

Online HorseCollege



Student Workbook

2.R.07 Riding a Horse in Canter

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Contents

Introduction	Pg. 4
The Canter	Pg. 5
Riding Canter	Pg. 6
Aids for Canter from Trot	Pg. 7
Aids for Trot from Canter	Pg. 8
Troubleshooting & Tips	Pg. 9 - 12
Extension Lesson	Pg. 13
Recommended Reading	Pg. 14
References	Pg. 15

Introduction

Gaits are the different ways in which a horse can move and in these gaits the legs will move in different sequences.

Gaits (or paces as they are sometimes referred to) are how a horse will move. There are many gaits which have been developed or trained within the horse by people and certain breeds are better suited to those gaits.

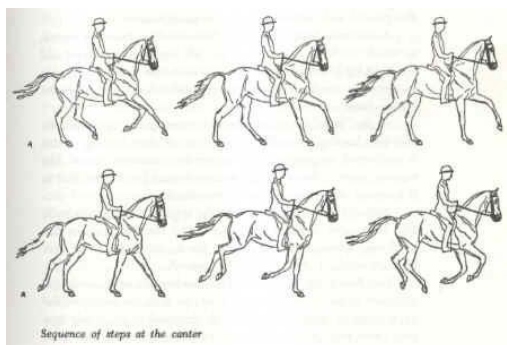
There are 4 'natural' gaits which are walk, trot, canter and gallop.

An example of a breed which has breed inherited and trained gaits is the Standardbred which have been developed for pacing (racing industry).

The Canter

The Canter

The canter is a 3 beat gait also with a moment of suspension and has different leg sequences depending upon the direction of travel. Like the trot there are also variations within the canter in dressage.



If travelling to the right the sequence is left hind leg followed by the right hind leg and left front leg together, then the right front leg and finally a moment of suspension before the sequence starts again. This is known as the right leg or lead canter.



Footfalls-

Right lead.



Here you can see the moment of suspension when no hooves are on the ground.

(See video for larger image)



When travelling on the left rein the first leg is the right hind leg, then the left hind leg and right front leg together followed by the left front leg and the moment of suspension. This is known as the left leg or lead canter.



Footfalls-

Left lead



Riding Canter

Much the same as sitting trot, the seat (pelvis, thighs and hip joints) will be required to follow the canter movement. The seat should flow and remain in contact with the saddle forming a series of arcs (which may form an outline similar to that of the lower side of an egg which is laid on its side).

It can be described that there are 3 sensations to be felt at canter:-

- 1) First, a lowering or sinking of the seat. This coincides with the first hind-leg in the canter sequence coming down to touch the ground.
- 2) Then, sliding or floating forward in the saddle. The upper body remains upright and tall. This corresponds with the horse shifting weight forward onto the next legs in the canter sequence.
- 3) And finally a slight and gentle rise upward without the seat separating from the saddle. The sensations then start over again. This feeling comes from the moment of suspension in the canter from when the horse has pushed off the ground with the final leg in the sequence and prepares to start it over again.

At no point in the canter should the riders seat come away from the saddle (see image c.). This is the main fault in the canter that the rider is almost rising (see image a.), as in the trot but is rather thrown upwards out of the saddle then falls back into the saddle which potentially can cause the horse and rider some discomfort.

However when riding jumping exercises it is appropriate for the rider to be slightly elevated out of the saddle but this position is held and moves in harmony with the horse.



Image a.

The rider is up, in the air out of the saddle, the shoulders are forward, elbows out, the foot has moved forward in the stirrup and the heel drawn up.



Image b.

Even in this image the riders' seat has left the saddle and the leg has gripped on.



Image c.

This rider has maintained a tall upright seat, positioned in the deepest part of the saddle.

Aids for Canter from Trot

As previously discussed, a horse canters in a three-time beat series of strides. Depending upon the sequence of legs the horse is said to be in left or right canter or it can be described as cantering with the left or right leg leading or cantering on the left or right leg.

Predominately when riding in the arena the horse canters with the inside leg leading, this is known as cantering true (image a.), if however the outside leg is leading it is then counter-canter (image b.).

Preparation is essential before asking for a transition into canter. The better organised you are in preparing the horse with an energetic trot the quicker and easier the horse will go into canter.

The aids for a transition into canter are:-

- 1) Shorten your reins
- 2) In rising trot or sitting trot the rider prepares the horse to canter by making sure the horse is trotting energetically. If the horse is trotting too slow when you ask for canter they will simply trot faster
- 3) Go into sitting trot. If you find the energetic trot difficult to sit on you can use one hand to hold the front of the saddle (whilst holding the reins)
- 4) Keep even contact on the reins
- 5) Then use both legs by the girth to give a forward driving leg aid to signal the horse into canter
- 6) As the horse jumps forward into canter you will need to give the reins just slightly forward to allow the horse to canter



Image a. Canter True



Image b. Counter canter

Aids for Trot from Canter

If you can slow the canter down to a speed similar to that of trot it will make the canter to trot transition smoother and easier to ride. Some horses will be better at this than others but in those horses which have messy and difficult to ride trot to canter transitions the more you practice them the better they should get.

The rider's hands should always follow the movement of the horses' head and neck in canter by allowing the elbows to give so that the hands move slightly forward and back, not up and down. As the horses' head drops downwards in canter the hands will give slightly forward then as the horses' head comes up the hands will come back to their original position (this is not a 'pulling' back action on the rein). This allows for the natural movement and head carriage of the horse. Problems can arise from having fixed, stiff hands in canter such as the horse tossing its head or pulling at the reins and the horse becoming tense or reluctant to canter because they aren't allowed 'room' by the rider's hands.

The aids for a transition from canter to trot:-

- 1) Steady and slow the canter to a speed similar to trot. This is done by keeping the seat in the saddle, sitting slightly against the movement of the canter, making the hands still and if necessary taking a restraining rein contact.
- 2) Then using a non-yielding contact on both reins bring the horse into trot. As the horse returns to trot you should remain in sitting trot for a couple of beats to establish the trot before starting to perform rising trot.



Troubleshooting & Tips

Canter:-

It can be difficult to learn to keep your seat in the saddle at all times when cantering because when first learning to canter it may feel like the movement is throwing you out of the saddle. Again it is helpful if you can be lunged on a suitable horse with a good, regular, slow canter. A fast canter will make it more difficult to find your seat (we will look at positions for faster paces in future workbooks). Some causes of being up, out of the saddle are leaning or bringing the shoulders forward, gripping with the knee or thigh, uneven weight in the saddle, stiff pelvis or hips and the rider trying to sit still.

If you can be lunged so that you don't have to worry about directing your horse, a useful technique for getting your seat into the saddle is to hold the front of the saddle with your inside hand and the back of the saddle with your outside hand. That means that if you are being lunged to the left your left hand will hold the front and your right hand the back. This technique will enable you to pull yourself into the saddle and help to put your body into the correct position for the direction you are travelling.



Another common problem is riders can follow the movement of the canter without bumping on the horses' back but their seat is still such that daylight can be seen between them and the saddle. This is usually because the rider's shoulders move forward and back with the canter rather than the hips and seat. Often times these riders just need to bring the shoulders further back to get their seat into the saddle and then allow the hips to move forward and back and the seat to slide in the saddle.

Another problem is the loss of stirrups while cantering. This is commonly caused by the rider gripping with the leg in an upwards motion which brings the weight out of the stirrup. Sometimes the toes of the rider also point out to the sides. A dilemma associated with this is the bottom half of the rider's leg from the knee down appears to swivel forward and back with each canter stride. To rectify these problems the rider needs to allow the leg to stretch down with each canter stride and ensure the leg and knee are not gripping to the horse. It can be useful to check the length of the stirrups too. Stirrups which are too long will be difficult to keep and too short can cause the toe to swivel.

Troubleshooting & Tips (cont.)

Trot to Canter transition:-

Some common problems you may encounter are:-

- Horses that trot faster instead of cantering or that are lazy or don't want to canter
- Co-ordinating balance and aids for the canter transition
- Horses that canter too fast

The first problems are similar to those discussed in previous workbooks. If the rein contact is too strong the horse may find your aids conflicting in that your legs and seat are saying 'go' but your hands are saying 'whoa'. The opposite to this is that if the forward driving aids are too strong and rein contact too little you won't have much control when the horse picks up canter.

If you are just learning to move the horse from trot to canter (or canter to trot) then maintaining your balance is probably one of your top priorities. If you struggle with balance when moving the horse to and from canter it can be helpful to use one hand to hold onto the saddle while you use the other for guiding and control. If you can be lunged on a horse you will be able to use both hands to hold the saddle and then progress to one, then none.

Horses that are keen and happy to trot may only require a soft leg aid. It is important that when riding a horse which is happy to go forward that you keep a good rein contact and length, this way if the horse gives you more speed than you expected you will have immediate control.

The aids and methods of applying them for moving a lazy horse into canter will be the same process used for moving a lazy horse into walk and trot.

To help eliminate any bouncing as you move from trot into canter, make sure that you haven't dropped your shoulders forward in anticipation of the canter or as you have used your leg aids. If you find it difficult to perform sitting trot on a trot with more energy then it is probably a good idea to practise this to make maintaining your balance and giving the correct aids easier.

A good way to strengthen your seat, balance and position is to be lunged on a quiet horse (by an experienced person) riding without stirrups and reins.



Troubleshooting & Tips (cont.)

Trot to Canter transition (cont.):

It can be quite frightening to ride a horse which canters too fast or faster than expected. It is common for ex-racehorses to canter quite fast and that is because that is what they have been trained to do. Some horses will naturally have a bigger canter stride or canter faster than others and sometimes they may be fast because the rider gave a firm aid or the horse may be feeling good (as is often when riding outdoors) or even if a horse stumbles they may jump forward faster in canter for a few strides.

It is better if a fast cantering horse which is difficult to control is ridden by someone with experience but if however the horse is just forward there are measures you can take to slow it down. Firstly you need to take up a position and aids which you would use if you were asking the horse to return to trot because if you follow the horse in canter you are not signalling it to slow down. Circling is a good way of progressively slowing a horse down. Circle sizes can be made smaller and smaller until the horse slows to the speed you want. Horses usually slow down on smaller circles because it is much harder work to go fast on a small circle.

Young horses (and Standardbreds which have been used for pace racing) may be awkward and unbalanced in canter which contributes to them going fast and it is very common as they are learning to balance under the weight of the rider. Lunging this type of horse can help to develop the canter.

Trot to canter and canter to trot exercises are good for getting the horse to focus on your aids and will improve the quality of the canter in the long term (it is important to remember that a horse will probably not 'learn' or change how they go immediately).



Troubleshooting & Tips (cont.)

Canter to Trot transition:-

Some problems you may encounter include:-

- Horses which are hard to slow down to trot
- Rough and messy transition to trot
- Difficulty maintaining balance from canter to trot
- Difficulty slowing the trot down after canter

Again, circling is a good way of progressively slowing a horse down into a slower pace. Circle sizes can be made smaller and smaller until the horse slows to the speed you want. This exercise can also help improve rough and difficult transitions to trot and slowing the trot down after canter. This is because the smaller circles can help encourage the horse to use their hind legs more to carry themselves from canter to trot which helps to develop smooth transitions. It is important to remember that when you ride the circles that they be consistent in size and shape and that they are ridden gradually from a larger to smaller circle. Sharp turns or spinning a horse onto a small circle can lead to injury and lameness.

Should you be having difficulty maintaining balance from canter to trot as for the upwards transition you can hold onto the saddle with one hand whilst using the other to guide the horse. Remember to sit deeply into the saddle with your shoulders back. Dropping the shoulders forward or rising out of the saddle in anticipation of trot makes your position vulnerable should the horse trip, stumble or shy.



Extension Lesson

What are some problems you have encountered with riding a horse in canter?

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What could be some potential causes of these problems?

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What are some problems other riders have had when cantering?

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What was the cause of their problem and how did they overcome it?

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Using a suitable horse try the following exercises in canter to help develop your riding skills:-

- Start by cantering your horse for 10 strides then return to trot (if 10 strides is too difficult double it to 20 strides) when you can accurately ride 10 strides in canter reduce the number to 9 then 8 and so forth. This exercise will test the co-ordination of your aids and the responsiveness of your horse.
- Set 4 markers or cones evenly around a large (20m) circle then in canter see if you can weave your horse around the markers turning to the inside then outside then inside and so forth. When you can do this without missing or knocking any over increase the number of markers to 6 then 8. See how many you can weave around.

Recommended Reading

Publication:-

The principles of riding

Author:-

German National Equestrian Federation

References

Publication:-

The principles of riding

Author:-

German National Equestrian Federation

Images:-

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