

## October 2007 Beyond the Basics

# *Preparing for Balanced Lead Changes – Part I*

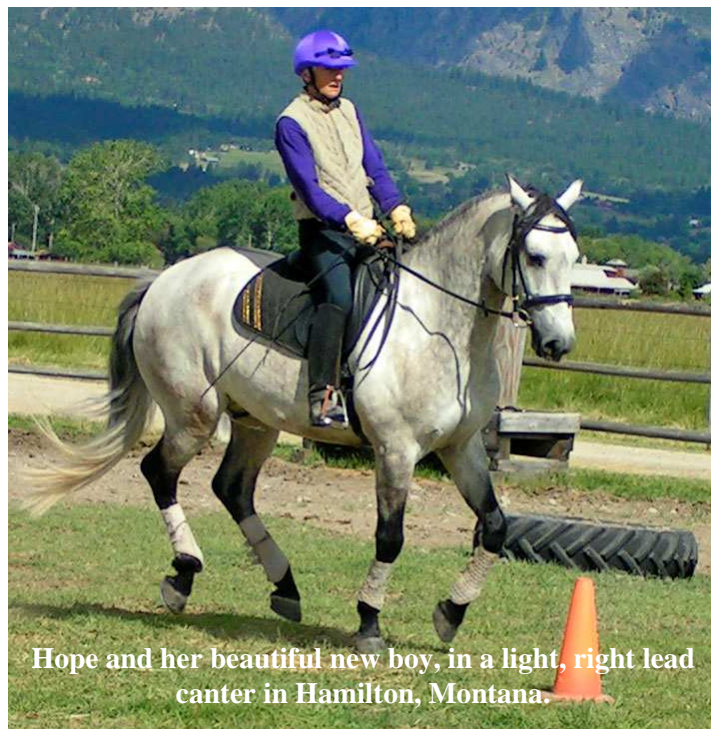
There is nothing quite like the feeling of cantering in perfect harmony with your horse, in lightness and rhythm. To feel the energy sweeping from behind you like a wave of air, lifting horse and rider to the crest of the wave, and then coming back to the human through a slight caress in rein. Then to change the lead, effortlessly... What a dream! As Mr. Hank Young expresses in his book, *Doma Vaquera and Spanish Equestrian Training Disciplines*, "It may well be that man, while upon this earth, will never achieve lightness to gallop the horse across billowing white clouds above, but it is that dream which has inspired our inner spirit to ride in lightness, and a man who does not dream is a man without a future".

In the next series of articles we will be exploring the balance, rhythm, and timing to achieve this dream of beautiful, light canters and canter lead changes. As with all the previous subjects in the *Beyond the Basics* series, there are a number of items we need to prepare in order to achieve a successful maneuver. In other words, long before we start to ask for canter lead changes, we need to have some basics well established. Here are some prerequisites that prepare us to softly ask for canter work and eventually canter lead changes:

First, let's make sure we are all on the same page regarding what a canter looks and feels like to both horse and rider. I find that most disciplines define a canter as a three-beat gait, that begins with the horse's outside hind foot (Outside of the bend) driving the energy up and under, the inside hind foot and the outside fore moving second and in unison, and the final beat of the cadence coming with the inside front foot or lead. As example: If the horse is slightly bent to the right, and I am asking to pick up the right 'lead', then the first beat of the canter is the left hind, the second beat is the lateral pair of right hind and left fore foot, and the final beat is the right front foot. The 'lead' is really miss-named in that it is the last foot to move in the three-beat cadence. We should note that in some cultures, particularly out west, this gait is called a gallop or a lope.

The balance of the horse is definitely tipped to the hindquarters, with the poll being the highest point. The feeling and look should be as if the horse were moving uphill, and the energy is well engaged up and under the horse, coming from the hindquarters, up

through the back, to the poll, and finally resting gently in the hands of the rider and in front of her leg. If by chance the balance of the horse is more on the front end, with the poll being lower, and the back rigid, then the likelihood of achieving a four-beat canter is quite high. In my opinion this is very hard on the horse both physically and mentally. If the Creator had wanted horses to pull themselves along with their front feet, I bet he would have given them claws instead of hooves! Personally, I want my horses to live a long, energetic, and happy life. In order to do so I need to provide the leadership that helps to athletically condition and supple the horse, while working him in a very proud manner. Whether on the dressage court or sorting cattle on the ranch, I strive to achieve this balance and freedom that comes from behind, and carries the poll as the highest point, in what some might call a 'soft-feel'. This phrase was coined by Mr. Ray Hunt as he tired to help us humans understand this picture of softness throughout the entire body and mind of the horse...not troubled and certainly not forced.



Hope and her beautiful new boy, in a light, right lead canter in Hamilton, Montana.

Second, we need to examine the skills necessary to effortlessly set it up for both horse and rider to take the canter and then lightly ride it. Here is a check list that you need to confirm before going forward with asking for balanced canter work:

- 1) Review the age-old training triangle from the master horseman
- 2) Confirm the use of your lateral aids
  - ✓ Can you accomplish leg yields and half-pass
  - ✓ Can you effortlessly move from shoulder-in to haunches-in
- 3) Does your horse (and you!) understand a half-halt, a preparation to a position for a transition?
- 4) Can your horse back up or perform a rein-back by picking up his feet, and lightly sneaking them backwards?
- 5) Can you easily rate your horse at the walk, trot, and in the back up?
- 6) Are the shoulders and hips, ribcage and neck, poll and jaw of your horse soft, supple,? Can you move the hips on a larger arch than the shoulders, now change and ride the shoulders on a larger arch than the hips?

If the answer to all these questions is 'YES', at least most of the time, then you are truly ready to start your canter work! The next confirmation comes in asking *when, where* and *how* do I ask for the canter? These may seem like complicated answers, but always keep in mind that the horse has been cantering and changing leads from pretty much the first day of his life! All we have to do is set it up, stay out of his way, give him time to understand your request, and allow it to happen.

Where to Ask for the Canter: Generally I try to have plenty of room, so I can give the horse the general idea of the way I'd like to have him go, and maybe he can follow that feel or suggestion. If he takes the lead opposite of what I had pictured, I want to have plenty of room to let him go for a time in counter-canter, then ease him back to a trot or walk to set it up again.

When to Ask for the Canter: At the canter, the horse is going to naturally shape slightly in the direction of travel, with the haunches slightly in towards the center of the school. (I.e. if he is shaped to the right, and you are asking for a right lead, his haunches will be slightly to the right.) In the beginning canter work, this posture is just fine, but as we progress, you may want to have the horse a bit more straight and tracking up.) I want to ask for the canter when the outside hind foot is positioned to push up and under the horse, so I need to not only position the hip, but also have my timing down to ask *before* that outside hind foot leaves the ground.

How to Ask for the Canter: This conversation will open a can of worms from those pursuing Baucher techniques to the cowboys at the watering trough! There are some elements that seem to be universal:



First, take your time; Second, accomplish quality preparation with impulsion coming from behind; Third, there is no room for force, as it will only build brace into the horse, and most assuredly, into the rider! In general, I find the most success using my diagonal aids. As example, if I am asking for a right lead canter from a trot, I will place my left leg slightly behind the girth to hold the haunches a bit to the right, and picture the horse lifting into the canter on the right lead with my right hip slightly coming up and forward, and the right rein doing the same. My right leg keeps the bend of the horse slightly to the right. **CAUTION:** You may have well-meaning people instructing you to bend the horse to the left, in order to pick up a right lead. *Please avoid this tactic.* It causes the horse to cast his shoulders in the direction of travel, placing the weight on the forehead, and will result in an out-of-balance canter.

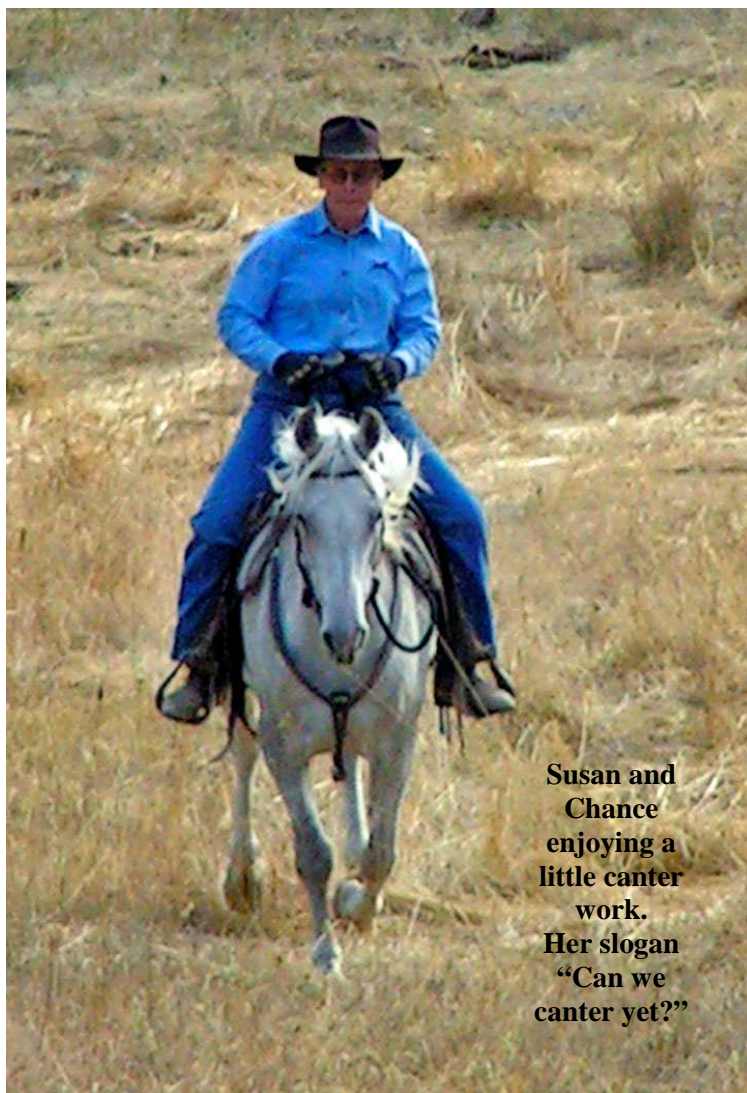


Gloria and Juandero, cantering uphill in the right lead. Note the position of the poll.

So let's start with one of my favorite set of exercises to ask for the canter...Reverse or Counter-bends Maneuvers. We have practiced this in several of the exercises previously, particularly when learning about lateral movements with application of our balance and pressure aids. Now let's put it to work in picking up a brilliant canter. We will start by envisioning a left lead canter as the goal, since most horses canter to the left more easily. Begin by tracking right on a large schooling area. In the corners, pick-up a slight reverse or counter-bend, so that you can just see the horse's left eye lash. Remember that your aids will change as you ride the corner in a counter-bend. (I.e. The left leg caresses at the girth, the right leg relaxes and grows longer, the left hand asks for the left eye, and the right hand accepts the energy as it travels from the left hind foot to the right shoulder.) Next, carry this reverse bend on a quarter-turn, with the shoulders traveling to the right on a larger arch than the hindquarters, and ride off on a new circle to the left. Finally, picture a big Figure "8" pattern, or two larger circles on top of one another. Keep the reverse bend to the left on the top part the top circle, and a regular bend to the left on the bottom circle. Once you have a nice flow and rhythm, carry the reverse bend (bent to the left, traveling to the right) a little further, until you nearly hit the edge of the arena. That's the point that you ask for the canter! The haunches are well positioned under the horse, he is correctly bent slightly to the left, his back is supple. Simply switch your right leg back, relax your left leg, and lift your left hand a bit. Your left hip will naturally come a little forward and up. As this pattern becomes effortless, see if you can ask for the canter before reaching the wall of the arena. Ideally, you will ask at the point where your two circles, or the Figure "8" meet or cross.

To achieve the dream of cantering in lightness is one that has possessed aspiring horseman since Athena first bridled the horse. As we move forward over the next two articles in examining the preparation for balanced canter lead changes, we will be well served to remember the words of the masters, and give ourselves time, patience, clarity, and consistency. Next month we will talk more about exercises to help both horse and rider, but as you practice this month, remember the words of Henry Wynmalen "Complete calm and peacefulness are important in all stages of training the horse, but never more so than in this work at canter".

Suggested Reading :  
\*Gymnastic Exercises for Horses –  
The Classical Way by  
Eleanor Russell  
\*Dressage – A Study of the Finer  
Points of Riding by  
Henry Wynmalen  
\*True Horsemanship Through Feel  
by Bill Dorrance and Leslie  
Desmond  
\*The Complete Training of Horse  
and Rider by Alois Podhaiskv



**Susan and  
Chance  
enjoying a  
little canter  
work.  
Her slogan  
"Can we  
canter yet?"**