

Pin the Perfect Stride

Practice adjusting your horse's canter stride on the flat with the pinwheel exercise.

By Annie Eldridge

October 2007

Want to keep that effortless, balanced rhythm throughout your hunter rounds? Start by learning to adjust your horse's canter stride on the flat.

Here's an advanced training maneuver from hunter/jumper trainer Greg Prince that will help you lengthen and shorten your horse's canter stride.

Set up four ground poles evenly around a large circle within your arena, so you can walk a curved line of 60 feet (four strides) from the center to the center of each pole. (If your arena can't accommodate this size, try a smaller circle of 48 feet, three strides, between the poles.) Trot through this circular grid, the pinwheel, a few times to familiarize your horse with the poles.

Then establish an organized, balanced canter and enter the pinwheel, riding an even four strides between the poles. You'll have to concentrate on many factors at once to make this exercise work:

Find the correct bending line between the poles so you can fit four strides evenly between each one—heading toward the center of every pole. As you ride over one pole, you'll already have to be looking ahead to the next one so you can plan your turn.

Maintain the same canter rhythm so your horse's stride remains consistent. This, of course, is easier said than done. If you hit a long distance to a pole, you'll have to close up the stride immediately on landing—or you won't have room to canter four strides before the next pole. Similarly, if your horse arrives at a pole on a short distance, you'll need to open up the stride on landing. Learn to react instantly so you can make whatever stride adjustment your horse requires before a problem develops.

Stay relaxed and calm as you make your stride adjustments. Find the right combination of synchronized rein and leg aids so you can seamlessly adjust your horse's stride without affecting his balance or rhythm.

Keep going. You'll probably manage one circuit of the pinwheel just fine, but holding a quality canter through a series of circles requires thoughtful and tactful riding.

Eventually you will be able to challenge yourself even further by changing the number of strides you do between each pole. Ride a smaller circle, head toward the inside of each pole, and open up the stride to get three strides on each circuit. Then ride a larger circle, close up the canter, and steer toward the outside of each pole to get five strides.

This exercise demands that you practice many of the skills you need to ride a hunter course successfully. How many times have you entered the ring with a great canter, but lost the rhythm by the fourth or fifth jump? This is your chance to practice maintaining your horse's canter stride between each pole, just the way you would through a series of jumps.

But since riding over poles doesn't stress your horse's legs at all, you can practice the pinwheel exercise as often as you need. Be patient—you'll need several days of practice before you'll be able to successfully negotiate this exercise.