

THE COUNTER CANTER

- Q. I'm schooling my horse at 3rd level but I'm having some trouble with the counter canter. My horse doesn't seem to understand the exercises and I have trouble not getting frustrated.
- A. In our schooling we must always pay attention to the basics. The horse must move freely forward, relaxed (that is without undue tension) in good rhythm and tempo. Rhythm is the regularity of the beat of the footfalls and tempo is the speed at which this rhythm is repeated.

A correct and effective warm-up is very important. Walking is an essential part of any warm-up. Walking exercises, such as, walk-halt-walk transitions, counter shoulder in, half circle and leg yield, and exercises on the perimeter of a 20m circle, are a very good way to stretch your horse's muscles at the start of your work.

Warm-up exercises in trot should include lots of transitions, to ensure that your horse is engaged and working through from back to front. Include transitions within the gait, collected trot to medium trot to collected trot, going around your arena, or on large circles. The trot warm-up should also include work in shoulder-in, haunches-in, and half pass.

Before starting specific exercises for the counter-canter it is a good idea to work some trot to canter to trot transitions, large circles in canter, and a little collection and extension in the canter.

Having completed a thorough warm-up and made certain that your horse is forward, attentive, calm and balanced you can start on specific exercises to help develop the counter-canter. This work will ensure that your horse never changes his leading leg in canter except upon his rider's specific command. It is indispensable as a preparation for the flying changes that the horse should understand this. Most horses will change leads in the air of their own accord when changing direction – this is a natural thing for them to do to maintain their balance, so work at counter-canter is, to some extent, asking an unnatural thing from the horse.

The counter-canter is primarily a straightening and suppling exercise. Before learning the flying changes the horse needs to be confirmed in maintaining the canter lead being asked of him. The rider has the responsibility to be able to sit correctly and quietly and to fully understand the aids required and how to apply them. I like to start by cantering around the arena on the true lead in a fairly collected canter and, at the beginning of the long side, making a long shallow loop towards the center line and then back to the track before the corner to the short end. Maintain the aids for the canter lead consistently throughout the

exercise, and to return to the track TURN ONLY YOUR HEAD in that direction.

This work is not difficult but to some extent it does involve asking the horse to give up his own natural wishes and balance in favor of an artificial balance which we teach him. This requires tact and careful explanation from the rider. Even when you maintain your aids for the canter lead correctly the horse may change leads anyway during the counter-canter loop. If he does, do not punish him. A little later in his training you will be asking him for flying changes and if you punish him now for giving them to you he will remember that and be unwilling to risk it again. Simply return to walk, walk for a few minutes until he is completely calm, and repeat the exercise.

When you and your horse are comfortable performing this loop in counter canter go to the next step. Develop the loop exercise until the curves become more marked and eventually form a broad, shallow serpentine. Do not change leads during the serpentine, so that your horse will be cantering alternately in a true canter and in a counter-canter. Later still develop the serpentine into large circles and figures of eight without changes of lead.

These exercises in counter-canter will take time, patience and practice to perfect. Do not be in a hurry and do not punish your horse for any misunderstanding of your explanations. Remain calm yourself and make sure that your horse remains perfectly calm and relaxed throughout the work. It is very natural for a horse to become excited at the start of this work and to try speeding up or rushing in the canter. Bringing him back to a quiet walk and waiting until he is relaxed and calm before repeating the exercise is crucial.

It is important to understand that to gain the full benefit of the suppling exercises in counter-canter, the horse must remain 'flexed' to the leading leg, but must allow his body to conform to the track of the movement. Flexion means a relaxation of the horse's jaw to the action of the rein and a 'tendency' in that direction. It does not mean a bend of the horse's neck in the direction of the rein aid. This distinction is important. Your horse should ultimately be able to bend around your inside leg while maintaining the counter-canter and a flexion of the jaw to the opposite direction, that of the canter lead. This is demanding a very great deal and will only be achieved with much time, patience and hard work. Like everything else in the training of the horse, it cannot be achieved by force - the horse, when ready, will give it to you freely.

