

February 2010 Beyond the Basics

Use of Ground Poles and the Cavalletti – Part IV

February is often not a favorite month for aspiring horsemen and women, as it is hard to become motivated when the snow has drifted in the trailer, along with the arena door, and it takes five layers of clothing to just make it out to catch your horse! Often my winter mind is drifted as well, and it takes real dedication to get through the layers to truly think about what I am asking of my horse and where we are headed. So below I am suggesting one more cavalletti or ground pole exercise that will give us a focus for our winter ground work and riding.

Walking, Trotting, and Cantering the “Plus Sign”

Purpose – Sending or riding your horse over the “Plus Sign” poles will help to promote:

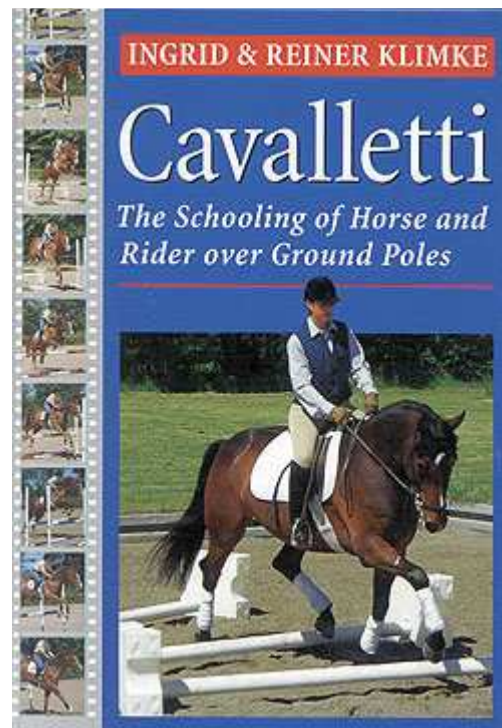
- Attentiveness from the horse in the placement of his feet
- Focus for both horse & rider
- Effective use of your aids, without intimidation
- Stretching over the top line, as the horse looks where he is going
- Eventual gathered softness and the beginnings of engagement, and rhythmic picking up of the feet

Equipment Need –8 ground poles, about 6’ to 8’ in length; Horseman’s halter and lead; When riding - use a snaffle or bosal to begin. (Note: I am not referring to a mechanical hackamore, as I do not recommend their use) Patience, focus, and a clear picture of the correct movement are also critical components.

Preparation – Lay out the poles in the design and dimensions as diagramed, in an area with good footing

Progression of Maneuver: Set your ‘Plus Sign’ pattern up in the approximate dimension described below. Start by sending your horse over the poles on the end of your lunge line, using a horseman’s halter or cavesson. Position yourself in the middle of the ‘Plus Sign’, and work to develop a flowing rhythm at the walk, trot and canter, with no pulling on the lunge line, and the hips and shoulders tracking-up straight on the circle. (Note: At the walk, you may need to adjust the width between the poles to a bit closer together to accommodate a flowing rhythm.)

After an appropriate gymnastic warm-up, begin riding the exercise at the walk, then on to the trot, and finally moving to the canter. First, as you track right, ride three-quarters of the school or a large square, then focus your eyes, torso, shoulders, and hips in the center of the first set of poles, cross them, and return to the track. Next time around the school, focus on crossing the first two sets of poles, and return to the track. Keep adding pole sets until you are traveling on a circle around the entire ‘Plus Sign’. You are looking for rhythm, balance, flow, and the horse picking his feet up over every pole, while cluing off your body position and focus. Try to use very little inside rein to guide the horse, but rather focus, keeping your inside leg on at the girth, and your



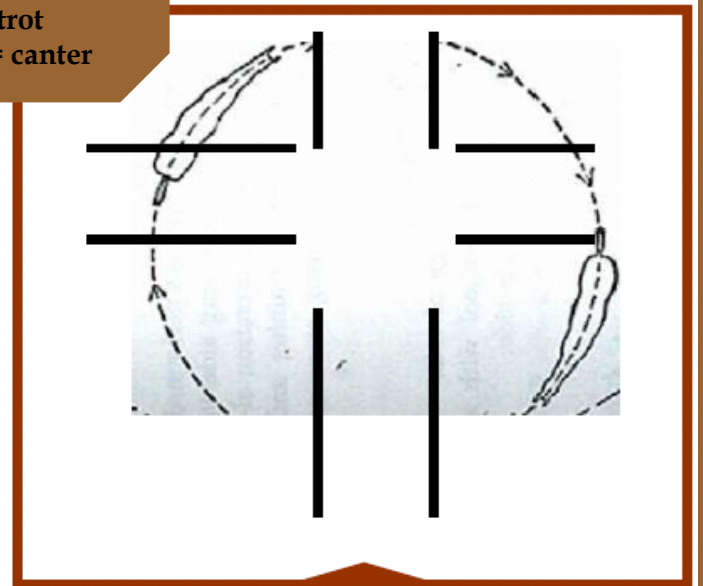
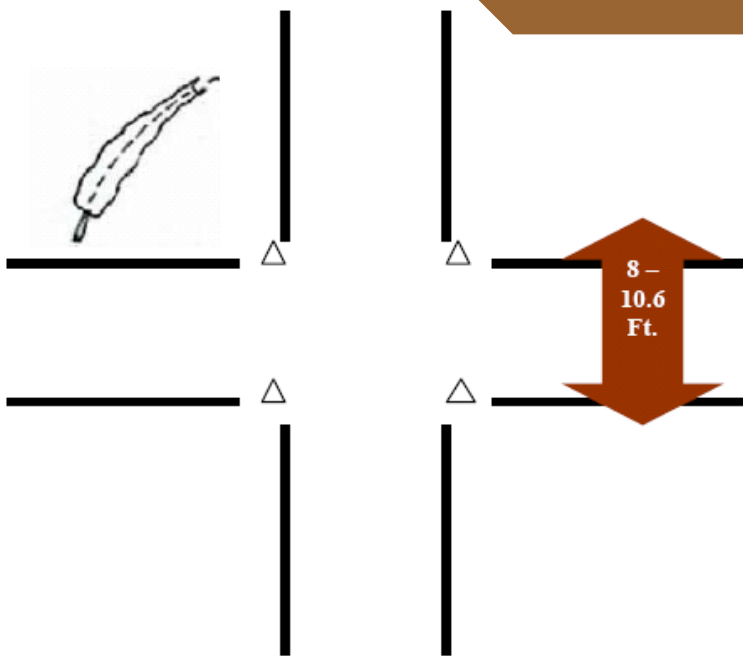
outside leg slightly back to ask for 'forward' and to keep the hips from swinging-out. Shoulders should remain up, balanced and hips should be driving under and forward.

After completing the exercise at the walk traveling in both directions, move on the trot, and eventually, the canter. This progression may be accomplished over the course of several days, or even weeks. Don't rush it! The bio-mechanics required take some time to develop in both suppleness and the strengthening of the horse.



- Use of the ground poles can be dangerous! Make sure you are using correct distances between poles to facilitate the rhythmic gait for which you are working; It is helpful to have a worker-bee on the ground to help re-position poles. Use of the cavalletti stands where the pole is attached is a more safe scenario for keeping the pole from rolling under the horse's foot.
- Take your time on this exercise! You may want to work up to the canter over a period of several weeks. Time is not the factor, but rather finding rhythm, balance, focus, and timing are the goals.

2 ft. 8 inches apart = walk
4 ft. 3 inches to 5 ft. = trot
8 ft. to 10 ft. 6 inches = canter



Proceed adding another set of poles each time, until you are making a complete circle. Aim your torso for the middle of each pole.

Begin by crossing just one set of poles, and then return to the track.

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