

Canter Transition Troubleshooting

Five exercises to develop your green horse's balance in the canter.

By Annie Eldridge

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On-the-aids goes out the window when you ask for canter. Your horse trots faster and faster until he finally plunges into canter, which he maintains only for a few unbalanced moments before he falls back into that equally not-fun-at-all runaway trot. The whole exercise makes you feel bounced around, out of control and disheartened.

International three-day event rider and 2004 Olympic aspirant Ashley MacVaugh trains young horses, too, and she knows just how you feel. "Occasionally you'll find a young horse that came out of the womb with a balanced canter, but most of the time this gait takes more schooling than any other," she explains. "But hang in there—training will always improve your horse's canter."

Young or green horses simply don't have the strength to hold themselves in a rhythmic canter, Ashley explains. A horse's body easily maintains balance in trot since the horse moves in diagonal pairs in this gait. But canter is a three-beat gait. This means the horse's entire body weight bears down upon the outside hind leg when it steps off into the first beat of canter.

"You've got to give a horse time to build the strength he needs to hold himself in canter," explains Ashley. "It won't happen overnight. And you're not doing you or him any favors by allowing your horse to canter badly. Use transitions and schooling figures to improve the quality of your horse's canter."

Use the Trot to Improve the Canter

"Be willing to accept the notion that you can't fix the canter within the canter," says Ashley. "Right now your green horse isn't strong enough to sit down on his hocks and carry the weight of a balancing half-halt within canter."

So, here's the philosophy you'll use to guide your canter work for the next few months. Use trot as your half-halt. Look for short moments of quality canter; as soon as the canter begins to deteriorate go back to trot, regroup, and then try canter again.

"There's no better way to improve your canter than to focus on trot-canter-trot transitions for weeks and weeks, if not months, depending on your horse's age and level of conditioning," Ashley suggests.

Exercise 1:

To start, establish a large working trot circle in your arena—usually 20 meters, or the width of your arena, works fine. Most horses—like people—prefer one side to the other. Always start in the direction of your horse's easier lead. Now, ask for canter and remain on the circle. Staying on a circle will encourage your horse to carry himself, since he has to shift weight to his haunches in order to turn; bending him on the circle will also help your horse stay soft in the bridle. Keep your shoulders tall and stay centered in the saddle, even as your hips follow the motion of the canter. Don't give your horse your arms to lean on by pulling back on the reins, Ashley warns. Keep a soft contact, and follow the motion of your horse's head and neck at canter with pliable arms and elbows. Even if your horse seems heavy in the bridle, keep your contact light. The horse must learn to balance himself—you can't do it for him.

Meet the Expert

Ashley MacVaugh, 33, placed fifth in the Pan American Eventing Championships in October 2003, in Fair Hill, Md., and is currently long-listed for the 2004 U.S. Eventing Team at the Athens Olympic Games. She placed 20th at the Rolex CCI Modified**** in 2004 and was the second-highest placed American at the Blenheim (England) three-day event in 2002. She first reached national prominence in 1990 when she won the coveted USCTA Young Rider of the Year award in eventing. She lives in South Hamilton, Mass., where she runs a small coaching and training business. The instant the canter gets unbalanced or hurried, go back to trot and immediately half-halt. Never allow your horse to run in trot after canter. If your horse rushes his trot, simply move onto a smaller circle to encourage him to slow down.

Then move back onto the larger circle. At first you may only be able to canter halfway around your circle—that's fine. Remember, you're looking for quality canter work. This may be an entirely new concept to your horse; give him time to understand what you're after.

It might take an entire circle to re-establish a rhythmic trot. That's OK, too, for now. However, expect your horse to obey your corrections within trot—after all, this is something he already knows. Once you've repeated this exercise a few times, he should come back to a steady trot right after the downward transition. (If he doesn't, consider adding a "wake-up call" correction, like a trot-halt transition.)

Once you've regrouped in trot, go back to canter and repeat the exercise. Try this several times in one direction, then repeat in the opposite direction on the horse's other lead. For your first session, you may only succeed in riding half the circle in a quality canter, and you might need an entire circle in trot before you canter again.

Over time, repeat this exercise, gradually lengthening the time you stay in the canter and shortening the duration of your trot corrections.

Preparing for the Canter Half-Halt

As weeks pass and your canter work improves, your horse should be able to maintain several circles of quality canter before you go back to trot. By now your horse should also be quite sharp to these upward and downward transitions, easily moving back and forth between the two gaits.

Now, Ashley explains, it's time to introduce some more exacting canter-trot-canter exercises, as a way of preparing your horse for an eventual half-halt within the canter.

Exercise 2:

First, add a change of direction into the scenario by riding a canter-trot-canter figure-eight. Ride a 20-meter trot circle at one end of your arena. Now canter the circle and return to trot, but change direction as you turn across the center of your arena. Trot the same-sized circle in the opposite direction, then canter it. Repeat the exercise, so you're changing leads after a full circle of trot in each direction. Once you've mastered the figure-eight, see if you can eventually change leads through shorter and shorter periods of trot.

Exercise 3: After several successful figure-eights, try a big, three-loop serpentine, using your entire arena. First trot this figure several times, so you're comfortable riding these sweeping curves and changes of direction. Now trot a 20-meter circle at one end of your arena. Pick up the canter on the short side of the arena, and canter your first serpentine loop. Trot as you straighten out the curve across the center of your arena; then pick up the canter on the new lead as you make the turn into your next loop. Then repeat for the third loop, and return to trot once you've finished the figure. Again, gradually try to shorten the number of trot steps you need to change leads between the loops.

Exercise 4:

For the next exercise, you'll use your entire arena. Establish a 20-meter working trot circle at one end of your arena, then canter the circle. After completing the circle, ride a downward transition to trot as you turn into the corner of your arena and trot a 10-meter circle in that corner. Then return to canter down the long side of the arena, and trot a 10-meter circle in the next corner. Repeat this around your entire arena. If you feel this is too difficult, you can ride each 10-meter trot circle twice in order to give yourself a little more time to regroup between the canter sessions.

Introducing the Canter Half-Halt

Hot Tip!

Before you begin your canter work, Ashley suggests that you test your horse's response to your aids at walk and trot. "Ride several walk-trot, trot-halt-trot transitions; ride varying sizes of schooling figures, with changes of direction, all over the arena. Before you begin work on what you know is a difficult gait, make sure your horse is attentive and listening to your aids."

Exercise 5:

After weeks, if not months, of progressive training, you should be able to introduce a half-halt within the canter.

Go back to your tried and true canter-trot-canter exercise on the 20-meter circle (Exercise 1), but this time, trot half the circle, then canter the other half. (By now your horse understands these transitions, and he should be able to easily handle this exercise.) Practice these precise transitions over and over, then gradually shorten your trot sections of the circle, so you are cantering for three-quarters of the circle, say, then trotting only for a quarter. Then work to the point where you trot for only three steps on the circle before returning to canter.

Now, stay on your circle, ride canter and prepare to trot. Maintain a soft supporting leg as you lift up your rib cage and brace your back to ask for the half-halt. At the same time let your elbows softly come back, and put a little drag on the reins as though you mean to trot. But at the instant you feel your horse respond to your downward request by shifting his weight behind as though he will trot, add more leg, soften your fingers and keep cantering. (You should feel like you're asking your horse to canter in place for a step or two.) Continue in canter.

Make sure you intersperse these early canter half-halts with downward trot transitions, so you're constantly reinforcing this new concept with one he already understands.

"Whether you plan to jump or ride dressage, the canter half-halt will become a very important tool in your future training," Ashley explains. "Give your horse all the time he needs to understand this concept and gain the strength he needs to accomplish it. A 4-year-old probably won't be strong enough for a canter half-halt, but if you spend a year working on canter-trot transitions, he'll be well on his way to perfecting the canter half-halt as a 5- or 6-year-old."

Further Reading

Learn to Roll with the Canter

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