

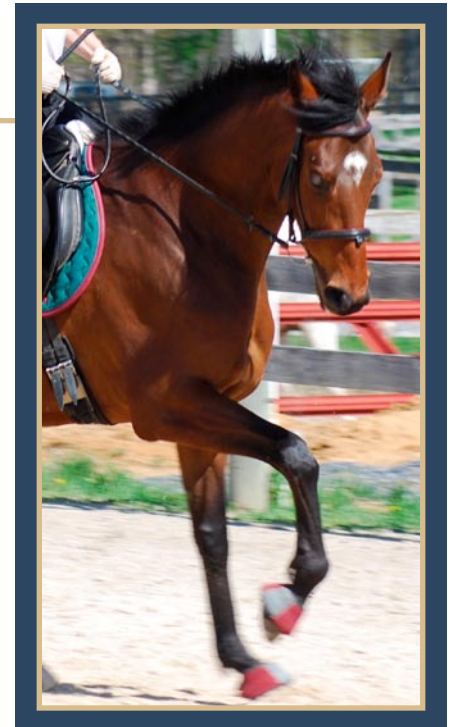


Tim Lewthwaite Riding Instruction: Lesson #5

TROT TO CANTER

Transitions from trot to canter occur when the horse breaks the two-beat gait of the trot and moves into the three beat gait of the canter. The first leg to break the two-beat sequence of the trot is the inside (or leading) foreleg. If you are on right rein, that would be the right foreleg and if you are on the left rein that would be the left foreleg.

The inside foreleg breaks the two beat sequence on the trot, however, it is the outside hind leg that is the first leg to strike off in the canter. So when people talk about the three beats of the canter, it starts with the outside hind leg as beat #1. Beat #2 is the inside hind leg with the outside foreleg together. The third beat is the inside foreleg. Then there is a moment of suspension when all four legs are in the air before the sequence starts again.



The moment of suspension in canter - all four feet off the ground.

WHAT THE HORSE DOES

When the horse strikes off into canter, he should do so by lifting up through his withers and freeing his forehead. To get a nice canter transition from the trot, it is important that the horse is working in a well-balanced trot with good energy. This means that he has engaged his hind legs under his body, is light in the forehead and is not rushing. As the horse breaks the two-beat sequence of the trot with his inside foreleg, he lifts up through his withers and then strikes off with his outside hind leg. This is an important thing for riders to be aware of - the horse should lift through his withers as he strikes off into canter, he should not fall or rush forwards into it.



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WHAT THE RIDER DOES

Once the rider has established a nice balanced trot with good rhythm and energy:

1. Half-halt on the outside rein. This serves both to let the horse know that you are about to ask for something new, and it will also help to rebalance him onto his hindquarters.
2. Weight the inside seat bone. A helpful hint to do this in a subtle way is to pull your outside shoulder back a little.
3. Have your inside leg at the girth.
4. Outside leg comes behind the girth and asks the horse to strike off with his outside hind leg.
5. Make sure not to lean forwards with your upper body. Remember, the horse is trying to lift through his withers to strike off into canter, the last thing he needs is for your weight to be falling forwards!

SOME COMMON FAULTS

1. The most common fault I find with riders occurs when they ask for the canter and they do not get an immediate response from the horse: the rider loses their upper-body position and collapses forwards in an attempt to get the horse to go into canter. The rider has to remember that the canter transition is about allowing the horse to lift himself into the new gait. If you don't get the transition when you first ask for it, just reorganize the trot and ask the horse again - don't let a lack of responsiveness/understanding from the horse make you ride poorly.



In the first photo, Jenny is in a working trot preparing to ask for the canter. She could have Ears more engaged and balanced (note how he looks a bit downhill in how he carries himself) as this would help both her and Ears in the next photo. In the second photo you see how Ears lifts through his withers into the canter, but you also see how Jen has allowed herself to collapse through the waist. Ears is showing a bit of resistance - note the swishing of the tail. Jen does recover her position quickly in the final photo.



- The horse will sometimes give you the wrong lead. There are a number of reasons this can happen. Young horses may not understand the aids. Make sure you are being consistent in your position and aids when asking for the canter. A young horse will make mistakes, but by consistent riding on your part, and through repetition, the horse will come to understand what you are asking.

LEG-YIELDING ON A CIRCLE

One of my favorite exercises to do while riding is to apply the leg-yield aids while I am riding circles. The benefit of this is that it encourages the horse to engage his inside hind leg further under his body, thus increasing his balance and encouraging him to work properly over his back. Start off in the walk, then move up to trot and then finally to canter.

Begin on a 20-meter circle with your dressage whip in your inside hand. As you go around the circle apply your inside leg at the girth to ask the horse to move sideways. Also use your outside hand to apply a half halt a fraction of a second after you have applied the inside leg. Apply the aids for a few strides and then stop and ride the circle as you would normally, then come back and re-apply the leg yield aids. If he doesn't pay attention to your leg, you may have to brush him with the whip behind your leg.



You don't have to move the horse sideways a great distance, what you are aiming for here is the sensation that the horse is yielding to your leg. He will do this in two ways: he will both give you the sensation of moving out on the circle and he will also yield through his top-line, becoming rounder in his frame and head carriage as his inside hind leg engages further under his body. Try it first in the walk, then the trot and finally in the canter. Be careful to make sure your horse doesn't over bend his neck to the inside - your outside rein will help you keep his neck straight.

You can also apply the leg yield aids as your ride corners, and even while you keep the horse on a straight line. It's all about encouraging the horse to engage his hind legs and encouraging him to work correctly over his back.

Here I am applying the leg-yield aids in the canter on a 20-meter circle. Notice how Ears has engaged his inside hind leg well under his body. This allows him to better balance himself as he comes around the turn. It also encourages him to lift through his back and become round and soft in his top line. Apply the leg-yield aids on part of the circle and then stop. Re-apply a few strides later. You can use the aids to enlarge a circle, but the real benefit comes from the engagement of the inside hind leg and the horse yielding through his frame.



EARS AND THE CANTER TRANSITION

As a four-year old, Ears would occasionally give me the wrong lead when I asked for canter. When something like this happens, don't get frustrated with the horse, view it as an training opportunity.

By keeping his neck straight, turning with my outside aids, then weighting my inside seat bone before applying the outside leg behind the girth, Ears not only learned to give me the correct lead, but he also tuned into my position. By the time he was five and a half years old he would give me both leads when I asked for canter by just weighting the inside seat bone. There was no need for the leg aids to ask for the canter as he had tuned into my "canter" position. The leg aids then are there to help channel the horse and refresh the gait if needed.

This is why you want to be consistent in your position, because the horse can then tune into subtle changes in how you use your body and aids - when that happens, you'll have a horse that offers a big response to almost invisible aids!



Written by: [Tim Lewthwaite](#)

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