

## Don't Forget Your Lunge Money!

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At this stage in my career, I don't teach many real beginners, but occasionally there's an exception. Last year I began helping a neophyte—the fifty-year-old husband of a long-time student and close friend. Over the course of the year, this from-scratch, casual rider developed beyond the mental up-down, up-down stage but his riding was still buried deep within his left brain—typical of an adult, once-a-week rider with a background in computers. He had experienced sessions on the lunge-line before when he was learning to post, but recently we returned to the lunge but for a different reason.

Once we got him situated on the circle with side-reins and a stabilized tempo, I produced from my bag of tricks... a "Bop-It." If you aren't familiar with this toy, it's an electronic game shaped something like a foot-long tube with a flattened spherical bulge in the middle. On one end there's a yellow handle, on the other a blue knob. Once the device is energized it emits a stultifying, rhythmical sound not unlike that of two sandpaper blocks being rubbed together. Over this noise, a voice in the same rhythmical cadences demands that you either "bop it!" which requires instantly whacking the bulge, or that you "pull it!" which entails (you guessed) quickly pulling the yellow handle or that you "twist it!" which involves the appropriate manipulation of the opposite end. As you perform these tasks successfully, the Bop-It's imprecations come at you faster and faster and in an entirely unpredictable, random sequence. If you are slow to react or reflexively hit the wrong part of it, the Bop-It yowls at you derisively and demands that you, the bumbling fool, start over.

In the old days riders on the lunge were invited to braid ropes in their fingers or remove their vest, turn it inside out, and put it back on. This was the microchip version of the same exercise. With a little practice, my student got his Bop-It Mojo working and was then able to keep up the game whether he held it in front of his belt buckle like the reins or over his head or behind his back.

After the session he mused, "You know, I wasn't thinking about my riding at all!" And, no surprise, it was far more fluid and natural as a result.

Years ago I sensed a similar mechanistic theme in my own riding. I had no Bop-It available, but I did join a polo club and played for a few years. I found that aside from battering my shins and straining my elbow, the experience put a missing element of spontaneity into my riding—a quality that child riders with backyard ponies grow up with but which is sadly missing from those of us who were first exposed to horses in our young adult years.

While on the subject of lungeing, I am periodically confronted with a rider who needs that time to refine his or her seat but wants to "get on with the fun stuff." I tell them of an incidental encounter with Tad Coffin on a fall afternoon in Massachusetts. I had stopped in at the stable where he worked to pick up a saddle for someone. There in a dusty back paddock I found him, the Individual and Team Gold Medalist in the Three

Day Event at the previous Olympic Games and a more recent competitor at the World Three Day Championships, on a circle being lunged by his working student, perfecting his seat because when he was schooling he knew he was too busy to concentrate on that part of riding. If that sort of attention to detail was good enough for him, it shouldn't be "above" any of the rest of us!