

FLYING *Changes*



The flying lead change should be part of any finished western horse's repertoire. Here's how to keep them tuned up

Before I talk about riding a lead change I think it is important that we define exactly what it is. When I talk about a lead change in the context of a finished western horse, I am referring to a flying lead change. This is where a horse travelling at a lope (or canter) changes its leading leg without taking any trot strides.

To get your head around a lead change it helps to think about the footfalls in a lope. The lope is a three-beat gait, meaning that there are three footfalls per stride. These are evenly spaced and followed by a moment of 'suspension' in which all four legs are off the ground. When a horse is loping on the left lead it starts with the right hind leg, followed by the left hind leg and right fore leg together, and then the leading fore leg – the left fore in this example. The horse's leading leg will extend forward further than the other front leg and, in a correct lope, its entire weight is carried in this sequence.

In order to 'change leads' we need to change that sequence of the lope to the left hind leg, right hind and left fore together, followed by right fore. Given that it is the hind leg that initiates the lope it is clear to see that it is the horse's hip that will create the lead change, and that the timing of our aids to initiate this change is very important.

The change should be asked for just prior to the moment of suspension in the lope stride. It is important that a horse be responsive to a rider's leg aids as you can't physically make a horse change leads, he has to be soft through his body and listening. A successful lead change will also depend on the rider's balance. You need to stay out of the way of the horse as they change or you will compound any problems that they may have.





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RIDER MISTAKES

★ Changing direction

Combining a change of direction with a lead change is one of the most common mistakes I see when working with people. Asking for a change of direction first will often cause the horse's shoulder to come to the inside and will 'drop in,' making it hard for the horse to change smoothly, if at all. If you were changing to the right I would be important that your horse keeps its right shoulder up and stays soft through the right side of its body as this will make the change smoother. If your horse were to try and push though the shoulder in the change then you would need to use your leg to secure the shoulder.



★ Changing in the same place

Horses get wise to patterns and drills, and will quickly start to anticipate the lead change. This is especially true when it's done at a set place every time such as the centre of the arena. When working on lead changes at home I rarely ask my horses to change leads where I would do in a pattern. I'll normally ask for the change on a straight line and I use a lot of counter canter to hold my horse on a lead until I want the change. This keeps them waiting for my cue and helps a lot with anticipation problems.

★ Leaning

A lot of people make the mistake of leaning into the change and looking down to the inside of the horse. Remember that you want to keep your horse's shoulder up and secure, so tipping over his inside isn't going to help him. When changing right to left, sit back and keep a little weight in your left seat with your right shoulder up and slightly forward. This should help keep your horse's shoulder secure through the change.

★ Trying too hard

There is an optimum riding position that we can put ourselves in for anything that we ask of our horses. Often people try too hard to help their horse and end up shifting their position and get in the way of their horse instead. If what you are trying isn't working, then maybe you need to tune your horse up so he looks for you and tries a bit harder. →

THE AIDS

The aids I use for a flying lead change involve my weight and leg. If I am asking for a change from the left to right, I sit a little weight in my left seat bone, open through my inside leg and hip and take them back a little to bring the horse's hip through to the inside. I want the horse to wait for my leg to come back before he changes. On a finished horse you shouldn't have to do much at all and the lightest gesture should be enough to initiate a change. If you find you have to work hard for your changes then your horse probably needs a tune up.

Ideally a western horse should change leads from behind. When a horse changes leads from his hip he'll more likely give a clean change instead of becoming disunited. I spend a lot of time training my horses to be independent through all their body parts and on a finished horse I should be able to ask a horse to move his hip without him pushing through his head or shoulder.

Tuning Exercises

MOVING FROM PRESSURE

It's important that your horse moves away from pressure softly and willingly when asked. I want to be able to position the hip and shoulder with the lightest of pressure while keeping the horse soft in the bridle. I don't want to use my spurs through a change as this shouldn't be necessary on a well trained horse but sometimes they can become lazy to the leg. If my horse isn't moving softly off my legs I'll use my spurs as a reinforcement to get him soft again. As with everything I do, I'll ask as softly as possible first and then use a firmer pressure to reinforce the initial cue. If I do this correctly my horse will understand the connection between the initial soft cue and the reinforcement and become softer again.

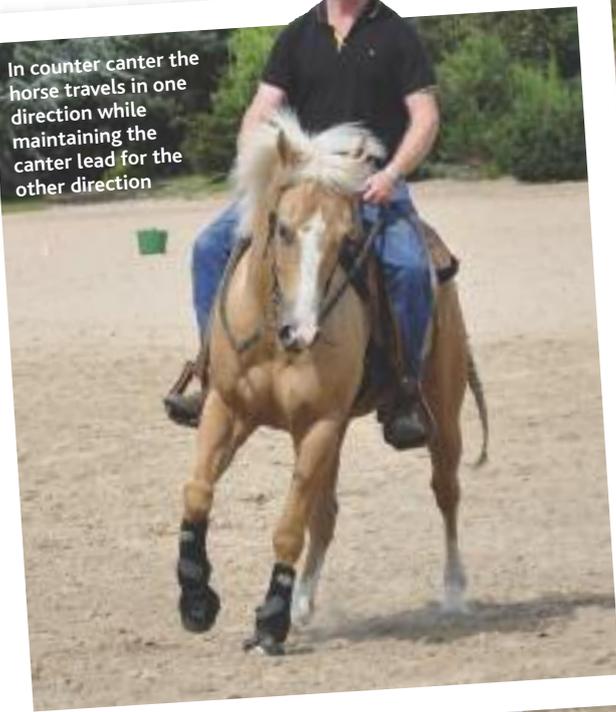
In travers, the horse moves with its hip to the inside of the direction of travel



TRAVERS

Travers on a straight line and circle are good exercises to start with when working on softening your horse through his body in preparation for the lead change. I start by working on straight lines at the lope, lifting my horse's inside shoulder with my leg and a little inside rein and moving his hip over to the inside with my outside leg. I want to feel that my horse's shoulder is travelling straight while his hip travels to the inside, and want to make sure the cadence of the lope remains the same. I think about cadence a lot when I'm training. If a horse can work through an exercise without speeding up or slowing down then it tells me that he is comfortable and not finding it hard. If he can work easily in travers I'll move on to the counter canter to give me a greater degree of hip and shoulder control.

In counter canter the horse travels in one direction while maintaining the canter lead for the other direction



COUNTER CANTER

Counter canter is a very useful exercise for both training and maintaining the lead change. In counter canter I want my horse to be soft from nose to tail and ideally maintain an inside bend while keeping the inside shoulder up. I want to be able to push my horse's hip to the outside of a circle and also counter canter 'squares' to give me more hip control. Counter canter is very useful when working in a small school as it gives you the option of

changing leads anywhere.

For a horse that is really pushy through the lead change, or anticipates it easily, I'll spend some time reverse bending on a circle until he softens and stops fighting for the lead change. This exercise really allows me to push the horse's shoulders around and get a soft face while taking out some of the anticipation, especially when working on lead changes from circles.