

Improving Your Trot



By Katherine Lark

The trot is a gait of two even beats. The horse's legs move in diagonal pairs: left fore and right hind together, then right fore and left hind together. Because of its evenness, the trot is the best gait in which to discover one-sidedness, lameness, and rider imbalance.

Before you start working on improving your horse's trot, it is wise to evaluate his movement and your position at this intermediate gait. Ride your horse on a straight stretch of firm footing where you can hear the footfalls distinctly for a period of

time. Pick up your ordinary trot and listen. Two clear hoofbeats will indicate a true gait. Trot rising on each diagonal and make note of what differences, if any, are heard.

Fore Leg or Hind Leg in Advance

If you hear a double beat, with the sounds very close to each other, your horse is either trotting fore leg in advance (you may be driving the horse beyond his balance, and the hind legs can't keep up), or hind leg in advance (you may have a hollow-moving horse above the bit and rigid or rough hands, causing some "bridle lameness"). Both of these conditions require much work to engage the horse's haunches gradually while

stretching his topline, suppling his hind legs, and flexing joints and jaw to create relaxation and strength.

Trotting a 20-Meter Circle

Trot your horse on a 20-meter circle at a working sitting trot. Your horse should be on the aids, moving forward freely without any rushing. Do you lean to the inside? If you do, the horse will cut into the circle to stay under your weight, and you will collapse the inside hip.

If this is happening (it is common), drop your outside stirrup and trot on for awhile. Notice how this exercise improves your position, in turn helps your horse stabilize on the circle.

Using a few simple exercises, you can develop a strong, balanced trot in your horse.

Tips for Perfecting the Most Commonly-Used Gait

Do this equally on both reins.

Think of riding circles at all gaits as riding around a cylinder, never in a cone shape. Keep your spine in line over the horse's spine, your inside shoulder back and outside leg back. Then trot the large circle posting.

Drop your outside stirrup if necessary, and change rein every eighth time around. You may notice a difference from one posting diagonal to the other. Either your horse is less able to stretch one side, or one hind leg is weaker than the other. Sometimes the culprit is a combination of both conditions at once.

When a horse is really one-sided, it will mean that the hind leg has trouble supporting and propelling his mass, or that his shoulder cannot stretch freely forward. Remember that posting a diagonal means working in unison with the horse's inside hind leg.

Shoulder-In

A good exercise to improve an uneven trot from one side to the other is a properly executed shoulder-in. You should perform all lateral work on both reins, with perhaps 10 to 20 percent more work on the weaker or stiffer side.

Teach your horse the shoulder-in at the walk (ask your trainer to help you if this movement is new to your horse). Move on to the sitting trot shoulder-in after the horse supples in the walk.

Ask for balance and relaxation before demanding accuracy. You will want stretching more than impulsion at first, so go at a slow pace until you feel good flexion, then ask for a strong stride forward under the body

from the inside hind leg without changing rhythm or rushing.

Correction

If your horse trots fore leg or hind leg in advance, you will use one stabilizing exercise to correct either. Slow your trot down and send him forward and down onto a long rein. You want his poll lower than his withers, and eventually, his nose level with his knees. This will stretch his topline, soften his jaw, make his shoulder freer, and his haunches engage.

Imagine that your reins are rods and gently "push" his head and neck down, while your legs maintain contact. Do this at both the rising and sitting trot while you find which is more comfortable for your horse. Trot him long and low during every warm-up (after walking on a loose rein) and guide him through corners with seat and legs. Find that point where his trot seems to "float" and listen to how the footfalls become correct. Then gradually close your legs to elevate the forehead and send him to your hands before you take up contact.

As the horse comes onto the bit, flex him with a softening, massaging use of the reins, yielding in rhythm right then left. Keep your leg on him to keep the "motor running" (that is impulsion). It is necessary to keep the topline stretched.

If he hollows away from your aids, send him back down, long and low. There is no point in trotting around hollow-backed and ewe-necked; you will strengthen all the wrong muscles and ruin your horse. Never ride off the hands alone. You have to use driving aids in varying degrees to keep your horse balanced, stretched, and

supple. Ride him to your hands, and keep them consistent.

Stroking and Combing

If your horse stays hollow when you try to send him down, and your reins just loop at his sides, try stroking his crest with one hand, then the other, from the middle of his neck toward his withers very slowly. Don't run your fists down him in rapid-fire order, snatching the bit side to side. Keep a feel of his mouth with the still hand and let it follow his stretching as you progress.

You might also try "combing" the reins. Take the buckle in one hand, palm down, and bring this hand to your chest. With the free hand, place your two middle fingers between the reins from above, palm down, and slide this hand slowly up the reins to the other hand. This makes the reins and bit vibrate lightly, and the horse will stretch forward to seek the bit. Be sure to yield to him as you run the active hand lightly up the reins.

Start asking him to go long and low. Come into contact slowly and smoothly, remaining engaged, then go back to long and low, and so on.

Never hurry these exercises. They are not movements to be performed within the limited space and time of a dressage test. They are like Yoga or Tai Chi Chuan, movement for its own sake, to reap a broad benefit beyond the mechanics of the movement.

Lateral and Longitudinal Flexion

With the use of a shoulder-in (lateral flexion) and the long and low exercises (longitudinal flexion), your horse's trot should be feeling springier—not bouncy or rough—and longer, with a solid rhythm that is easier to stabilize.

Your next work is on longitudinal flexion—lengthening and shortening the stride. Always ask for lengthenings first. Just think "forward" first (this is why you ride with spurs before you ride with a full bridle). Begin at the rising trot where you can help maintain rhythm by posting a consis-

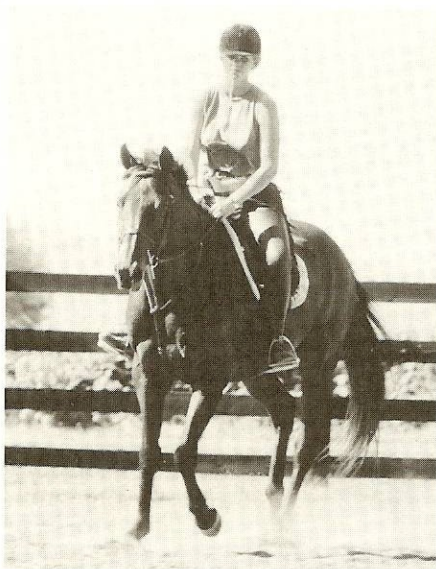
tent, obvious beat.

Down the long side of your arena, lengthen the stride by closing your legs each time you sit, and drive him evenly into your slightly apart, very quiet hands that do not yield. After the corner, always wait until your horse is straight before you drive him on, and shorten the stride back into a working trot well before the coming corner.

To shorten the stride, drive less (keep the legs on to maintain impulsion), soften the hands once right, then left, and stretch up, thinking "elevate the stride." Before your transition up or down, inhale deeply and exhale as you make the transition.

Collection

When you are ready for collection, after much work on all the previous exercises, you will ask for this on the short sides of the arena, sitting to the trot. Be sure to come out of the corner before the transition from work-



ing to collected, and move to working again before the next corner. Collection is a shortened stride, because it is elevated with no change of the trot rhythm.

Have a short contact with the reins. Become bouncy in your seat

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with very relaxed thighs, and soften your horse side to side. Drive him firmly forward into strong, active contact while you stretch way up and bump his sides if needed with a scooping leg. Bring your legs back slightly and evenly for more energy. Engage your seat with a pelvic tilt, but don't pump your seat. Think "up." To lengthen back to a working trot, push your reins forward a little, close your legs in unison, and relax as you exhale.

Your work at the trot will affect the walk and canter, as well. As one gait improves, so do the others, because you are not really working on one gait; you are improving your horse. Balance, suppleness, impulsion, and relaxation know no boundaries. Have patience. Do not hurry, be always clear with your aids, and you will find success. ■

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