

## Moving Forward

### **My mare keeps switching gaits. How can I train her out of this?**

*By Dale Rudin*

**Q.** My mare keeps switching gaits. I ask her to trot, and she starts crow hopping and tries to lope. How can I train her out of this?

**A.** Your horse is having trouble because she lacks forward motion. Forward motion creates a dynamic stride and minimal elevation at the knees and hocks. Crow hopping is the exact opposite; it's energy being directed straight up and down, a sign that the horse is retreating from the rider's hands and legs.

There are two factors to consider: one emotional and one physical. Your horse has lost confidence in moving forward. Either she's intimidated by your hands or the bit, or you're applying rein pressure without using your legs to encourage her to maintain a lengthened stride. Traveling with restricted gaits has a physical impact by limiting her range of motion. That causes her muscles and joints to tighten, so her body needs to be retrained to work properly.

Work with your mare on the ground to build her confidence and physical condition without the influence of a rider. A round pen would be ideal, but this work can be done on a longe line. After 5-10 minutes at the walk, ask your horse to pick up the trot and extend her stride as much as she can. This is not about going fast, but she might need some speed in the beginning to loosen up enough to relax and trot out with a free-swinging stride. It could take one to three weeks for her to start to fluidly swing her legs from her shoulders and her hips, instead of lifting them up and down. If she breaks into the lope, push her forward until she relaxes. Let her drop back into the trot on her own, and then try again. Keep the sessions brief, asking for only a lap or two of extension before allowing her to rest.

Once she has noticeably improved, use a smooth snaffle and ride her either in the round pen or a circle of the same size. Ask her to trot and lengthen her stride by squeezing with both legs while maintaining rein contact that is consistent but soft. Keep your inside rein 1-2 inches shorter to encourage her to hold a bend and have a supple spine. If she starts loping, keep your legs on her and close your fingers on the inside rein until she accepts the pressure and moves forward. Give her some slack as a reward, but don't completely loosen the rein until she returns to the trot.

**Expert:** Dale Rudin teaches her "Performance through Partnership" techniques near her home in Tennessee and offers clinics nationwide. She also authors "Western Lessons" in *Young Rider* magazine. [www.dalerudin.com](http://www.dalerudin.com)