

Under what circumstances would I want to use a running martingale?

BILL--First, let's be clear on what we're talking about. A running martingale is a strap of leather that connects to the girth, passes between the horse's front legs, and at about chest height splits into two straps which terminate in metal rings through which the reins pass. There is also a yoke around the horse's neck which keeps the martingale itself from drooping low enough that the horse's leg could be entangled. It is a legal device permitted in the schooling arena at dressage shows but not in the classes themselves. It is the only kind of martingale permitted in eventing.

Occasionally, you will come across another device which looks like a breast collar and has two fixed rings which lie flush against the horse's shoulders, one on either side. When the reins are passed through these fixed rings, this contraption is also referred to as a "running martingale" but it is not. It is not legal at USEF/USDF dressage competitions under any circumstances. For some reason these appear in Arabian barns and almost nowhere else. They severely limit the direction from which the rein can affect the horse's mouth (not necessarily undesirable for riders with atrocious hands) and they tend to produce a "head set", which of course, we are not seeking.

Conventional running martingales don't do much for me either. Now and then I come across a horse which carries its head too high, and a running martingale will suggest to him that he can bring it down. At least as often, it has the opposite effect—the head comes up; the point on the rein at the ring (midway between the bit and the hand) stays down; the bit/wrist/elbow straight line is broken; the bit makes more downward pressure on the bars of the mouth; and the head wants to go up even higher. It has somewhat the same effect as when you try to pull a horse's head down by lowering your hands—that hardly *ever* works!

I don't want a device that restricts my ability to vary the reins' effects. I want to be able to follow (or to lead) the horse in any direction that will help him understand. The "rings" can interfere with that.

You'll also hear people say they put a martingale on to keep a horse from rearing. That, I'm afraid, is just silliness. If a horse wants to rear, a martingale isn't going to keep his front end on the ground, and once he does stand up, it may contribute to him losing his balance and being *more* likely to fall over with you.

A martingale can help with a horse that tosses his head violently. It won't make him stop the habit, but at least while he's doing it, you can prevent him from re-arranging your face with the top of his head. For this job, however, I'd much rather use a standing martingale, adjusted loosely the way fox hunters do as opposed to the hunter trainers' "snug 'em up tight so they can't move" approach.

I own a running martingale. I hardly ever use it. Riding cross country would be the exception. Fifty or sixty years ago a couple of Olympic level event horses drowned on course because they fell wearing standing martingales and couldn't get their heads above the water. Since then, eventors have been obligated to use only the running variety if they use one at all.