

Question of the Week: Lope Leads

How do I get my horse to consistently pick up the correct lead?

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Q: My 6-year-old horse is sound and well-behaved, but he doesn't always pick up the correct lead when I ask him to. I've heard conflicting advice—turn his head to the outside rail as I cue him, or pull it to the inside. What is the most reliable way to improve his consistency with picking up the correct lead?

A: When you're loping around the arena, your horse's inside legs are leading the outside legs. On the left lead, the left hind leg and left foreleg take a longer stride—they're leading. Although you want to keep your horse's front end and head relatively straight when you're asking him to lope, you'll need to bend his head and neck just a little to the inside. If you're traveling to the left, you want your horse to be slightly arced to the left so he's in the best position to pick up the correct lead.

If you bend your horse to the right while traveling to the left, you'll throw him off balance. He will lean to the left and pop his left shoulder to the inside. This puts your horse on his forehand, which is counterproductive because the lead initiates from the hind end.

I suggest riding your horse in a snaffle when practicing your leads and teaching your horse to respond consistently.

When I'm working on transitioning to the lope, I like to do it from a trot rather than a walk because it gives the horse more forward movement. From the trot, slightly bend your horse's head to the inside and push his hindquarters to the inside with your outside leg just behind the cinch. For the left lead, the first step your horse should take to strike off into a lope is with the outside hind leg.

If your horse pushes against your outside leg, then you need to go back to a controlled walk or trot and get a little stronger with your outside leg aid to teach your horse to move away from it.

If your horse drifts to the left or starts traveling on a smaller circle, then his head is probably bent too much to the inside, and/or you're not supporting him with your inside leg. Remember that the front end of the horse should stay fairly straight with only a slight arc to the inside.

Using these methods will help your horse pick up the correct lead more consistently.

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