

WHAT IS AND WHAT ISN'T A CANTER

By Lee Ziegler, revised 1998

If you want an interesting experience, go to a few multi breed horse shows and dressage exhibitions and watch what the horses do when they are asked to canter. Saddlebreds and Morgans will move one way, Arabians in English or Western classes will move another, Thoroughbreds and Warm bloods will have their own type of movement, Quarter Horses will do something that seems entirely different, and the Walking Horses and Fox Trotters will be doing something completely different from any of the other breeds.

Why so many variations? The basic, natural canter of all these types of horses should be the same — a three beat, asymmetrical gait with a moment of suspension performed on a particular lead, front and back. Style and speed vary between breeds, and that is a big part of the different look of the gait when done by a Saddle bred and a Quarter Horse, for example. The main variant, however, may be that some of these horses are not doing a canter at all!

WHAT MAKES IT A CANTER?

The canter is defined by its footfall sequence, support sequence, and timing. Any variation in these things will make the gait into something that is no longer a canter, while changes in style or speed will only make it appear different and may affect the overall quality of the gait.

Footfall sequence: The canter is an asymmetrical gait. This means that the legs on one side do not exactly mirror the action of those on the other. The footfall sequence in the canter depends on the lead the horse is using, that is, which front foot contacts the ground last in the stride. For a left lead the sequence, starting when the right hind touches the ground, is: right hind alone; left hind and right fore simultaneously; left fore; moment of suspension (all four hooves clear off the ground); right hind. For a right lead, the sequence starts with the left hind and ends with the right fore.

Support sequence: Again, the support sequence of the canter depends on the lead the horse is using. For a left lead the weight bearing support sequence is:

- 1) Right hind supports all weight, all other feet clear of the ground;
- 2) Weight shared by right hind, left hind and right fore, left fore clear of the ground;
- 3) Weight shared by left hind and right fore as left fore touches the ground and right hind lifts;
- 4) Weight shared by both fore and left hind as right hind lifts;
- 5) Weight on left fore as left hind lifts, right hind and right fore clear of ground;
- 6) Moment of suspension when no hoof bears weight.

This sequence is reversed if the horse is on the right lead. As complicated as it sounds, it can be simplified as; one hind hoof alone; followed by both hind and one fore; followed by both fore and one hind; followed by one fore and one hind on the same side; followed by one fore; followed by no hooves on the ground.

Timing: The canter is a three beat gait, evenly timed, with a short hesitation between each three beat sequence. It sounds like a waltz with a hesitation - 1-2-3--1-2-3. The second beat is caused by the simultaneous set down of the diagonal hooves, and the hesitation comes from the brief moment of suspension. A gait that varies from this timing is not a canter.

Style and speed: Although the canter is natural to most horses, it has been modified by riders in various ways to meet their own aesthetic and practical uses.

- 1) A dressage horse, of any breed, is expected, as he advances in training, to do a collected canter in a smooth, athletic, balanced manner, with an elastic use of the back. He rises in front

only as his hindquarters lower from a rounded croup and back, and the thrust of his non-leading hind leg is channeled into fluid upward motion of the forehead.

2) A Thoroughbred hunter, expected to have a flexible use of his back to cover ground and collect himself between jumps, canters a bit faster than his normal trot, balances to his hindquarters, and rises moderately in front as he thrusts forward with his non-leading hind leg.

3) A "Western Pleasure" type Quarter Horse, on the other hand, is not expected to be particularly athletic in his back, must appear extremely calm in the show ring, and so canters very slowly, weight on the forequarters, not rising at all in front with the very diminished thrust of the non-leading hind leg.

4) A Saddle bred, expected to be showy, but not required to have the athletic back of the Thoroughbred, moves with high action in his knees and hocks, rising much higher in front than either the Quarter Horse or the Thoroughbred.

5) A "Big Lick" Walking Horse "canters" with a very stiff back, very slowly, rising high in front, his action not coming from the thrust of the non-leading hind, but as a reaction to the weight he carries on his front hooves. Only rarely does the gait done by these horses meet the footfall or support sequence in the definition of a canter. In recent years, Fox Trotters are usually ridden in a similar gait when called on to canter.

VARIATIONS

Because riders, trainers and judges are often preoccupied with speed and style in the canter, many do not pay attention to the basics of the gait. It is quite possible to see horses of several breeds place well while doing all sorts of things that are not true canters.

Four beat canter: This is probably the most common variation in the canter. While horses do use a four beat gait to gallop, in the slower, more contained canter is always a three beat gait. In the attempt to get that gait, some horses are ridden too slowly, pulled down to a very slow speed, losing impulsion and forward energy. They end up "four beating" at the canter. This can happen in two ways. First, the horse's forequarters can be inhibited by various training techniques, causing the front leg of the diagonal pair to set down before the hind. Second, (and more likely) the hind quarters are inhibited by lack of flexibility in the back and correct use of the stifles and the hind hoof of the diagonal pair will set down first. This second type of "canter" can sometimes be strung out into a low lope (seen often in Quarter Horses), but it also occurs with higher action in front whenever the horse does not work with an elastic back.

No suspension canter (rear and walk): This gait was once seen only in Big Lick Walking Horses, but is now seen in the Plantation shod ones and in show Fox Trotters. It is similar to the second type of four beat canter, with the diagonal hooves coming to the ground separately, but in it, the leading fore is followed by the non-leading hind with no moment of suspension. This can come about because the extreme high action of the front legs interferes with the timing of the gait so that the hind is ready to set down before the front have finished their time in the air. It can also be the result of stiffness in the back and a poor use of the stifles in a horse that is made to go too slowly for his physical ability.

Disunited canter: Fortunately, most people recognize this as a problem, and it is not often seen in the show ring or elsewhere. It is a dangerous and uncomfortable way of moving that is usually due to a stiff back and poor use of the hind legs. It occurs when the hind quarters completely lose coordination with the front, and the horse "leads" with one leg in front and the diagonal one in back.

In a left lead, the left hind will come down first, followed by the right hind and right fore together,

with the left fore coming down last. This creates a violent rocking motion and can make a horse fall, especially if he catches a front hoof with a hind. The movement is not common in unriden horses, but it can develop easily in a horse when the rider interferes with his natural gaits. It also seems more likely to occur in horses with a tendency to pace.

Another type of disunited canter occurs when both hind hooves set down together, while the fore legs are still moving in the canter motion. This can happen when a horse is changing leads or when he is confused and lacks coordination and strength in his hindquarters.

SIGNS OF A GOOD CANTER

A good canter is not defined by slow speed, although it should not be very fast, or by high action in front, although it should not be done "heavy on the forehand" with no lift to the front legs. It should be relatively slow, collected, with the horse moving from an elastic back with good, functional lowering of his hindquarters and proportional rise in his forequarters. There should be no stiffness or hitching in the motion and no bounce or jolting in the saddle.

The beat must be a 1-2-3 and the support sequence, especially the moment of suspension, must be preserved. This brief time when all feet are clear of the ground allows the horse to round his back, concentrate his energy and thrust forward and upward efficiently with his non-leading hind leg. This type of motion produces a gait that is rhythmic, fluid and graceful to watch.

Go back and watch those horses at the dressage exhibitions at the collected canter. If they are working correctly at upper levels, even though they are often 17 hh, they appear to float lightly at the canter at a very slow speed, rising smoothly in front. Compare that to what you see in the Big Lick Walker ring or among Fox Trotters.