



# Step By Step Transition to Canter (or Lope)

Few of us would expect a 6 year-old to read a complete sentence without first being taught it's individual words, nor would we expect a young, aspiring gymnast to execute a complex maneuver without first learning the fundamental elements from which it is comprised. Yet, we often expect our horses to perform complex skills, without first helping them to master each fundamental part of those skills or maneuvers.

Learning is a step-by step process, whereby fundamental elements or knowledge are combined and built upon, in order to achieve a complex or advanced result. Humans learn to crawl before they learn to walk. Then they learn to walk before they run. If any intermediary step along the way is skipped, it can lead to difficulty, or even disability, later in the learning process.

The lesson for us as Rider-Trainers, is, to break down any skill into its fundamental elements, or steps. We must understand each element and how to teach it to our horses. Some horses will need extra time with one element, while others may not. Other horses will show great talent, and understand and perform more than one element of a skill, simultaneously, but don't expect this to happen. Instead, be prepared to take your time, be patient, and treat your horse as a unique individual as he or she progresses through the learning process. You may have to spend whole training sessions mastering one fundamental element before putting all of the elements together to execute the complete skill.

Even if you are riding a well-trained, advanced, horse, you must understand how your horse came to acquire that level of skill, in order to maintain your

horse's level of performance. Only through your precise and accurate use of aids and cues, and by referring back to the fundamental elements of each skill that your horse was first taught to perform, in its earlier training, is this possible.

For example, consider the transition from walk or trot to canter or lope. When performed in balance and in control, it appears smooth and effortless, belying its underlying complexity. Several fundamental elements are required in a well-timed sequence and combination, in order to perform this skill well. The rider trainer must help the horse learn to comfortably perform each element step by step, before combining them in order to perform the transition seamlessly.

**The Big Picture.** Before you begin, visualize your horse stepping into a smooth, flowing canter from a walk or trot, with you balanced astride, following your horse's movement. Your horse should be comfortable moving forward in a collected frame with even energy. This doesn't necessarily mean with shortened steps, but rather, with a soft poll and jaw, a lifted back, and a quiet, willing, attitude. You'll choose a lead, (for simplicity, let's say the right lead), move your outside, (left), leg down, back, and into your horse's side behind the girth, then breath and press in with both legs. Then "go with" your horse into the canter.

**The Details.** The transition will be in 2 parts: 1) Set-up, and 2) "Ask".

### 1) Set-up Elements:

Soften your horse in the jaw and at the poll, (squeezing each rein down and back), while moving it forward into the bridle, (with pressure from your legs), collected, with a lifted back and engaged haunches.

Tuck your horse's jaw to the right, (for the right lead), by engaging your right rein close to the midline of your horse's body. Meanwhile, open and engage your left rein until your horse's head is in a level position, close to a point that is even with the center of its chest. The side of your horse's neck should have a soft, slightly concave shape. Keep moving forward. (Photo 1).

Move your horse's haunches slightly to the right, by moving your left leg back and in, while still moving forward. You should feel your horse's back feet cross over each other slightly, in this part of the set-up for the transition. (Photos 2 and 3.)

### 2) "Ask":

Now that your horse is in the perfect position\* to transition to the right lead canter, sit tall, inhale, and apply pressure with both of your legs, (left leg behind the girth, right leg over it), then exhale as your horse steps into the first stride of the canter. (\*Since your horse's haunches are positioned slightly to the right, your horse's left hind foot reaches up under it's belly and your body, propelling it forward for Beat 1 of the canter stride. Beat 2 continues with the right hind and left fore striking the ground si-



Photo 1) I'm beginning to tuck Nellie's jaw to the right. Her neck's still a little stiff just behind the poll. I'll circle her right, then ask her to keep her neck soft on the right side as we continue down the rail.



2) I'm moving Nellie down the rail with her haunches in to the right, until this part becomes easy for her. (We spent most of a training session doing only this.)



3) Now I'm getting more suppleness in her neck and jaw, and nice haunches in with her back feet crossing over.



4) I have "Asked" Nellie to canter with my tall body and breath. She is moving forward quietly, with good balance for this stage of her training.

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multaneously, continuing to drive your horse forward. The right foreleg finishes the stride for Beat 3.) Let your hips move with your horse as he or she steps into and continues the canter or lope. (Photo 4).

Study photos 1-4, until you understand and can visualize how your horse's body and your own will look and feel through each step of the process. Then go execute the steps with your horse. Your improved awareness will enhance your experienced horse's transition immediately. Your less-skilled horse will need more

time, and a step-by-step approach to mastering each of the Set-Up Elements before you "Ask" for the first stride of the canter. (Teach the left lead canter transition by using a mirror image of the above instructions.)

While the process may seem tedious, it will all be worth it when you feel your horse flow seamlessly through a quiet, balanced canter transition. Remember to Enjoy the Ride!

*Dianne can be reached at Hill Country Equestrian Lodge where she teaches Whole Horsemanship year-round. www.hillcountryequestlodge.com, or (830) 796-7950.*

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