

# Fox Trotters and Walking Horses Can Canter!



By Lee Ziegler

A while ago I took a friend who rides Arabians to watch an all-gaited horse show. After a long day spent watching seemingly interminable 2-Gait classes, she turned to me and asked: "Don't these horses ever canter?" I sighed and told her to wait.

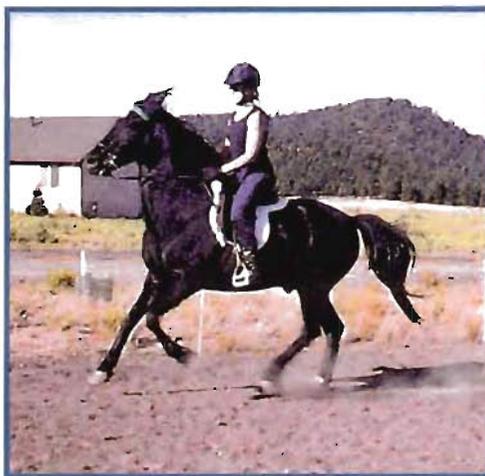
In a later class, to much whooping and hollering, a canter was finally called. Again she turned to me, this time with an appalled look on her face. "Is THAT what they call a canter? No wonder no one does it." I assured her that these horses could do a "real" canter, but that the fashion of the show ring had produced the wretched imitation she was observing.

The performance involving the riders' pumping arms and the horses' flailing front legs and inhibited hind-quarters developed fairly recently — these horses were once shown in a canter that resembled the collected gait she was familiar with from the Arabian English Pleasure world. "Strange fashion," she commented. "Why don't they just train the horses to canter normally?" Why, indeed?

## What Is a True Canter?

The canter is a moderate-speed (no faster than 10 mph) asymmetrical, three-beat gait. It is natural to most horses, and is used at liberty by all but a few of the gaited breeds. The canter is different from the gallop in that it has a three-beat rhythm, the result of the horse working in collection, with more impulsion channeled into lifting the horse rather than propelling him forward at speed. The same three-beat gait, performed with less collection, is often called a lope.

The footfall sequence of the canter is as follows: one hind hoof sets down (first beat of the gait); the opposite hind hoof and its diagonal front set down simultaneously (second beat of the gait); the final front hoof sets down (third beat of the



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gait); all four hooves are clear of the ground for a split second.

The lead of the canter is determined by which front hoof sets down last in the sequence. If a horse "canters" with any variation of this footfall sequence, he is not doing a true canter.

The show-ring aberration is usually a four-beat gait (no simultaneous set down of the diagonal pair) and lacks the moment of suspension that provides lift and grace to the gait. This is most often the result of training that forces the horse to approximate the canter at extremely slow speed, in the mistaken belief that slow speed equals collection.

## Problems in the Canter

To canter well, a horse requires good coordination, a strong and supple back, well-conditioned hindquarters and strong joints in his hind legs. His legs must work together to produce the complex footfall of the gait; his back must arch and straighten as he tucks his hindquarters under his body, then pushes forward; his hindquarters must have the strength to lower and push his body upwards, changing the angle of his pelvis as he moves; and his hocks and stifles must be stable so that they can direct the thrust produced forward and upward as he pushes off from the ground.

A horse with a stiff back will not be able to flex it into the first, rounded position of the canter. This in turn will make it difficult for him to lower his hindquarters, and use his legs with the coordination required to produce the gait. The result is often a four-beat canter, the hind or the front hoof of the diagonal pair setting down first.

The horse may also do a "rotary" or disunited canter in which the set-down of a hind hoof on one side is followed by the set-down of the fore on the same side. Another possible result is a "canter" in

which both hind hooves set down simultaneously, or a "siar" in which the horse has a cantering or hopping motion with the front legs and a trotting or walking motion with the hind.

These faulty "canters" can cause physical damage to the horse's joints, ranging from excess torque and wear in the hocks and stifles to navicular syndrome in the overweighted front hooves. Unfortunately, these impure gaits are all fairly common faults in many gaited horses that attempt to canter.

## The Tennessee Walker, the Fox Trotter, and the Canter

Many Walkers and Fox Trotters have trouble performing any type of canter, let alone a collected one, because they have stiff, poorly conditioned backs, weak hindquarters and underdeveloped coordination. These physical problems accompany the tendency to pace that is so common among them, and may also be a result of training that concentrates on developing gait alone rather than all-around athleticism.

Selective breeding for "camped-out" hind legs or "sickle hocks" also contributes to the difficulty of the canter for many of these horses.

Such conformation may produce longer stride in back, but it also inclines a horse to weakness in the stifle joints and hocks, and reduces his ability to lower his hindquarters, round his back and thrust off strongly in the first beat of the canter.

The most common method used to train a horse with these physical problems to approximate a canter is to manipulating the timing of his front legs, either with devices attached directly to them, or by the use of particular bits. The horse is slowed to walking speed, then forced to lift the desired "lead" leg. His back is still stiff, his hindquarters do not come under him, and the resulting gait is something that more resembles a "walk and rear" than a true canter.

It is not easy to ride or to teach, and most riders and horses are not capable of performing it. For that reason, fewer and fewer riders seem to be willing to try to canter in the show ring, giving the impression to people like my Arabian-owner friend, that these horses can't canter.

## Teaching a True Canter

Of course, it is quite possible for most Tennessee Walkers and Fox Trotters to perform a true, three-beat, collected canter. For many years Fox Trotters were shown in a gait no different from the canter seen in English Pleasure Arabian or

Morgan classes. Most flat shod Walkers also used this gait in shows until fairly recently. A systematic program of physical conditioning similar to that used by non-gaited trainers will work nicely for developing the canter in almost all Walking and Fox Trotting horses.

## Preliminaries

Obviously, before a horse can learn to canter, he should be well beyond "green-broke." He should have lost any tendency to run away, buck or become unmanageably excited. He should be set in his intermediate gait, with NO tendency to pace at

aids (squeeze and release with both to move forward, pressure from one to move to the side) and rein aids (both direct and indirect rein effects) while working with light contact in a snaffle (non leverage) bit. He should flex at the poll when asked, and relax his jaw in response to light vibration on the reins. A horse that has not learned these things can certainly be taught to canter, but he will have trouble benefitting from most of the exercises that build a strong and flexible back, and his gait will suffer as a result.

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## Round Pen and Longe Line Work

Before he can canter with a rider, a horse must be able to do the gait on his own. For horses with a strong tendency to move in a lateral gait, work at liberty in a round pen, first at a gallop, then at a slower canter is very useful in establishing the true canter. If you have access to a round pen, take advantage of it to teach your horse to move out in a gallop.

If you are not accustomed to using a round pen, learn how this useful piece of equipment works before you try it. A good source for round pen work is John Lyons' video collection "Controlling the Mind and Body of Your Horse" tape 2.]

Once your horse understands round pen work, try to push him into a canter or gallop from his intermediate gait. This may not be easy! Keep at it until he will move out with speed in something besides a pace or rack. Often horses that have a lot of trouble galloping or cantering free can be helped by adding a couple of low jumps (about one foot high) at intervals in the round pen. These will encourage the horse to thrust off the ground from his hindquarters, slightly rounding his back and lowering his haunches as he jumps.

After the horse has begun to move at liberty with some semblance of a canter or gallop, it is a good idea to work him on a longe line in the gait. The longe allows you to rate or adjust the speed of the gait, and to introduce some lateral bending. The best equipment to use for this purpose is a longeing cavesson, although a well-made halter will also work. Do not use side reins or a bit while teaching this beginning canter work on the longe. (If the horse does not know how to work on a longe line, take the time to teach him at the walk and intermediate gait before you start work on the canter!)

When the horse has begun to develop a fast, somewhat awkward canter on the longe, practice longeing him through transitions in the gait. Work the horse in the canter half the way around the ring, then slow him to a walk. Walk him for a few steps, then ask again for the canter. Let him canter only a few steps, then return to the walk. Practice these transitions for part of each lesson on the longe, until the

horse can take the canter instantly from the walk, and return to it just as quickly when required. This exercise builds strength in the back and hind-quarters, and teaches the horse to control his speed in the canter—preventing him from stringing out into a fast gallop. Keep these sessions on the longe short—no longer than 10 or 15 minutes at a time.



**Above:**The Missouri Fox Trotter Stallion "Princes Moon Beam" owned by Elizabeth Kopplow of TX, in a natural flowing canter. **Right:** The TWH "Jackson" with rider Christel Cole and owned by Kimberly Haag of Flagstaff, AZ, in a collected canter.

## Ridden Work

As the horse develops his ability to canter in the round pen or on the longe, you can increase his flexibility and strength by practicing some basic exercises.

**Transitions:** Repeat frequent transitions from walk to flat walk, flat walk to running walk or fox trot and back again. Ask him to use his body in these transitions, squeezing and releasing with your legs and taking a deeper (more upright) seat before you ask for either an upward or a downward transition in gait. Keep his energy level up, even when you are asking him to slow down. When he is working well at walk/intermediate gait transitions, practice halting from a walk, backing three steps, then, just as he takes the last step back, urging him on into a flat walk. This will help improve both his strength and his coordination.

**A discerning judge will reward the true, flowing, impulsive three beat canter in the show ring over an artificial, stiff or incorrect (four beat) gait. If more gaited horses did the correct canter, the judges would have a chance to place it and the fad of the "show canter" might pass away.**

*Liz Graves, trainer, judge, clinician*



**Bending:** Practice frequent large (60 ft) circles, figure 8's and serpentines with your horse, asking him to bend laterally in a controlled way. Work at first in an ordinary walk, then in a flat walk.

### Steps for riding a circle:

(first place something in the center for you to focus on)

- Shift your weight very slightly to your inside (toward the center of the circle) seat bone.
- Lower your inside hand just a little.
- Raise your outside hand very slightly.
- Press straight into the horse's side with your inside leg to keep the horse from turning too sharply. Press lightly with your outside leg, just behind the girth, to prevent the hindquarters from swinging to the outside of the curve.
- Keep your shoulders parallel to the horse's shoulders and your those of the

horse and your hips parallel to his hips.

- Practice circles in both directions, working a bit more often toward the horse's stiffer side.

When the horse is doing these large circles well, keeping them round and even, combine them into a figure 8, with one change of direction, or a serpentine, which is a number of half-circles strung together.

**Lateral flexions:** A couple of other exercises that will help strengthen and supple any horse are the haunches-in and shoulder-in. These two-track movements condition the horse's back, shoulders and hips. They are not difficult to teach, and will help a horse perform the canter equally well on both leads.

### **Steps for teaching the haunches-in from the circle:**

- Ride your horse along the rail in an arena in a straight line.
- Make a medium sized circle toward the center of the arena. As you come back to the track, just as his head and neck are parallel to the rail, increase the pressure from your outside leg to keep his hindquarters yielded over one step.
- Squeeze with your inside leg to keep him moving forward in a straight line along the rail.
- Increase the contact with your inside rein to keep him from nosing over the rail.
- Support the action of the inside rein

with light contact on the outside rein to prevent him from bending his head too far toward the center of the arena.

- Ride several steps in this position, then allow the horse to return to the circle.

- Practice the haunches-in on both sides, until the horse easily yields his hindquarters over from your leg pressure and bends his body away from the rail.

### **Steps for teaching the shoulder-in from the circle:**

- Ride with light, even contact on the reins at an ordinary walk.

- Make a medium circle away from the rail.

- As the horse returns to the rail, allow him to continue on in the circle until his shoulders, head and neck are faced away from the track, but his hindquarters are moving parallel to the rail.

- Shift your weight slightly to your inside seatbone, keeping your hips parallel to the horse's hips and your shoulders parallel to his shoulders, looking between his ears, at an angle to the direction of travel.

- Do not tilt your pelvis downward toward your inside seatbone.

- Do not twist your neck to look in the direction of travel.

- Lightly increase the pressure from your inside thigh against the horse's side, pushing toward his outside shoulder.

- Gently shorten and increase contact with the inside rein to give the horse's neck the

necessary curve.

- Slightly raise and press the outside rein against the horse's neck, just in front of the withers, to help maintain the position of the shoulders and to prevent too much bend in the neck. You should see the horse's inside eye clearly as he moves forward parallel to the rail, shoulders, head and neck curved toward the inside of the arena.

- Go forward a few steps, then return to the circle. Practice in both directions. If the horse becomes confused or stops, return at once to the circle and then start over.

- Do not try to push a stiff, resistant horse into the shoulder-in position.

**Hill work:** When the horse has begun to canter easily in the round pen and on the longe and has spent some time working on lateral flexibility and strength, he will usually canter uphill under saddle. In climbing a hill, a horse automatically rounds his back and pushes with his hindquarters, the same position necessary for the take off phase of the canter and one he may not be willing to use on the flat. Take advantage of this natural use of the back by cantering up moderate grades whenever possible.

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### Steps for beginning to canter uphill:

- Ride with slack reins at a flat walk up a moderate incline.
- Lean slightly forward and gently rock your seat from back to front in the saddle by undulating your lower back.
- Squeeze hard with both calves, give the verbal command "canter" and if necessary tap the horse sharply on the haunches with a crop or dressage whip.
- The horse should take off in a fast, strung out canter. Leave the reins slack and allow him to canter some distance, then slow him to a walk by shifting your weight to the rear and vibrating the reins.
- Ride down the hill at a walk, repeat.
- Do not worry about leads in the canter at this point — they can come later when the horse is more physically able to canter.

Continue practicing the canter only while going uphill for several months. This exercise will develop flexibility, strength and coordination, preparing the horse for later canter work on the flat. Do not attempt to slow the canter or ride with contact on the reins uphill or in an arena until the horse is solid in the gait on slack reins up the slight hill.

**Cantering in the arena:** As the horse develops strength and balance cantering uphill, you can start teaching him to the canter in a level arena. Teach him the standard cues for the canter. These diagonal aids naturally position the horse to strike off into the canter on a specific lead. Assuming your horse prefers the left lead, begin this canter work first in a counterclockwise direction.

- ### Steps for cantering on the left lead:
- (reverse these aids for the right lead) As you come to the corner of the arena, in a flat walk, take light contact with the reins.
- As the horse's right hind leg starts forward adjust your seat to put your weight over your right seat bone.
  - Do NOT lean forward.

### "Begin to teach your horse to canter by asking for the gait up slight inclines, first."

- Press strongly with your outside (right) leg, just behind the girth. Lift lightly with your inside (left) rein to gently tip the horse's nose toward the center of the arena and raise his head and neck.
- Do NOT pull back on this

rein.

- Repeat the word "canter" and squeeze strongly with both legs for an instant.
- If necessary, reinforce your leg with a tap from a crop or whip. If the horse moves into a fairly fast canter on his left lead, discontinue all leg and rein cues, allowing him to canter with no interference.
- If he does not canter, return to a walk and try again at the next corner.
- When he does take the canter, stay in the gait for about half the length of the arena, then return to the walk.
- Ride at other gaits for a while, then ask for the canter once more. Practice several more canter departs from the corner in the left lead, then go on to other work.
- Do not drill constantly at the new gait.

After a couple of canter lessons in the arena in the horse's preferred lead, when it is clear that he understand the cues and is able to canter on flat ground, it is time to teach him to take the lead on the other side. This is where the earlier work in the haunches-in will pay off! When a horse

**Christal introduces Jackson, the Tennessee Walker, to the canter. Both she and Jackson are fairly relaxed and comfortable. He is just beginning to give at the poll and collect.**



 Canter three-beat, up to about 10 m.p.h., somewhat collected

 Lope three-beat, up to about 10 m.p.h., more relaxed

 Hand gallop four-beat, still controlled, but faster

 Gallop four-beat, with speed and extension

canters he naturally shifts his body into a shallow C curve in the direction of the leading legs. This allows him to move the legs on that side forward a bit closer in time than the ones on the non-leading side, and causes him to push off with the non-leading hind leg in the first stride of the gait. If the rider can curve the horse toward the required lead, the horse will not be able to canter on the wrong lead. Take advantage of this to help the horse take the right lead.

Try the right lead first with light diagonal aids at a corner of the arena. The horse may simply go into the requested lead with no problems. However, if he has trouble with the gait, either taking off on the wrong lead, going disunited or failing to canter at all, start over on one of the straight sides of the arena. Use a haunches-in cue to position him to take off in the correct lead.

## Slowing and Collecting the Canter

At this point the horse should be cantering in the arena, on cue, in a fast, strung-out gait. He may consistently take the correct lead in a three-beat gait, but his performance still leaves a lot to be desired. You should now teach him to slow down and use his hindquarters more effectively in a true canter.

Many trainers believe that the best way to teach a horse to slow from a fast lope into a collected canter is to ride the

horse in small circles, forcing him to slow down through tight curves. This may work for some horses, but it often causes Walkers or Fox Trotters to lose their balance, slew their hindquarters to the outside, and four-beat the gait.

A better method for slowing the canter is to practice frequent transitions from the walk to the lope/canter while working in a straight line. This allows the horse to learn to canter, not by rushing around until he is worn out, but by making the adjustments in his back and hindquarters that allow smooth transitions into that gait from the walk. He slows and cadences his gait naturally as he makes these adjustments.

### Steps for slowing the canter:

Ride along the rail in the flat walk with light even contact on the reins.

- Cue the canter at one corner of the arena.
- Canter half way down the arena.
- Shift your weight slightly to the rear, tipping your pelvis under you.
- Lightly vibrate (small pulls and slacks) the reins, taking slightly stronger contact with the inside rein.
- Return to the flat walk. Walk to the next corner of the arena, then repeat.
- Practice these "canter departs" several times, on both leads, then ride at the flat walk in circles, serpentine, etc.
- Return to the canter a couple of times during each lesson. After a session or two of this sort of work, you will notice that your horse will start to take slower, less strung-out steps at the canter. Build on that by beginning to ask for some slight collection in the gait.
- Do not try to collect the horse by pulling back on the reins or pumping them up and down. This will only make him stiff and may cause a faulty four-beat canter. Ask him with a combination of leg and rein aids to bring his body together in a true canter.

### Aids for collecting the canter:

- Ride in a flat walk with light even contact on the reins.
- Cue the canter.
- Adjust your weight in the saddle by tipping your pelvis forward so that you are seated firmly on your buttocks.
- Squeeze and lift with your upper thighs at alternate canter strides.
- Simultaneously, while vibrating your reins to prevent too much forward speed, ask the horse to bring his nose toward vertical, flexing at the poll.
- Ride a few steps at the slower canter, then return to the walk.

**Working in small circles is not the best way to teach your horse to slow down his canter.**

These aids will increase the energy of the horse's hindquarters while preventing him from moving out in a fast lope. He will begin to channel his impulsion into lifting his forequarters and raising his head and neck, as he pushes from his slightly lowered hindquarters. He should start to work in a naturally rolling, semi-collected canter with no stiffness in his neck or back. Practice this type of canter, a few steps at a time, until the horse takes

it effortlessly when asked. If at any time he starts to string out into a low lope, shift your weight strongly to the rear and use light vibrations on the rein on the leading side to slow him. If he starts to four-beat the gait, push him on for more speed with less contact on the reins, then ask again for a more collected gait.

## The Results

The canter that results from this sort of training is identical to that of a well-trained non-gaited horse. There is no flailing of legs, pumping of reins or "walk and rear" motion to this gait. This sort of collected canter is possible for most Walkers and Fox Trotters, at a speed slightly faster than the flat walk. You may not win with it in performance classes in the show ring, but you and your horse will be very comfortable with it on the trail or in open classes.

