid a dropped shoulder or rushing turn. When turning the horse toward you, be sure and have