

The Secrets Of Transitions

Getting Your Horse Smoothly From One Gait To Another

Changes from one gait to another or from one form of a gait to another form are called transitions. In dressage, transitions are judged as specific movements themselves. In other styles of riding, transitions reflect on the overall performance of horse and rider, either blending the movements smoothly one to another, or distracting the observer by making sudden, sometimes jerky changes.

Poorly executed transitions are most often caused by a lack of preparation. To be sure your horse will step gracefully into that next gait, you need to balance him for it with a half-halt *just* before the change. The half-halt suspends his activity for a moment. It warns him that a change is coming.

You close your legs on his sides to send his energy up to your seat. At the same instant, you tilt your pelvis (like pushing a swing forward) and close your fingers on the reins. You *hold* his energy for that moment without pulling on the reins.

He will bring his hind legs further under his body, will elevate his stride slightly as he shifts weight to his haunches and will flex (yield) at his jaw, poll, and through his topline.

From that half-halt, you will give the aid for the required transition. The aids for each gait or form of a gait are different from one another to avoid confusing the horse. They are designed to consistently position and balance your horse for a smooth, controlled transition.

AIDS AT DIFFERENT GAITS

From halt to walk, the aids are even, equal; hands stay low, legs remain in base position ("at the girth"). From the walk to trot, aids are even, equal; hands yield forward slightly (following the forward tilt of your pelvis), and the legs knead from a slightly-behind-girth position forward. From trot to canter, inside rein softens to flex the horse, outside rein is stretched and steady, inside leg remains at base and becomes active, outside leg behind girth is supporting, seat lifts and rocks into canter.

From canter to trot, you simply straighten your shoulders and hips, touch the outside rein, make the aids equal, and the horse will step up into trot. From trot to walk, even and equal aids roll the energy back to the haunches. Ask for the push into walk with hips to hands and allow the topline to stretch into walk. From walk to halt, you imagine that your hands have ceased moving forward (never

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pulling), and you send the energy to them where it gathers and stops.

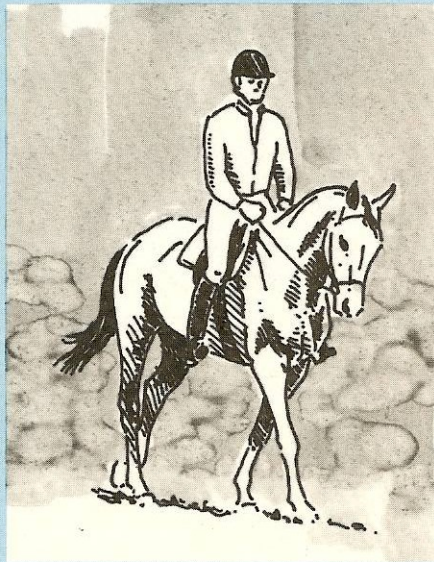
Walk to canter, trot to halt, halt to canter, etc. are all simply more polished variations of the basic transitions. The aids are the same, just more concise, more clearly understood and applied for more engaged changes.

Lengthening the walk requires alternating leg aids in rhythm with a quiet seat. Shortening stride in the walk is done with alternating hands *yielding* from base position and returning to it in rhythm with driving aids asking the horse's stride to elevate and not slow the rhythm.

Lengthening the trot requires driving. Legs close each time you sit when at posting trot. Aids applied equally, actively, and evenly to send the energy to your hands which maintain sure, even contact. Shortening stride in the trot (always sitting) requires legs slightly behind base position; *springs*, engaged seat and supple contact through the reins.

Lengthening the canter is accomplished by using strong, *active* inside aids and supporting outside aids with the outside leg back slightly, your inside shoulder back to maintain the gait. Collecting the canter requires the same body position and aids, with the legs creating a lot of energy that the active inside hand rolls back to the haunches with every stride.

Remember: rhythm must not change.



The transition from halt to rein-back is accomplished by moving both legs back behind base position, taking your seat off the horse, and driving him to immobility, with equal hands and even leg pressure. To halt from rein-back, send reins forward, bring your legs forward to base position, and engage the seat.

In halt transitions the ideal is a square, flexed, smooth halt. If the horse's left foreleg is back, your left hand was too strong. If his right foreleg is back, right hand was too strong. Right foreleg forward from square means you dropped the right rein. If the horse's left hind leg is too far forward, your left leg was too strong. If his right hind leg is out behind him, your right leg was not applied.

If his head and neck come up stiffly, and his back hollows and drops away from you in any transition, you are pulling on the reins and/or using no seat nor legs.

If his halt is not straight, you did not aid evenly. If he halts bent to the right, you had your left leg too far back or did not stretch the left rein, or both. If you had the outside aids correct, it could be that you applied *no* inside leg.

If the horse moves to one side as you halt, you probably put too much weight on your sitting bone to that side.

Everything you do (or don't do) as a rider has a direct influence on the horse beneath you.

FROM WORKING TO FREE GAITS

When you go from a working gait to a free gait, make it a very *gradual* transition. The horse's head and neck are supposed to stretch down and forward; his back should come up to carry you. Send him long and low with your seat only as your hands allow a *long* rein—keep that contact. Only in the walk should you sometimes go to a *loose* rein. Dropping the horse at trot or canter will certainly disrupt his balance and confidence.

As you bring him back to a working gait from a free gait, close your legs (without using the seat) to elevate his forehead as you increase contact.

How smoothly your horse can perform transitions will depend entirely on how much you decide to concentrate and use your body to aid properly. Accuracy will come without effort after you have mastered the art of communication. Without a doubt, work on this "longitudinal flexion" will improve your horse. ■