

Mastering The Canter

Exercises To Help You Improve The Way You Ride To This Gait

By Katharine Lark

We've all blown a class at one time or another by picking up a wrong lead, missing a lead change and getting a cross-canter, or rushing about in the wrong rhythm, frame, etc. *Understanding* the canter virtually eliminates the possibility of making really big mistakes.

WHAT THE CANTER IS

You must know what your horse's legs/hoooves are doing at the canter and in all of its variations. The canter itself is a gait of three beats—first beat, the outside hind; second beat, the diagonal of inside hind in unison with the outside fore; third, the inside (leading) fore. Then there is an instant of suspension before the footfalls repeat.

The canter starts on the outside hind leg when the transition is balanced and on the haunches. A green horse sometimes starts the canter with its third beat, the leading foreleg, from and on the forehead.

The canter can be ridden working—forward, in rhythm with contact on the reins; free—on long rein or a loose rein but still balanced and rhythmic. It can also be lengthened—longer strides, on the aids, but not faster strides; extended—fully lengthened; shortened—more elevated strides, lots of impulsion; collected—fully elevated, same rhythm; and counter-canter—on the outside lead, horse flexed to the lead. It can be moved up into a gallop (the second diagonal beat of the canter becomes two beats—inside hind, then outside fore—creating four beats), or ridden incorrectly as a

Katharine Lark has taught riding for over 30 years in Virginia, Florida, and Colorado. She now lives in New Mexico and does her teaching with a pen, writing for several national horse magazines.



cross-canter with one lead on the fore and the other lead on the hind. (Note: the term "crossfiring" refers to an interference when a hind hoof strikes the opposite foreleg and is sometimes used to mean cross-canter.)

TRANSITIONS

In order of increasing difficulty, you can ask for transition to canter from the trot, from the walk, from the halt, and right after a rein-back. The key to proper transition from any gait is preparation. Some horses strike off best from a walk simply because the rider works harder to gather the horse's energy before the canter depart.

You must use half-halts to balance the horse before the transition and, like coiling a spring tight, to build up a bit of impulsion for the canter. If your horse is very green, you may need to help him get the inside lead by freeing his inside shoulder with a momentary flexing of his head to the outside just before the depart. You ask his haunches to come inside slightly with your outside leg just behind the girth, and, with your inside leg at the girth, you aid for the canter with both legs and a lifting seat into soft hands.

The schooled horse departs on his haunches from the first beat, the outside hind leg, of the canter. You balance him to the inside, flexing his whole body including head and neck to the inside with your inside leg at the girth, outside leg behind the girth. You lift the inside rein *slightly* to help put his balance over his outside hind leg for strike-off just as you make the transition.

FROM THE POSTING TROT

If you ask for the transition to canter from the posting trot, you will be very aware of the position of the horse's legs. (Be sure you are posting the correct diagonal.) As you sit momentarily with the grounding of the horse's inside hind leg, the outside hind is reaching forward—the time for a canter depart from the haunches on the first beat. To time the transition from trot, you properly and smoothly sit

three beats. The first trot beat sitting is to half-halt, the second beat is to bend the horse, the third trot beat is the moment for canter depart. At sitting trot, you may want to glance at the horse's shoulders to time the transition.

FROM THE WALK

From the walk, much more energy is created before the transition to canter by driving the walk into massaging hands that channel the energy back to the haunches, where it collects until there is enough impulsion for canter. The green horse is asked to canter just as the inside shoulder moves forward. The schooled horse departs a fraction of a second later but before the outside shoulder moves forward.

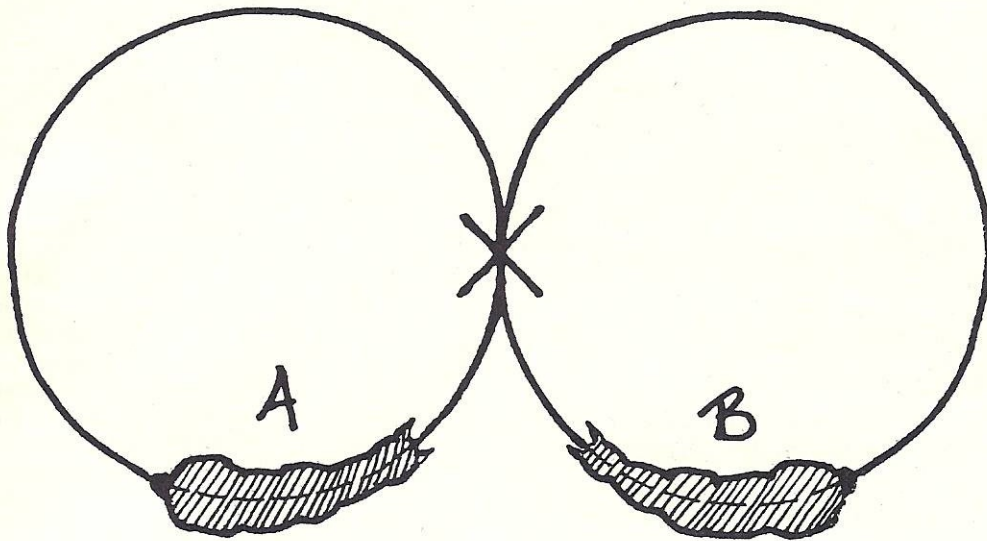
FROM HALT OR AFTER A REIN-BACK

Only the schooled horse does canter departs from halt or after a rein-back. From the halt, a massive amount of impulsion is generated (coiling the spring), and the lead is determined by your balancing of his body and which hind leg is the first beat. You do this by flexing the horse to the inside and aiding extra strong with your inside leg at the girth so that your horse actually lifts his forehead out of the way, brings his leading hind leg forward, and pushes off from the outside hind, all within an instant.

The aids are basically the same to canter after a rein-back with the exception of the amount of effort needed to get the horse on his haunches, because he will certainly be engaged.

MAINTAINING RHYTHM, BALANCE, IMPULSION, FLEXION

Once you have the canter and the lead you require, some effort is needed to maintain rhythm, balance, impulsion, and flexion. The horse's haunches are wider than his shoulders, so he will always appear somewhat crooked going down a straight line at canter unless you compensate. You can make him appear

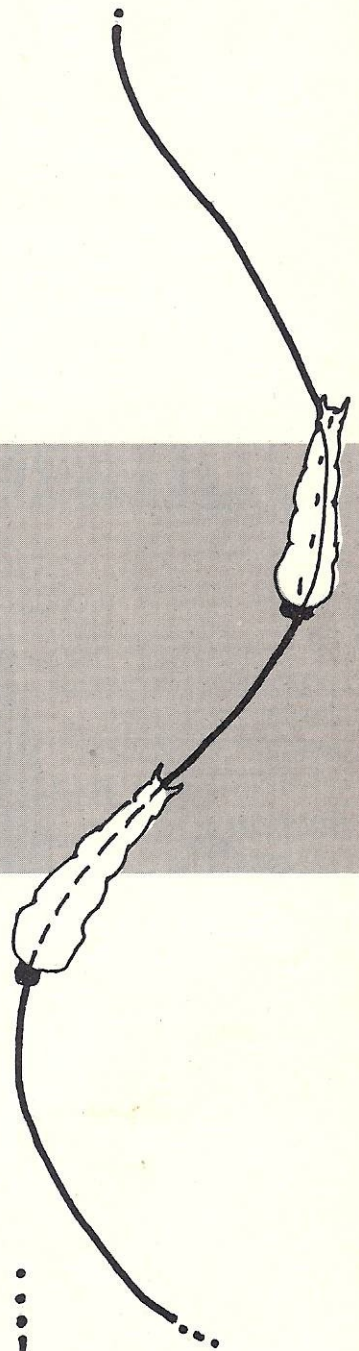
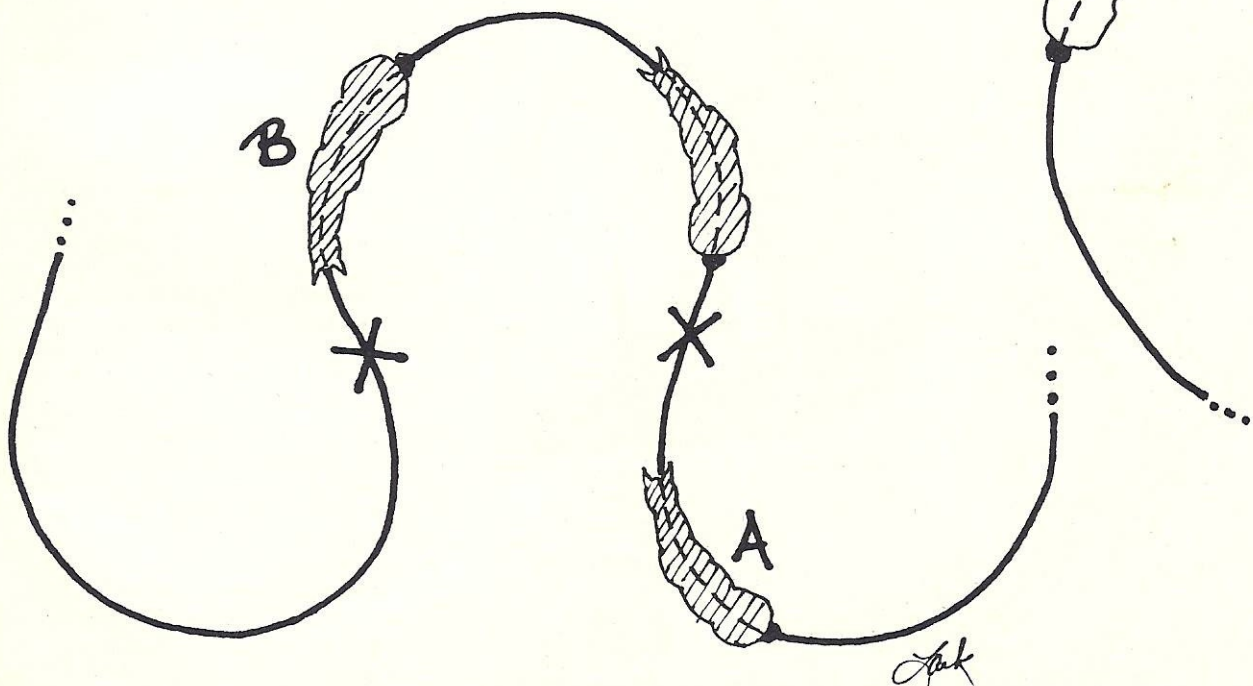


Above: Canter figure 8, with simple changes of lead through the trot. A and B are points for transition to sitting trot, X is center point where change of direction/bend occurs and where canter transition onto new lead must occur.

Center: Serpentine for counter-canter should start with long, smooth curves. Horse stays on one lead for entire figure.

Below: Canter serpentine with simple changes. A and B are points for trot transition. X's are points for canter transition on new lead.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY KATHARINE LARK



straight with a very slight shoulder-in. Impulsion is maintained by your rhythmically driving seat and a kneading inside leg at the girth, a steady outside leg behind the girth. You slow a fast horse and help transfer his weight to the haunch with an active inside rein, a stable outside rein. Do not make your aids straight. To straighten the horse's body is his aid to come to a trot (a straight gait with the pillars of even support supplied by the diagonal two beats).

Keep your thighs relaxed at canter to keep you deep down on your horse's back. Count the rhythm, *feel* the rhythm. You should have energy but not speed. Balance your horse on his haunches for every corner, circle, figure, or transition with the use of half-halts. Picture the next stride and prepare ahead for every movement. Look ahead, not to the side, which would cause the horse to stiffen or twist, and keep your shoulders lined up with where you want his shoulders to be.

If the horse leans on your hands, transferring his weight to the forehand, don't try to pull him up with the reins. That will make him pull, too, and could lead to a nose dive. Make both reins active and use very strong driving aids to rebalance him.

A wrong lead is the horse cantering a circle on the outside lead, his head pulled to the inside, his outside foreleg popping from the shoulder. He leans dangerously to the inside while the hind legs take tiny, hopping strides trying to keep him from falling.

A counter-canter is the horse cantering a circle on the outside lead, his body flexed to the outside of the circle, his leading hind leg stepping well under his body. He is engaged, balanced on his haunches. His rider has her shoulders in line with his and keeps driving him into soft hands. Counter-canter is taught when both leads are polished, and the horse's transitions are fluid and correct.

CHANGES OF LEAD

While cantering, you may need to change direction and, therefore, need to change leads. At first you will do a *simple change* by breaking to a different gait and picking up the other lead with a new transition to canter. This is done through the trot (always sitting), the walk, or the halt as you progress in the practice of simple changes. A flying change of lead is done at canter without changing gait and is correct only if the horse changes in front and behind. It should start with the change of lead on the hind, then the forelegs the next instant.

You can practice simple changes on a large figure eight. It must be two circles connected at the middle so there is a distinct change of the horse's bend at the center where he changes direction. For at least three full figures, start the figure by trotting one half (one circle) and cantering the other circle. Then change the trot circle to the canter circle, and the canter circle to the trotting one. This is the exercise you will return to every time the

simple changes fall apart, or when anything goes wrong cantering figure eights.

When you feel ready and begin to canter the entire figure eight, changing leads through the sitting trot, you must remember that the change of lead, the transition to canter on the other lead, *must* be made at the exact center point of the figure where you change the horse's bend. This means you have to break to the trot *before* the center and have time to balance the horse and prepare him for the transition to the new lead.

SERPENTINES AT CANTER

Large serpentines at canter are your next exercise and should be ridden with simple changes. When your horse is ready, do it all on one lead using counter-canter. This will prepare you both for flying changes and help assure that your horse will *listen* to you for the aids for the lead he will take, instead of making that decision himself.

FLYING CHANGES

When you have polished the simple changes of lead and have ridden a lot of serpentines using counter-canter, you can try a flying change. You take the horse onto a large circle at counter-canter by, say, riding a figure eight without changing leads at the center and staying on half a large circle in the counter-canter.

Work for a *relaxed*, very rhythmic, and balanced gait. When your horse feels fluid, give a strong half-halt, suspend him for a fraction of a second in your hands, change his bend to the new lead, and change your leg and shoulder position. Look ahead, aid for the new lead just as for a canter transition, and instantly send him forward on the new lead. If you get a cross-canter or no change at all, immediately trot, go on to a figure eight, and work your way back up to asking for a flying change from a balanced counter-canter.

If you get a proper flying change, canter on the circle a bit to establish that it's no big deal (even though it is), and then quit for the day with hugs for the horse.

Be sure to ask for your flying changes, using all of your aids just as for canter transitions. If you get changes by using a single rein aid, you'll find your horse changing leads every time you touch your outside rein.

Working on the canter is time well spent. For competition, that little extra polish, control, balance, or beauty your horse reflects from this work can mean the difference between blues and not placing! For your own joy of just riding, you will quickly tune in to your horse's movements and not even have to think to know where each hoof is, and every ride will be more pleasant and successful. For your horse, there will be less confusion, and the canter itself, ridden correctly, will make your horse rounder, his neck will muscle on top, his haunches will strengthen, his shoulder will become freer, his stamina will improve, and his legs will be sturdier. ■