

CHAPTER 2. HARNESSING AND TRAINING

2.1 HARNESSING OF DRAUGHT CATTLE

2.1.6 HOW TO MAKE THE REINS FROM RAW HIDE

Source: S.P. Ejoku, Soroti, Uganda

INTRODUCTION

Animals tend to follow their heads when moving and advantage is taken of this when fitting the various types of head harnesses to steer them. In some regions, three people are needed to drive a team of working animals. One person leads the team, a second person handles the implement and a third person walks alongside, encouraging the animals to move. There is clearly much advantage to be gained if only one person can fully control both the animals and the implement.

The use of the complete head harness helps to achieve this goal; it comprises the halter, the coupling and the steering rope (see **Module 2.1.5**). This harness does not involve any nose punching and thus avoids any injury to the animal. The steering ropes pass through the eyes on the yoke to avoid them tangling with the feet of the animal (see **Modules 2.1.2 and 2.1.5**).

WHAT IS NEEDED FOR MAKING REINS FROM RAW HIDE

Before starting to make the reins by this traditional, East African method, make sure the following items are available:

- A suitable hide, selected from an animal over 2 years old. Make sure the hide is free of any cuts or other defects. Purchase, or obtain, the complete hide.
- Water to soak the hide; it could be obtained either from a drum or from a flowing river.
- At least one litre of engine oil (the cheapest available), vegetable oil or cooking fat.
- A point of support for hanging the reins, normally a tree branch about 3 metres high.
- An empty drum or similar support for the weight described below.
- A weight of between 40 and 50 kg (eg. a "V" shaped branch with a rock attached, etc...)
- A pole, about 2.5 metres long, for twisting the reins

SOAKING THE RAW HIDE

The dry cured hide must first be softened before it can be cut and worked. This is done by soaking it in water for 5 to 7 days. When it is soaked for 7 days, the hair will be easy to remove, most of it falling out during the soaking and the rest when it is subjected to the twisting

process. Alternatively, soak it for 3 or 4 days and then leave it in a plastic bag a further day. If the hide is required still with the hairs in place, soaking should only last about five days.

TRIMMING THE HIDE

After the soaking process, drain the hide and remove the excess water. Now trim off the irregular corners of the neck and legs to leave an oval and fairly regular shape. The smaller pieces can be used later, cut into shorter strips and joined to form a longer rein.

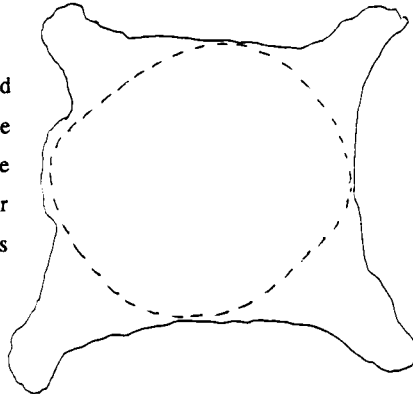


Fig. 1 Trimming the edges of the hide

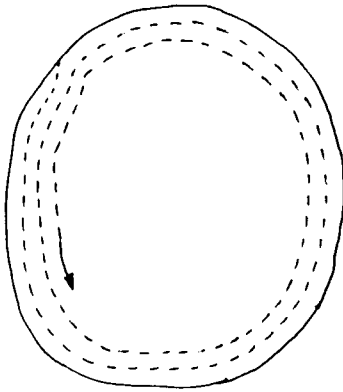


Fig. 2 Cutting the hide into a strip

CUTTING THE HIDE INTO A STRIP

Use a sharp knife and start working from the outer edge, cutting the hide into a single and very long single strip. Make sure that the strip width is kept constant at about 7.5 cm wide (four fingers width); this will avoid any narrower and hence, weaker parts of the rein.

FORMING THE LOOPS

The strip of hide is now looped over a branch or a beam, some 4 or 5 metres above the ground. Support the weight on the drum, well off the ground, and thread this free end of the strip through the weight. Form the first loop by making a small cut in the strip and passing the free end through, securing it with a knot. The length of the loop should be such that when it hangs from the branch with the weight attached, it is about 50 to 80 cm above the ground.

Now pull steadily on the strip near the end that went through the slit and gradually the main rein will follow in loops over the branch. Once the entire strip has been looped over the branch and through the weight, tie the final end through a slit made in the last loop.

TWISTING

Remove the support (the drum) from under the weight and place one end of a 2.5 metre pole through the space between the loops and above the weights. Push on the end of the pole and walk round and round in a circle until the loops are twisted tightly together, lifting the weight higher and until it is difficult to push any further.

Pull the pole out and stand well clear as the coils unwind themselves. When they have started to wind themselves in the opposite direction, quickly reinsert the pole and continue twisting in this opposite direction. This twisting process should now be continued as often as possible and for between 4 and 8 hours per day.

Each day, uncoil the loops and pull them over the branch a little to change the part which is in contact with the branch and the weight, so ensuring that all parts of the rein are worked equally. Overnight, the reins must be left wound up and the winding pole locked against a solid support, most conveniently the trunk of the tree. This stops the reins from drying out.

OILING

After the first few days, oil must be applied to the strip to avoid it from drying out. Clean engine oil, cooking oil or animal fat can be used, the amount applied depending on how much the rein can absorb. It is poured slowly over the twisted rein, from the top and so that all is soaked up by the leather.

FINISHING THE REINS

The twisting process should be continued for about two weeks and until the reins are completely supple. This may be checked by making sure that any part of the rein can be curled into a circle of 8 cm diameter or less. The fleshy part of the rein should be peeled off methodically and if the hide has been treated for removing the hair, these should now all come off easily.

MAKING THE STROPS

The strops are twisted reins which fit under the animal's neck and lock into the notches on the yoke pegs (skeis). They are made as follows:

- Cut a rein 150 cm long and make slits at each of the ends;

- Twist the rein whilst pulling it and until it starts to form knots;
- Fold one end to about one third the way along the twisted rein and let this loop twist;
- Slip the other slit end through the slit in the first end and let the remaining rein twist;
- Pass the first twisted loop through this slit from the other end so that the strop is locked;
- Now pull the strop from the two looped ends and twist it again until it is uniform shape.
These looped ends can now be spread to fit over the pegs and will lock in place.

MAKING THE HALTER (see also **Figs.4** and **5** of **Module 2.1.5**)

The halter fits over the head of the animal and provides a connection for the coupling and the steering rope so that head control of the animal in work is possible. It is made as follows:

- Cut a length of rein 230 cm long and about 4 cm wide;
- Make two short slits at one end of the rein, the first 5 cm from the end and the other 15 cm from the end; now pass the other end through the second slit and then the whole rein through the first slit; this forms an eye for the halter;
- Mark the centre of the rein between the eye and the other end; make two more slits, one 12.5 cm on either side of this centre mark;
- Now cross the two ends to form the nose loop for the animal and pass each of the ends through one of the slots just made, from the inside; adjust the loop length to fit the animal comfortably around the nose about a hand's width above the nostrils and loose enough so that three fingers pass easily under it. Remove it again and lock each end with a knot laid carefully flat so as not to rub the animal;
- Fit the halter and tie the loose end through the eye behind the animal's ears.

MAKING THE COUPLING (see **Fig.6** in **Module 2.1.5**)

The coupling is very useful to ensure that the animals' heads both move in the same direction when a signal is given. It is made as follows:

- Take a length of rein about 4 metres long and at least 1 cm wide; thread it through the halters of the two animals and adjust the length correctly, holding it in the middle;
- Cross the ends over and make a knot with one end over the coupling rope; adjust the length exactly by sliding this knot along the coupling and then tie a knot with the other end over the other side of the coupling. The two free ends are now tied loosely over the yoke to be out of the way.