

Training the Fox Trotter to Canter

by Lee Ziegler ©1999

Many gaited horses have trouble doing a canter. [I am referring to a true canter here, not the four beat, high action "show canter" that is popular among Fox Trotter and "big lick" Walking Horse trainers.] Some old-timers will occasionally argue that the canter is not natural to gaited breeds, and that it is wrong to make them do the gait. Latin American breeds are not required to canter in the show ring as part of their performance, and many trainers of those horses believe that the canter will ruin the easy gaits of those horses. North American gaited breeds are usually expected to canter, whether they are shown at the gait or not. There is no reason the canter should not be part of the picture for most well-trained fox trotting pleasure horses.

WHAT IS THE CANTER?

The canter is a three beat gait, done at a moderate speed — no faster than 10 mph— in which the rider feels a gentle rise and fall in the saddle. The footfall sequence of the canter is: one hind hoof sets down (first beat of the gait); the other hind hoof and its diagonal front set down simultaneously (second beat of the gait); the other front hoof sets down (third beat of the gait); all four hooves clear 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 pattern or timing, he is not doing a true canter.

To canter well, a horse must have a strong back, strong hindquarters, well-developed stifles and elasticity in his body. His legs must work together in a coordinated way to produce the specific and complex footfall of the gait. His back must round to allow him to push off with his outside hind leg, with his hindquarters tucked under his body, flexed downward at the lumbo-sacral junction. If his back is stiff and his coordination and timing are off as he sets down his hooves, he may canter disunited, that is with a hind and front on the same side setting down one after the other or simultaneously. [This is sometimes called a 'rotary gallop.'] He may also do a miserable gait in which both hind hooves set down at the same time. Or, he may do a four beat canter, in which the two diagonal hooves that should set down simultaneously hit at distinctly different intervals, usually the front hitting before the hind. The horse may also mix trotting or walking motion in either his front or hind legs with a cantering motion from the other pair.

WHY DO GAITED HORSES HAVE TROUBLE WITH THE CANTER?

Gaited horses have two strikes against them when they try to canter. First, unlike trotting horses which have only a couple of options in their leg coordination (they walk or trot); gaited horses have a number of possibilities in the timing of the way they move their legs. They may walk, trot, pace, stepping-pace, fox trot, running walk, or rack. Many of these gaits are lateral, with legs on one side moving forward together. This lateral timing is similar to but not exactly the same as that of the canter, since in that gait legs on one side also move forward together for part of each stride. This can be confusing to a horse, who may move his legs forward together one way in a stepping pace part of the time, and then must learn to move them just slightly differently for the canter. The ability to pace or do lateral gaits, which is part of what gives the horse his easy gaits, presents a coordination problem when he tries to do a canter. Second, in addition to this "wiring" problem, many gaited horses have very stiff backs, either from early training or natural inclination connected with the pacing gait. A horse with a stiff back cannot reach well under himself with his hindquarters, and has trouble lowering and pushing off with his haunches. He also will have rather poor balance, making the canter a true challenge. Gaited horses with these problems may not be able to canter free in a pasture, let alone with a rider.

WORKING THE HORSE'S BODY TO OVERCOME CANTER PROBLEMS

Most gaited horses can be trained to canter if they are taught to be supple, responsive to a rider's cues, and given a chance to develop their overall fitness before they are taught the gait. Fox Trotters should be trained to flat walk and fox trot, and must have overcome all tendency to pace, at any speed, before they are ready to work on a canter. In addition, before a Fox Trotter can learn to canter well, he should be quiet and manageable in his other gaits, and should be trained to work in a simple snaffle bit, with no leverage. Even horses that are normally ridden in curb bits should be manageable in a snaffle inside a ring or arena. The horse should accept the bit, going willingly with light contact with his head in whatever position you place it, and understand how to collect and extend his body in both the flat walk and fox trot. He must not have a rigid neck or poll from the use of a biting rig, and he must respond to the neck stretching exercise in the ordinary walk and flat walk.

Before you begin: You will need the following equipment to work on the canter: a snaffle, non leverage bit, (you can use the top rein of the Pelham, if you have one); a longe line and longeing whip; a round pen (optional, only needed if you try free longeing); four to eight six- inch diameter poles; two to four small cavallettis or the equivalent (poles set between cement blocks will work) and a small hill.

Try riding your horse in a canter by pushing him on for speed in the bit he normally wears, up a slight hill, in the flat walk or fox trot until he breaks into a hard trot, then a canter, if he will do the gait at all.. Analyze the type of gait he does. Does he go disunited— one lead in front, the other in back? Does he gallop on, rushing with too much speed? Does he use a four beat canter? Does he use only one lead? Does he refuse to canter at all, falling into a pace or a very fast hard trot? Some of these problems are fairly easy to deal with, while others, such as a horse that refuses to canter or lope at all, can be very difficult. All of them can be helped by exercises that condition the legs and body of the horse.

Building coordination and strength:

Work on the longe:

Many Fox Trotters have trouble cantering in a controlled way without the weight of a rider. They become even more uncoordinated if their only experience with the gait comes while being ridden. For horses of this type, work free longeing in a round pen can teach the rudiments of the canter, and work on a longe line in a 30 to 35 foot circle will help them learn to control their legs in the gait. To free longe a horse in a round pen, turn him into the pen, position yourself toward his hindquarters, and move him on, using your voice or waving a hat or lead rope until he moves out with some speed around you. Pay attention to the type of gait he chooses at canter speed. He may switch leads, front and back, pace or mix the pace with the canter. He may also decide to take off in a fast gallop. Allow this, then gradually crowd him into slowing down by positioning your body toward his shoulders and using the words "easy" or "slow down" to quiet him. Reverse him when he has slowed to a walk by positioning yourself in front of him, waving him off to make the change in direction.

After the initial sessions of free longeing (four or five lessons) fit the horse with a longe line, attached to a regular halter or longeing cavesson, with no side reins or other restrictions on his head. In a round pen, or a corner of an arena, work the horse on the longe until he understands and obeys this piece of equipment. [If you have never longed a horse before, have someone who knows the trick of it to help you, or read Charles O. Williamson's book, Breaking and Training the Stock Horse for a description of how it is done.] Then push him into a canter, from a hard trot, circling counter-clockwise, cracking the whip behind him to move him forward with some speed. If you have trouble getting your horse to hard trot, set out four poles on the track and longe him over them until he trots, then ask him to canter over them. If he is still reluctant to take

the canter, place one cavalletti at the height of about a foot, on the track, and longe him over that, allowing him to jump it. That will help him push off with his hind legs and may encourage the canter. Your horse may start to gallop in a fast uncoordinated way. Allow him to circle a few times at that speed, then use light pulls and slacks on the longe line to slow him down a little, being ready to push him on with the whip if he starts to fall out of the canter into a pace. Keep up his forward momentum and impulsion in the canter, so that he does a somewhat strung out, loping gait. Return to the walk, then reverse him and canter him the other direction.

Over the next several days, practice longeing the horse at the canter, using the word "canter" when you want him to take the gait, being sure to work in both directions. You will soon notice which direction is more difficult for him. Work him just a bit more to that side, helping him bend and take the lead he does not favor. Make frequent transitions into the canter from the hard trot, and into the trot from the canter. When those are going smoothly and it seems that the horse understands the verbal command to canter, try transitions from the flat walk to the canter, and the canter back to the flat walk. This will help him learn to slow the gait, and build strength in his back and hindquarters. Walk/canter transitions are actually more important in developing a good, cadenced, slow speed canter than work in at the canter itself. A horse learns to canter, not by cantering, but by making frequent transitions into and out of the gait. Expect to work your horse on the longe at the canter for several weeks, or months. It takes time to build strength and coordination. Of course, you can ride at other gaits during this time.

Ridden work:

Once your horse is cantering well and consistently on the longe you can add some ridden work in the gait. Do not discontinue the longe line work, as it will continue to build strength and flexibility. Use the longe for work over poles and cavallettis to help your horse condition his legs and back in the hard trot, and to develop his stifles. This will later help him work in a true, three beat canter in place of a four beat one.

To canter your horse under saddle, at first you must let him know that it is OK for him to do the gait. He may not believe that he should ever try it with you on him, if he has been working only in the flat walk and fox trot with a rider. To move him into a canter, on a slight uphill grade, lean slightly forward in the saddle, push him into a fast fox trot or hard trot, repeat the word "canter" and give him a sharp whack with a thick crop on his haunches, while squeezing with both legs. This should startle him into a faster gait, and with the addition of the verbal cue to canter, should get him moving in a fast lope. Do not interfere with his gait in any way. Do not try to slow him down, lean back, or pull on the reins. Let him move out with energy for a while, then gradually slow him by sitting a bit more upright, using light pulls and slacks on the reins to slow him to a slower canter, then a fox trot. Repeat several times in each riding session. Do not worry about leads, action, speed or other niceties of the gait. You are working on teaching the horse to do a gait in the canter family, not perfecting that gait. Be sure to work in this fast canter up slight hills. This will help him push with his hindquarters and round his back. Avoid cantering down even the slightest dip, as this will throw your horse's weight onto his shoulders and may interfere with his coordination. Horses that have trouble with a disunited canter or a four beat canter will be much worse if cantered on a downhill slant.

Once your horse understands that he can canter with you on a slight hill you can start working on the flat. In the arena, practices starting the canter as you ride your horse over one pole, encouraging him to lift his front legs and push off with the hind. Canter a few steps, and then return to a flat walk. Practice frequent transitions, flat walk to canter, canter to flat walk, just as you did on the longe line. This will teach the horse to canter more slowly, without inhibiting his forward movement. However, he will still be cantering fairly fast at this stage in training. Don't try to slow the canter below a fast lope for some time. He must be confident and willing to move forward correctly in a three beat gait before he can learn to slow down in it.

Lateral flexibility and leads:

Although it may take some time, once your horse has learned to take off into a canter, at whatever lead he prefers, whenever you ask for the gait, it is time to work on his lateral flexibility and on leads. All horses are naturally one-sided, and their preferred side determines their preferred lead. To train a horse to canter on the non-favored lead, he must first be made flexible in both directions, and then taught to use a body position favorable to that lead.

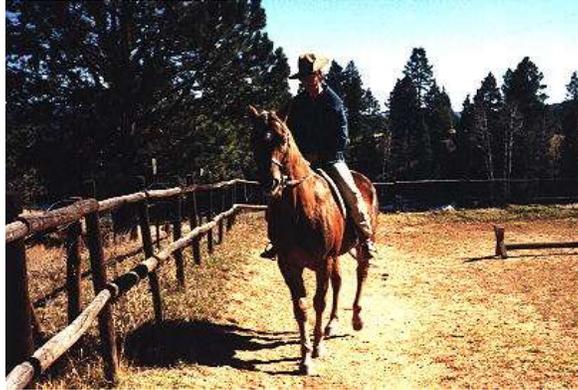
Haunches-in — the key to leads: When a horse takes off in the canter on his favorite lead, he is bent slightly toward that lead, his body making a very shallow "C" curve in the direction of the leading legs. This happens because his body is naturally inclined to bend that direction, due to tighter muscles on one side of the back and more elastic ones on the other. This tightening of the back is increased by carrying the weight of a rider, which probably explains why horses free in a pasture will usually take both leads with no clear preference, but when ridden almost always prefer one over the other. To overcome this problem, you must teach your horse to bend his back equally in both directions, on cue.

There are several exercises that will help a horse bend his back laterally. They are generally called the lateral flexions and include, the haunches-in, and the shoulder-in, leg yields, half passes, and voltes. All are valuable for building flexibility in a horse, but to determine leads at the canter the haunches-in is probably the only one you will absolutely need to teach your horse.

In a haunches-in, the horse's hindquarters move over at least one hoof-width away from the rail (or the rider's outside leg) while the horse moves forward, head, neck and shoulders on the original track, parallel to the rail. To do this exercise, the horse must yield his hindquarters away from outside leg pressure, while responding to inside rein pressure to prevent turning his head and neck "over the rail" to the same side as the pressing leg. This forms a shallow "C" curve, away from the rail, and puts the inside hind hoof and the inside front hoof in such a position that the horse must take the inside lead when pushed into a canter. It stretches the muscles along the back and loin of the horse, while shifting his weight just a little toward the outside hind leg.

It is a great help in teaching the haunches-in if you can first teach the horse to yield his hindquarters to the side with leg pressure in the turn on the forehand. Teach this at first from the ground. Standing at the horse's side, push with your closed hand on his side, just where your calf would hang in the stirrup, at the same time tipping his nose toward you. His hind legs should move over about one step. Stop, praise him, then walk forward a step, and repeat on the other side. After a couple of lessons of this on the ground, try the exercise mounted, using your calf to push the haunches over one step. Gradually discontinue tipping the horse's nose to the side as you cue the turn. Practice in both directions until at any time, when stopped, your horse will instantly yield over his hindquarters with a push from one of your legs.

Walk your horse along the rail in an arena, in a straight line. Do not try to do a haunches-in on a curve— this is very difficult for a horse and takes many months of preparation with flexibility exercises before it can be done well.



Press straight into his side with your outside leg to push his hindquarters away from the rail one step, while keeping lighter pressure on his side with your inside leg to maintain his forward motion, pushing strongly with your inside calf only when necessary to move him on. Shorten your inside rein just a bit, to prevent the horse from turning his head into the rail, supporting this by taking lighter contact with your outside rein to prevent the horse from bending his head too far toward the inside of the arena. Keeping his head and neck parallel to the rail, move your horse forward in the ordinary walk. Straighten him around the curves of the arena, and then continue on in the haunches-in. Repeat, going the other way of the arena, reversing your cues. Practice this often at the ordinary walk, in both directions, until the horse gives easily to your leg pressure and rein signals. Then do the exercise in the flat walk.

Cuing the canter: When your horse can easily perform a haunches-in at the flat walk, put him in that position, and then ask him to canter. To do this, sit upright in the saddle, shift your weight just slightly to your outside seat bone, push straight into his side at the girth with your outside leg, lift slightly with the inside rein (the one on the "leading" side) at the same time you gently rock your seat in the saddle, back to front, squeezing and lifting with both your inner thighs. Use the verbal cue to "canter," and be willing to reinforce your leg cues with a tap from the crop. Try to time your thigh squeezes with the moment the outside hind hoof sets down, encouraging the horse to push off with that leg. The horse should strike off into the canter, on the lead you have indicated.

Possible problems: Your horse may start out on the lead you want, then falter and switch leads. Return to the flat walk, start over, and be sure to keep pushing with your outside leg strongly on his side, keeping his hindquarters "traversed" over one step and his head and neck slightly bent to the inside of the curve. He cannot switch leads as long as you maintain the "C" curve toward the side of the lead you have chosen.

Your horse may also switch leads in back, while maintaining the correct one in front. Again, return to the flat walk, start over, and push strongly with your outside leg to prevent him from moving his haunches toward the rail. At the same time, squeeze with your inside leg to keep up his momentum, preventing him from changing the rhythm of his footfalls.

You may have trouble maintaining the haunches-in position as the horse starts off into the canter. Take advantage of the corners of the arena to help maintain the C curve for a while, until you have better control using the aids for the haunches-in.

Slowing down: Once your horse will take the canter, on the lead you want, you can begin to work on slowing the gait. The best way to do this is to work on walk/canter transitions. One of the worst is to canter in small circles. Work in circles is hard for a horse, especially a gaited one with balance problems. Cantering in a small circle will either cause the horse to rush the canter or to fall into the bad habit of four beating the gait, front hoof hitting before diagonal hind in the

second beat. To slow the canter, sit straight, ask for a canter-depart, canter four steps, then take a deeper seat (weight a little to the rear) and slow to a flat walk. Walk four steps, and then canter again. Repeat this, in both directions, until the horse canters slowly, anticipating the slow to the walk, then increase the number of canter steps. You should slow to the flat walk by using light vibrations on the reins and shifting your weight slightly to the rear of the saddle, not by pulling hard on the reins. In time your horse will do a slow lope when asked to canter.

A lope is fine for trail riding, but at some point you will want to develop a true, collected canter. To do this, ride your horse at the lope, then as you feel the forefeet leave the ground and the front of the horse starts to rise, very lightly restrain with your reins, as you squeeze and lift with your thighs. The horse will take a slightly higher "roll" in front, shortening his stride in the canter, and pushing his hindquarters under his body. Practice restraining very lightly with your reins and not quite simultaneously lifting with your thighs at each stride, until the horse canters at the speed you want. Be careful not to restrain too much with the reins or to "pump" upwards with them, since this will usually cause a four beat gait and will cause a loss of push or impulsion from the hindquarters.

THE RESULTS

If you follow a program of mentally and physically conditioning your horse for the gait, he should canter easily. However, if your horse is pacey, racky, stiff, high headed, and has weak conformation in the hindquarters, hocks and stifles, he will have a great deal to overcome before he can canter well. If, in addition, he is not able to canter while free in a pasture, he may not be able to do an acceptable canter with a rider. Enjoy him at his other gaits, and remember that the old-timers were sometimes right; the canter is not natural to all gaited horses.