



Teaching Soft Hands

A rein board can be used to teach beginning riders or drivers how little tension is needed to make a bit move.

Using a Rein Board for Riding and Driving

By Major George W. Paffendorf

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF MAJOR GEORGE W. PAFFENDORF

Teaching participants how to rein for riding and/or driving is a two-fold task. Instructors, of course, focus on how to handle the reins to effectively communicate with the horse. At the same time, they are concerned with helping participants learn to develop soft hands that respect the horse's sensitive mouth. But how can instructors impart this sensitive feel for the horse's mouth while the rider is worried about balancing in the saddle or the driver concerned with steering a cart or carriage?

Almost all PATH Intl. Certified Driving Instructors will know right away how to use a rein board to help participants develop better rein handling skills. Many riding instructors, on the other hand, may not know how this training aid can benefit their participants. The rein board helps all participants develop reining skills, including a sensitivity for how to hold the reins before they are attached to the bit in the horse's mouth. A beginning rider or driver can become very busy and overwhelmed when the horse begins moving, so the cart or the saddle may not be the best platforms for practicing the intricacies of reining. The rein board allows a new rider or a novice driver a chance to learn how to change direction and stop in an unhurried manner. It can also be taught as a ground lesson or indoors during inclement weather if an indoor arena isn't accessible. Best of all, horses appreciate the beginner's quieter, lighter handling of the reins.

Teaching Tactics

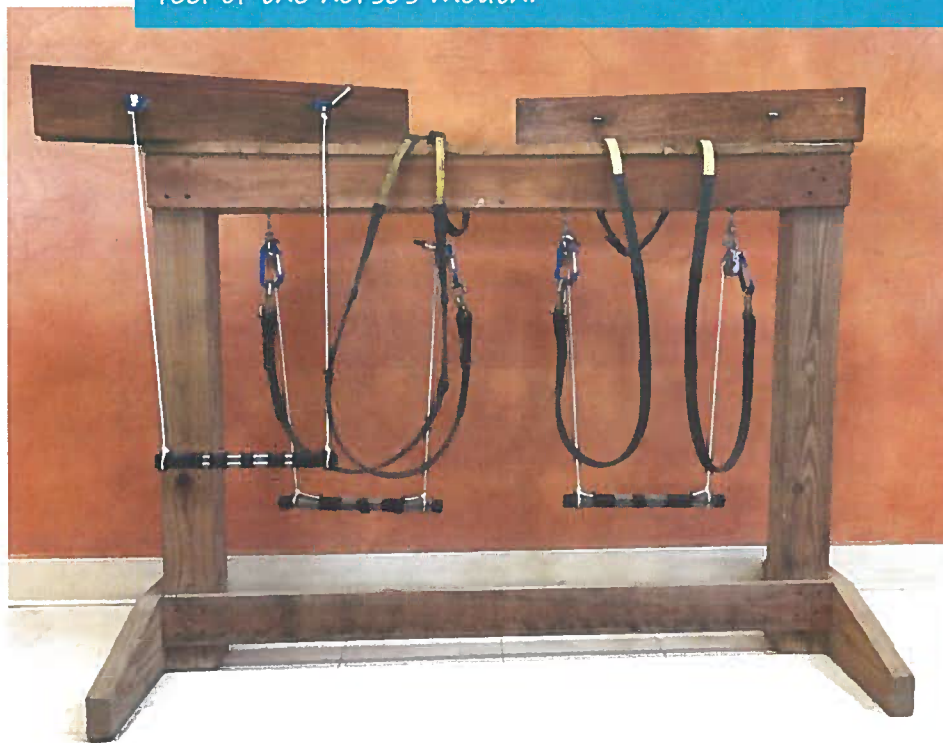
Using the device, participants can practice how to pick up and hold the reins and communicate directions for turning, stopping and backing up. A weight that looks like a metal bar and represents the bit is attached to the reins to simulate contact and helps participants begin to learn the feel of the horse's mouth at the end of each rein. This way participants learn to visualize and

feel how little tension is needed to make the bit move.

Rein boards can be permanently mounted or portable. (See "Construct a Rein Board" on page 42 for details on making one.) Some have a very simple design while others are more elaborate. The device can be designed for two side-by-side participants, usually the participant and instructor. It can also be used

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The rein board's weighted metal bar represents the bit, which is attached to the reins to simulate contact and help participants learn the sensitive feel of the horse's mouth.



Constructing a Rein Board

The device is not difficult to construct. With a few hand tools and some carpentry skills, one can be built in a few hours or less. Below are plans for two different styles. One can be attached to the wall of the barn while the other is portable and is made to slip over a fence rail. All use a similar setup consisting of a metal bar and screw eyes or pulleys to which the reins attach. Most, if not all, of the materials can be obtained at a local lumber yard or hardware store. Many stores will cut the lumber, if given the measurements. Using pulleys will provide a very smooth operating rein board. The wood can be painted, stained or left natural. The use of treated lumber is optional.

Wall Mounted Rein Board

The material list is for a single participant. Double the materials for a two-participant board. Building costs are about \$20.

- One 1" X 6" X 24" pine board
- Two 30" pieces of white (or any color) parachute cord
- Two 3/4" (#6) screw eyes
- Two 2" carabiners (lightweight)
- Three 3/8" X 12" threaded rod (usually has blue ends)
- One roll of black electrical tape

Start with the pine board. Measure six inches in from each end and down 2 3/4 inches and make a pencil mark. At the mark, screw in a screw eye. Do not go so deep that the point goes through the board or your finger. Fasten the board to a flat wall in the barn (low traffic area) and mount it with screws, three feet up from the floor.

Take the three metal rods and place two on the bottom and one on top of the others and tape them tightly together using the electrical tape. Use a wrap on each end and three or more wraps equally spaced along the bar. This will hold them securely together and provide some weather-proofing.

Take one piece of the parachute cord and tie it securely to one end of the metal bar. Use a double knot and pull it tight. Take the second piece of parachute cord and tie it to the other end of the bar. The loose ends of the knot can be taped to the bar to make it nice and neat.

Hold the metal bar with the two cords below the board, run one cord straight up through one of the eye screws and tie off a carabiner with a very tight double knot. Run the cord up through the second eye screw and tie off the second carabiner. Be careful to make sure the metal bar hangs level when the carabiners are tied off. Attach a set of rainbow reins to the carabiners using snaps on the rein ends or buckles to make it easy to take the reins on and off.

Portable Rein Board

This board has a top, front and back so it can be slipped over a wood or plastic fence rail. It is very light and easy to carry. The material list, except as noted below, and basic construction is the same as the wall-mounted rein board and is for a single participant. Double the materials for a two-participant board. Building costs are approximately \$25.

- Two 1" X 6" X 24" pine boards

Follow the plans and construct a wall-mounted rein board. This will be the front. Stand the board you just made on a flat surface. Take one of the 24-inch pieces and stand it up in back of the front piece. Place the other 24-inch piece on top of the two others, like a roof. Even up the edges and ends to make a pocket to slip over a fence rail. Once everything is even, screw them together, putting at least five screws along each edge.

with one or two participants. In addition to introducing the skill of rein handling, it provides one-on-one bonding time for the instructor and participant.

Therapeutic Riding at Centenary, a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center in Hackettstown, NJ, began using a rein board for beginning riders when they developed the curriculum for its veterans' program, Operation Centaur, and its youth program for teenagers who are at-risk. Each program involves several groundwork lessons that occur before participants ride. Incorporated in each lesson is time on the rein board to learn rein handling. Because much of this is repetitive, an average learning session runs about 15 minutes, and participants practice for several sessions before progressing to the arena for a riding lesson. A distinct advantage of this practice is seen when participants sit up tall in the saddle or carriage seat for the first time and then pick up and hold the reins properly.

For both disciplines, instructors teach basic rein aids for turning, stopping and backing. They teach participants how to hold the reins correctly so they can convey their signals effectively rather than give confusing signals that can make the horse uncomfortable. As participants advance in their skills, they learn to use rein aids in more subtle ways to cue their horse.

Teaching Driving Skills

When used with a driving participant, it is usually most effective for the instructor and participant to sit in a chair or bench in back of the rein board. The three aids used in driving are the hands, voice and whip. All three can be practiced on a rein board. Remind the driver to sit straight and tall with the back a few inches away from the backrest. The feet should be resting on the floor with one foot ahead of the other as a

brace. Riding reins or shorter driving reins are used, and gloves are typically worn. (Brown leather is the traditional color.) Skills that can be taught a beginning driver with a rein board include:

- Taking up the reins when entering a vehicle
- Holding the reins (an English-style rein hold is usually best for beginners)
- Managing the reins, including transferring the reins back and forth from instructor to participant
- Developing a feel for contact (enough tension on the rein to feel the weight but not enough to move it)
- Shortening, lengthening and adjusting the reins by practicing bridging and different ways to hold the reins
- Understanding how to direct rein
- Halt and half-halting
- Practicing turning—have drivers imagine they are watching where the horse and carriage is going, looking into turns and checking for obstacles
- Handling the whip

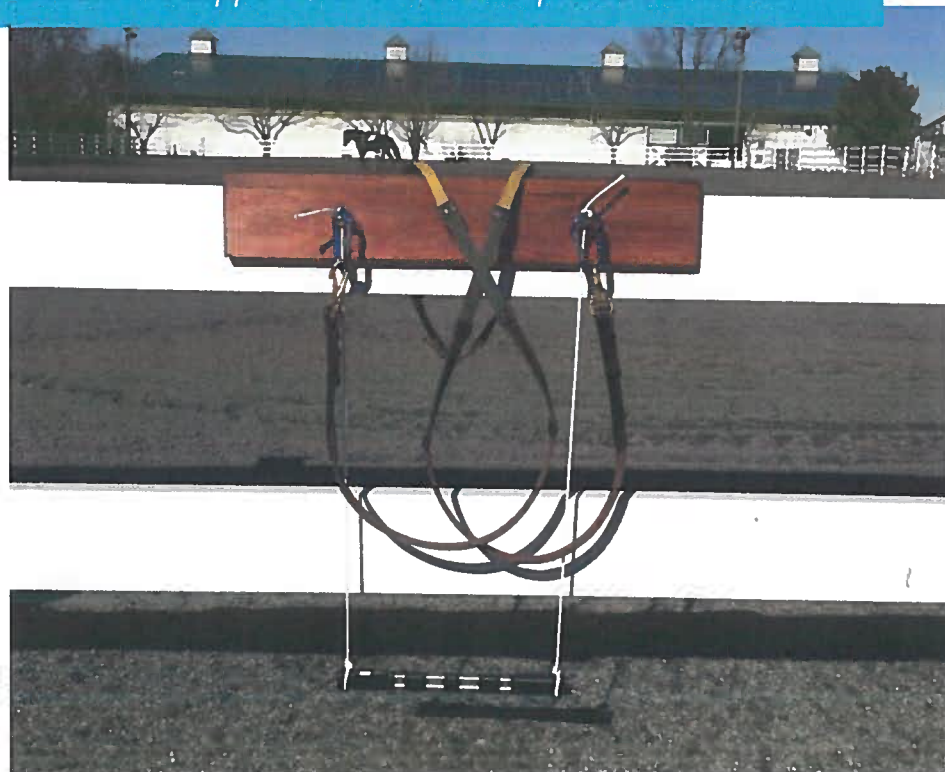
Along with the rein board aids, beginning drivers can practice the use of voice commands (walk-on, trot and whoa), communicating with the header and handling emergencies.

Practicing Riding Skills

With riders, it is usually best to have the participants stand in back of the board, if they are able to do this. The reins attached to the rein board lie as if on a horse's neck, and rainbow reins are preferable to teach the following skills:

- Holding the reins with an English-style rein contact
- Developing a feel for contact (enough tension on the rein to feel the weight but not enough to move it)

A portable rein board is very light and easy to carry and can be slipped over a wood or plastic fence rail.



- Shortening, lengthening and adjusting the reins
- Understanding how to direct rein
- Halt and half-halting
- Practicing turning—watching where the horse is going, looking into turns and checking for obstacles

Along with rein board aids, beginning riders can practice the use of voice commands (walk-on, trot and whoa) and handling emergencies.

Using a rein board can augment a center's riding and driving programs and benefit participants and horses. Good habits develop through repetition and form more easily when they are practiced correctly. Understanding basic rein handling and contact before riding or driving increases a participant's knowledge and confidence and accelerates the learning process. Mistakes are worked out on the rein board, not in

the saddle or the carriage. Horses will be happier and respond better with novice riders and drivers who have already begun cultivating soft, quiet hands. Although beginners still have a long way to go in developing confidence in the use of their seat, legs, heels and whip technique, they will have already acquired more responsive hands and will be off to a good start thanks to the rein board.

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