

Get Collected

How can I help my gelding collect and round up at the trot and canter without getting heavy on the forehand?

Q. My 5-year-old gelding has a nice carriage and collected walk, but loses most of it when we trot. At the canter, his stride is long and can become strung out. How can I help him collect and round up at the trot and canter without getting heavy on the forehand?

A. It may seem better to first ask for collection at the walk, but this is the last gait to use for teaching collection. The walk has no phase of suspension, whereas the trot and canter do. If you ask for collection at the walk and the horse isn't physically or mentally ready, he will stiffen his back, which affects his whole way of going. Once a walk is ruined, it is very difficult to correct. Therefore, ride the walk on a longer rein for a while, only asking for relaxation and a steady rhythm.

Collection is the culmination of training. There are many things to work on before worrying about collection. The horse must understand how to accept the bit and bring his weight off his forehand first.

The 20-meter circle is a great place to start because the slight bend of the circle will automatically encourage the horse to bear more weight on his haunches. Pick up a trot and ride a circle that begins and ends at the same place. If you don't have a dressage arena, you can set out cones or buckets to create boundaries and focal points. Keep a steady tempo (speed) and consistent contact, and continue to trot around your circle. If all is well, add some downward transitions to the walk, using the half-halt: close your hand, close your lower leg, tighten your back muscles and sit a little heavier in the saddle. This aid should only last a stride, but repeat if needed. Take a few steps at the walk and then move back to the trot again, repeating the transitions.

If all goes well, ask for another downward transition, but this time, before your horse comes to the walk, change your mind and ask for the trot. This is a rebalancing technique to use when your horse begins to feel heavy on the forehand.

If your horse becomes so heavy that he won't respond to this rebalancing aid, come to the halt, wait a moment, and then go back on the circle, repeating the transitions to refresh his memory. Next time, try to anticipate and apply the half-halt before your horse falls on the forehand.

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