

December 2007 Beyond the Basics

Preparing for Balanced Lead Changes – Part III

Authors Note: It is difficult to believe that just eleven short months ago we began this literary journey together. The premise was to examine four horsemanship topics in a concentrated manner, in an effort to truly give a more thorough exploration of each subject. The vision was to go “Beyond the Basics” and apply our foundational efforts to some very specific topics. We have ventured into the fun and precision of riding together as a group, performing to music, and picturing ourselves in the quadrille. Hopefully you have given yourself the assignment of developing individualized lessons plans for practice with the horse. We have torn apart your body to examine how the head, shoulders, seat, legs, and hands effectively apply pressure and aid balance to achieve effortless movements. And finally, we are closing the year with that beautiful waltz of canter and balanced lead changes. For me, composing these articles has been exhilarating, challenging, and truly enlightening all at the same time! Kind of sounds like horsemanship...does it not? I want to thank *Northwest Horse Source Magazine* for the opportunity to put down on paper these parts of my horsemanship journey. I wish to thank each of you, the readers for giving me your time. But most of all I want to thank the horses that have lead me on this path, and to this point, for their never-ending wisdom, and the courage to continue to be our best teachers!

I have certainly had fun these past few weeks thinking about and researching what the masters say about flying lead changes. Trying to find a consistent message and method has been difficult. From a recent article in *Dressage Today* by John Winnett, U.S. Olympic rider, where he counsels to never train the counter-canter prior to training the flying changes, to Mr. Oliveira's advice for obtaining easy strike offs to canter, where he counsels that the counter canter is a critical component in successful flying lead changes. Then add in the coaching from Anthony Crossley in his book *Advanced Dressage* suggesting the seat and use of human's back are the most important aids for setting up the maneuver, or mix the perspective of Bill Dorrance and Leslie Desmond in developing a 'feel' for the flying change. Pretty soon your mind is racing, your hips are dancing, your legs are on, back, and forward, and your horse is questioning your sanity! Here is my advice...Read and watch all you can on the subject of flying changes at the canter. Pick one and go out try it! If it works for you and your horse, then

great! If not, go back watch and read some more, and perhaps try another approach. In the end, it is always about what works for you, your horse, and jobs you will be accomplishing with him. If you are happy and your horse is too, then life is good!

Now, all that being said, here are a few reminders that I feel are universal in preparation for flying lead changes. Double-check that these factors are all in order before you select a specific method of actually accomplishing the maneuver. These are the questions you need to answer as prerequisites for your success:

- 1) Can I ride my horse at a walk, trot, and canter with roundness in his top line, while maintaining rhythm and balanced straightness?
- 2) Does my horse respond to my aids (seat, leg, hand, and artificial aids such as whip, spur, rommel) without fear or brace?
- 3) Can I control the movement and placement of all four feet, forequarters, and hindquarters?
- 4) Do I understand the rhythm and cadence of the foot falls, and have I experimented (at least in my mind's eye) with the timing of changing leads when all four feet are suspended in the canter?
- 5) Have I prepared my posture, balance, pressure aids, and rhythm, to have the timing correct to ask for the flying change?
- 6) Am I prepared to reward and praise the horse when he accomplishes my request, and not punish if it takes a while for him to understand? (Note: Often times it feels so great when we get that first ever flying lead change, that we humans want to do it again, and again, and again! If we persist, many times the quality of maneuver starts going downhill. Set it up, get the lead change, praise the horse and put him away, or go on to something he really enjoys doing. If you drill at this point it will ruin his enthusiasm to try.)

The past two months I have been giving you several exercises or patterns to prepare you and your horse for all of the prerequisites above. Now let's look at a few more methods, all of which have worked well for me in the past. Some horses excel at particular exercises more than others. You may want to pick and choose, or mix it up over the course of your training schedule.

Flying Lead Change Using the Figure “8” Pattern –

Most of the exercises I have shared with you in this series have incorporated the use the Figure “8” pattern. We have been envisioning the “8” as looking like two circles lying on top of one another, with a length of straight line between each circle. This spot we called “X”. We have conditioned the horse to have a memory that transitions happen at “X”, and that these transitions occur without a change of speed or an immediate change of direction. As I suggested in the November article, probably the most beneficial of the “Simple Lead Change” exercises, is the one that incorporates the canter - to a halt - to a canter on the new lead. Now it is time to simply take a deep breath at “X”, then change your aids to ask for the new lead. Inhaul just as the old leading foreleg hits the ground, and feel as if your breath is lifting all four feet into the air. At this moment, change your aids for the new lead. So if I am cantering on the circle to the right, as I approach “X” nice and straight, balanced, and rhythmic, I will take a deep breath as the right front foot hits the ground, and visualize the left lead. The picture will help my posture to position my left hip a little forward, as my right leg moves slightly back to hold the haunches. The left leg approaches or caresses at the girth to request that left lead. My back has a moment there, when all four feet are suspended, that the positive tension and rhythm hesitates or pauses, until it picks up the movement and rhythm of the new canter. It is important not to lean forward, or excessively open the new inside rein. This will only serve to set the horse out of balance, and your timing will be impaired. Horses have been accomplishing flying lead changes since birth. We simply need to get out of their way!

Flying Changes at the Canter Using the Diagonal and Corner

– The danger in using the Figure “8” pattern is that both you and your horse can become conditioned to thinking that lead changes also constitute changes of direction. It is important that we school the canter strike off on the straight line, and firmly see in our mind’s eye that the canter is starting in the hindquarters. Excessively tipping the nose of the horse in the direction of the desired new lead can cause the lead change to be generated on the front end, and will set things up for a cross-fire and very uncomfortable gait. All you need to see is the eyelash of the horse as you change to the new lead. Before trying the flying lead change utilizing the diagonal and corner, both Eleanor Russell and Mr. Oliveira recommend teaching your horse to carry the counter-canter. (As Example: Canter on a circle to the left, while on the right lead.) In addition, within his book, *Reflections on Equestrian Art*, Mr. Oliveira highly

praises the positive effects of schooling a shoulder-in at the walk, trot, and canter before attempting the flying lead change.

Start by picking up your canter departs on a diagonal across the arena or pen. Carry that in true-canter, or counter-canter around the outside of the school until you reach the point where you struck-off on the canter. Come back to a trot, or halt, and strike-off on the new lead. Next, let’s use the corner to help us to achieve the flying change. As you come across the diagonal, transition from the trot to a walk before you reach the wall. Ask for a slight haunches-in, and then ask for the left lead canter through the corner. Repeat the exercise several times. Next, try the same sequence, except come across the diagonal at the canter in the right lead, slow to a trot, accomplish a couple of strides of haunches-in and then strike-off on the left lead through the corner. After practicing this several times, eliminate the trot and ask for the flying change as you reach the wall. This exercise is well-diagramed in the series of books by Eleanor Russell called, *Gymnastic Exercises for Horses*.

Use of the Log or Cavelettis – An exciting variation to the more technical exercises and patterns above, is to school the flying change with the use of a cavelettis or log.

The concept is quite simple...As the horse jumps the log there is clearly a time when all four feet are in the air! This is the time to ask for the change of lead. You can set the log up in different positions and at different angles to the school to help your horse listen for your aids, and for you to feel the timing.

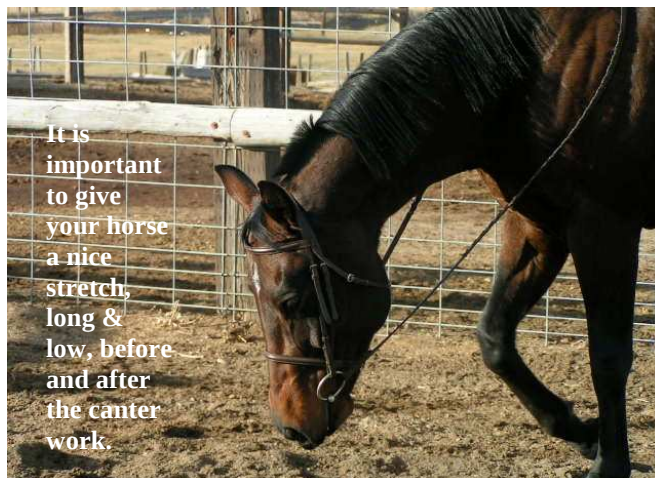
Again, avoid using your reins expect for the slightest of suggestion of a squeeze or sponge-like-feel, up and ever-so-little forward in the direction of the new lead. Example: I might place my log perpendicular to the diagonal line, some place past “X”, but well before the corner. As I approach on the right lead, just a split second before my horse jumps the log, I will apply my aids asking for a left lead. My right leg goes back to hold the haunch, my left leg cresses at the girth, my left hip comes a little up and forward, and is accompanied by my left hand’s small sponge feel. Da-DA...Flying lead change over the log!



Flying lead changes are great fun, and I think that most horses actually like to show-off their ability to accomplish them. They are an important maneuver for you to be able to achieve in most all disciplines and for many types of jobs you may have for your horse. While there are a myriad of ways to achieve them, it is clear that they will happen more effortlessly if we adhere to preparing the horse through use of the basics of good attitude (i.e. A willingness to yield in a respectful manner), combined with balanced, rhythmic movement. I look forward to seeing you in a clinic next year and hearing how your flying lead changes are coming along. May your 2008 be filled with patience, grace, and forgiveness – the lessons of the horse.

Suggested Reading:

Reflections on Equestrian Art by Nuno Oliveira
 Gymnastic Exercises for Horses – The Classical Way by Eleanor Russel, Vol. I & II
 Advanced Dressage by Anthony Crossley
 True Horsemanship Through Feel by Bill Dorrance and Leslie Desmond

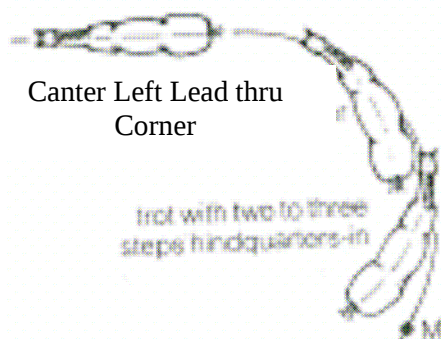


REVERSE BEND SERIES. Tracking to the left, pick up a slight right bend; Your seat bone and shoulder blade balance is in the direction of travel – to the left; Lengthen your left leg, and caress with the right lower leg, envisioning the energy moving from the right hip of the horse to the left shoulder and rein. Accept the energy in the left rein with a slight caress or sponge-feel. Avoid moving your hands across the mane line.

If I were to ask for the canter, I would do it here, as weight is being placed on the left hind foot, and the shoulders are balanced and clear.



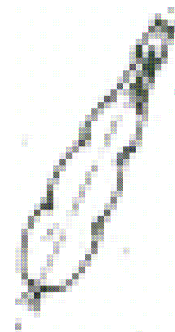
Flying Lead Changes Using Diagonal and Corner



Canter (Right Lead)

Developing Lead Changes Using a Log or Cavelettis

Canter (Left Lead)
You can see the left eyelash



Canter (Right Lead)
You can see the right eyelash



Slight haunches-in, displacing the hindquarters to the left, preparing for the left lead. My right leg is back, my balance is to the left, and my left leg will ask for the canter, along with a up and forward slight movement in my hip.



Strike-off on, on the left lead, after a slight haunches-in before the corner.