

## November 2007 Beyond the Basics

# *Preparing for Balanced Lead Changes – Part II*

Recently I had the wonderful opportunity to take a few lessons with Jorge Pereira from Portugal. Mr. Pereira has an extensive background in dressage and his success in coaching riders and horses to the Grand Prix – Olympic level is very impressive. During my lessons, which I accomplished with my Appendix Quarterhorse - Tilly, we worked on stretching through the top line towards the bit, and then gradually picking up the contact on the reins, with the poll coming higher, all the time maintaining rhythm. As we progressed to experimenting with slowing the rhythm, but maintaining the contact, I began to feel more uncomfortable. The amount of activity and contact on the bit was much more than I was used to requesting. While Tilly caught on quite quickly, it really set my mind to racing, particularly regarding questions of my ability to maintain engagement and impulsion, but still carry a lightness in the front quarters and on the reins. Was the “soft feel” I have been working to perfect as such a key component in my horsemanship journey actually inhibiting the true “collection” of my horse? In the end I came to these considerations: First, the answers in horsemanship ultimately come down to the relationship the two of you, horse and rider, have between you, and the jobs you need to accomplish. Second, you can learn and apply skills from various disciplines to make them your own in order to achieve the brilliance of the dance with your horse. Finally, the more I come to understand, the more I realize I do not know!

So how does all of this relate to our topic of preparing for balanced lead changes? I think it is so important to recognize that there are a myriad of methods and techniques that can be applied. There is no absolute correct answer. In the end, you need to first and foremost develop a willing relationship with your horse, and



then apply the methods that will help to achieve the job you have set out to accomplish that day. Perhaps today I will work toward my canter departs as Mr. Pereira requested, with contact on both reins, so that I can accomplish the job of better engaging my horse with impulsion. And tomorrow, we will go out to rope steers, where I will need to ride with one hand, soft on the reins, and cantering with lightness. Hopefully, my horse will benefit from both types of work!

Before we get started on this month’s exercises to prepare us for effortless canter lead changes, let’s review some basics from the October article. First, keep in mind that as we talk about the “canter”, we are referring to a three-beat gait, that sometimes is called a “lope” in western disciplines. Second, as with any maneuver we ask of our horse, there are some prerequisites that will definitely help facilitate a successful request. These include:

- ✓ Positive Attitude (i.e. A willingness to yield in a respectful manner, in both horse and rider)
- ✓ Fluid Movement (i.e. The ability to go forward, backwards, sideways, and cross the hind quarters with rhythm)
- ✓ A safe schooling area (i.e. An arena or round pen, large field, a slight incline or hill can offer a great place to school the canter)
- ✓ Horseman’s Protocol (i.e. Become Present & Breath; Think, Picture, Focus which prepares your body to Allow for the movement; Last, Reward the good effort)
- ✓ Give yourself and the horse TIME!

Last month you practiced picking up the canter with the assistance of lateral aids by starting with small reverse or counter-bend movements in each corner. You then carried that reverse bend onto a large figure “8” pattern, with the top part of the figure “8” in a counter-bend (to the outside of the circle), and the bottom part of the “8” being a circle in a regular bend (towards the inside of the circle). Finally, you carried the reverse bend to the wall, and at that point asked for the canter. The haunches were positioned well under the horse due to all the supple-lateral work in the reverse bend and leg yield. Finally, you asked for the canter by putting your outside leg back behind the girth, and with a slight lift up and forward of your inside hip and hand, off you sprung into the correct lead! (Note: If you desire to maintain contact, think of

just using your outside leg, and a slight raise in your inside hip. Try not to create brace, but allow the movement to come from behind and spring into the canter.)

This month, let's continue to utilize the figure "8" pattern, but incorporate a series of transitions through the center of the pattern. Again, picture two circles lying one on top of the other. The transitions will happen at that point where the two circles meet. Here there is a moment of a straight line, and relative straightness in the horse.

### Simple Lead Changes

**From the Trot:** After your warm-up of supple exercises for both horse and rider, including a nice rhythmic trot, at various speeds, both directions, start your figure "8" pattern. Let's make the top circle to the left and the bottom of the figure "8" to the right. As you approach "X" or the point where the two circles meet, first accomplish a downward transition to a walk, then return to the trot. Do this a couple times, letting your horse know that some type of transition is going to be requested at "X". Next, perform the same pattern, but simply slow the trot at "X", go to a sitting trot, then go back to rising trot in second quarter of the circle, and increase the tempo. Accomplish this several times, riding the complete figure "8" pattern. I don't want the horse to think he needs to rush or change tempo abruptly immediately after the transition. Rather, let's get him thinking that things happen at "X", but they happen *slowly!* Next, slow to a sitting trot at "X", focus slightly in the direction of the new circle, and picture a soft canter on a straight line with the lead in the direction of the new circle. As example, when trotting the top circle to the left, I will slow to sitting trot prior to "X", focus slightly to the right, and ask for the right lead. As you progress at the canter, prepare to come back down to the trot (rising), then sitting, prior to "X", slow and ask for the canter to the left.

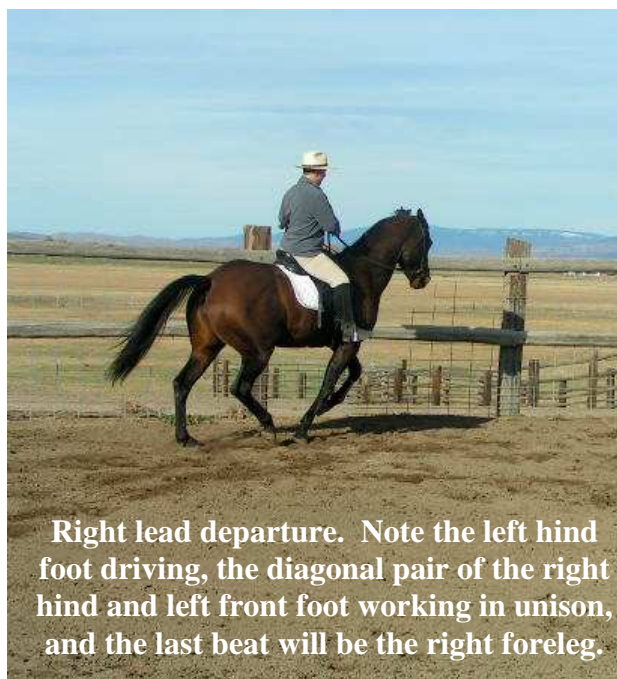


Leg yield at the trot to the wall, right bend, and ask to right-lead canter at the wall.

**From the Walk:** The simple lead change from the walk is the same pattern as described above, except your downward transition after the canter is ultimately to a walk at "X", rather than a slow, sitting trot. When you first start, you may find the downward transition in the order of canter to trot to walk. However, try to achieve the walk with fewer and fewer steps of trot. Again we are working towards the horse listening to your aids very closely at "X". Don't rush. Keep it light. Remember to breathe. And if you get an incorrect lead, don't make a big deal out of it. Just set it all up again, recognize the attempt, and finally reward the correct lead with an "At-a-boy".

**From the Halt to Backup:** The final simple lead change you will aspire to achieve utilizes the same figure "8" pattern, and specifically uses the geometric straight line between the two circles. You have already conditioned your horse to slow down and listen at "X", now it's time to build that into a halt and backup or rein-back. When your horse has backed a few steps and his weight is on the outside hind foot, then you are ready to ask for the canter. Try to make this transition with picturing the maneuver first, then your leg and seat aids. Avoid casting your body forward along with the reins.

So if we are trotting the top circle to the left, as I approach "X" I will take a deep breath and a little half-halt to say to my horse, "Listen up, we are about to make a change". I will picture a smooth halt, and slightly pull the tummy muscles towards my backbone and deepening my seat to ask for the stop. Next I change the angle of my pelvis (seat) to more vertical, becoming internally light, and back the horse up several steps.

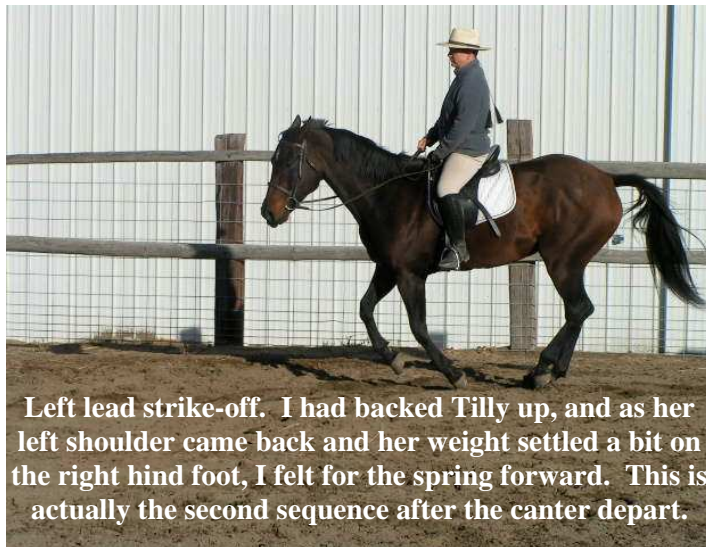


Right lead departure. Note the left hind foot driving, the diagonal pair of the right hind and left front foot working in unison, and the last beat will be the right foreleg.



To begin with I will cheat in order to know which hind foot is back, ready to push me into the new lead. Since horses back up in a two-beat gait, using diagonal pairs (i.e. Left front foot goes back with the right hind, & right front foot goes back with the left hind), I will back the horse on a straight line watching the right front shoulder. When it is on its way back, that's the time to ask for the canter. By doing this I have caught the energy of the backup on that left hind foot, and we rebound into the right lead canter. Soon you will be able to feel for these diagonal pairs, and be able to pick up the correct lead every time. Remember to depart on a straight line, and then pick up the direction of the circle. This will greatly assist you in the near future as you ask for the flying lead change, counter-canter, and tempi changes.

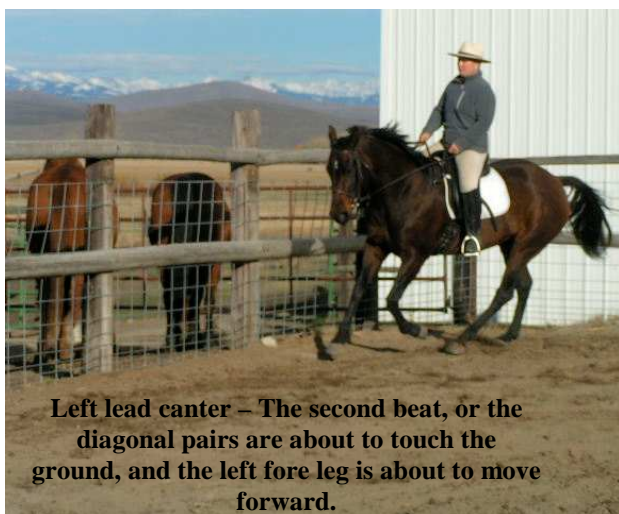
These simple lead change exercises are some of the most fun and very beneficial in helping us to develop the canter. They work on the multi-tasking that is absolutely necessary to become a good rider, and for your horse to become a good listener. As with all of our horsemanship maneuvers, it is the reinforcement of the basics that is the foundation which leads to a brilliant dance...In this case, effortless lead changes. Have patience and give yourself and the horse time to recognize the slightest try and reward the effort.



**Left lead strike-off. I had backed Tilly up, and as her left shoulder came back and her weight settled a bit on the right hind foot, I felt for the spring forward. This is actually the second sequence after the canter depart.**



**Left lead canter. The Right hind is just about to push off, the left hind and right fore foot are moving forward, and the final beat, the left front foot, will be the third beat of the canter.**



**Left lead canter – The second beat, or the diagonal pairs are about to touch the ground, and the left fore leg is about to move forward.**



**Left lead canter – The front left foot has hit the ground, and the right hind is already advancing to start the 3-beat sequence over again.**