Fourth Level: Bridge to FEI

How to develop pirouettes and tempi changes. Second of two parts.

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In this space last month, I explained several of the key elements of training for Fourth Level dressage: the loading half-halt, which "boomerangs" the horse's weight back toward his hindquarters, causing him to "sit" behind and to lighten his forehand; the differences between relative elevation (in which the horse's shoulders and neck appear "uphill" from the haunches as a result of lowered haunches) and absolute elevation (the raising of the neck alone, which hollows the back and actually inhibits the engagement of the haunches); and the art of introducing half-steps, which are the precursors to piaffe.

This month, I *will* continue my discussion of the Fourth Level work by addressing the two other key movements that are introduced at this level: canter pirouettes and tempi changes (flying changes in sequence).

Toward Pirouette Work

Pirouette development is to the canter what piaffe development is to the trot. Canter work is not as easily developed in hand as piaffe work, and so the development of effective half-halts from the saddle is even more critical in the canter.

The half-halt produces very different results when applied at different phases of the three-beat canter. To be effective as a gathering and engaging half-halt, the aids are best given in the suspension (airborne) phase, or with the first beat of the canter stride, or both. Doing so allows the gathering in the air to be more pronounced and the horse's hind legs to come more under, the outside hind to flex more while it is loaded, or both.

Some experienced riders describe giving the collecting half-halt in the second beat of the canter (the moment when the horse's inside hind leg and outside foreleg touch down). If you use this timing, be careful not to restrict the freedom of your horse's outside shoulder, thereby infringing on the clarity of the rhythm and the freedom of his forehand in the collected canter.

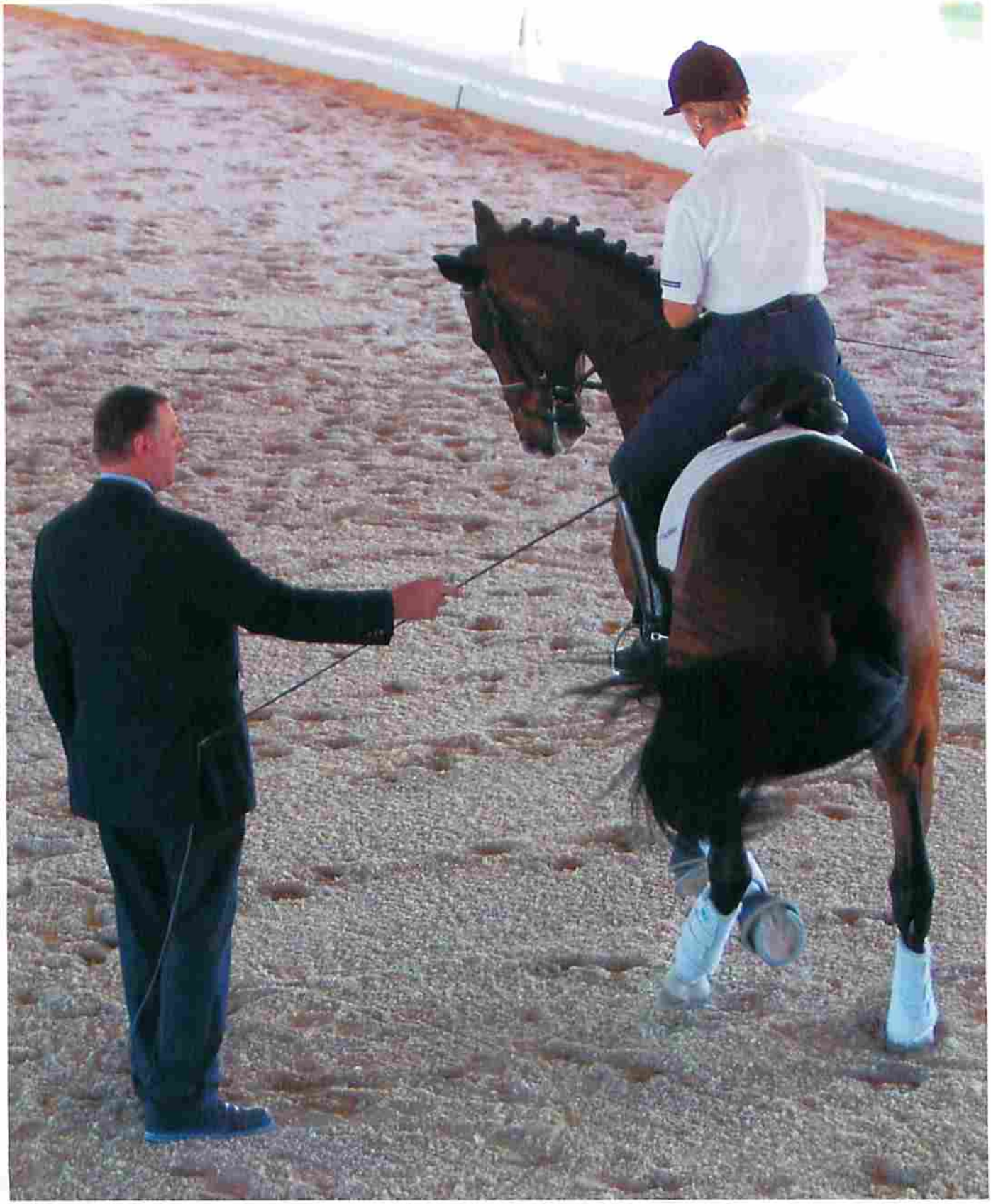
Applied in the last beat of the canter (when the inside foreleg touches down), the half-halt emphasizes the weight in the horse's forehand and the "croup up" phase of the canter. This timing is frequently used inadvertently when the rider's arms are stiff and the horse's natural neck movement makes him bump against the bit as he canters, resulting in self-inflicted, ill-timed half-halts. Much of the stilted canter work that we see in the upper levels of dressage is a product of poorly timed regulating rein aids and half-halts. The challenge for riders, then, is to focus on making the canter collection and transitions more harmonious by improving the quality and timing of the collecting half-halts. If your arms do not allow the natural movement in your horse's neck in the collected canter, then the gait will be constrained and tension will build as he does more collected work.

Pirouette Development

As I mentioned earlier, the pirouette is to the canter what the piaffe is to the trot: the ultimate test of engagement, as well as the ideal tool for developing engagement through the middle and upper levels. The Fourth Level tests offer a beautiful progression: from "very collected canter" on the circle, to quarter-pirouettes onto the center line, to half-pirouettes on the diagonals. The 2003 tests are designed to show how pirouette development is a tool rather than an end in itself.

The very collected "pirouette canter" or "school canter" is a prerequisite for good pirouettes. Practicing sets of these highly collected canter strides is valuable on the circle, as required in Fourth Level Test 1; yet it should also be practiced on straight lines. Shortening the canter in shoulder-fore is an important exercise if your horse has a tendency to get crooked or wide behind. If he persists in becoming crooked in the collected strides, practicing them along the wall in counter-canter can be very helpful.

One simple yet challenging exercise is to ride working- to pirouette-canter transitions along the wall in counter-canter in short sets of a few strides each. Riding the school canter through the corners is as challenging as a pirouette, but without your horse's associating the challenge with the actual pirouette movement. When I ride this exercise, I think of the instructions of celebrated trainer Major Anders Lindgren: "Make your horse like wallpaper!" Thinking of pasting the shoulders to the wall does wonders for helping riders straighten their horses without undue restraint. The corners automatically



An extraordinary photo. Arlene Page and Wild One are practicing the spiraling-in pirouette exercise around trainer Conrad Schumacher, who touches the horse on the croup to encourage lowering of the haunches and bending of the hind legs. From this angle, you can see that the outside hind leg is carrying all of the horse's weight and is still directly underneath the horse and perpendicular to the ground.

bring the horse further toward his haunches in the counter-canter turns.

Later on, a counter-canter volte (a small circle of ten meters or less in diameter) can be a wonderful setup for a pirouette because it helps to "load" the horse's outside hind leg. In all collected-canter exercises, attention to the timing of your half-halts and to the flow of your arms with his neck will ensure better results and help preserve a good-quality canter.

Horses naturally prefer a longer stride and frame to the more difficult, highly collected pirouette canter. If they are prevented from making their strides longer, then they often try to minimize the loading by getting "wide behind" with their hind legs.

On a horse's hollow side, traveling wide behind may manifest itself as overbending and crookedness, and in the pirouette's becoming too big while the haunches lead a small circle to the inside. On his stiff side, a common evasion is to touch down with the outside hind leg and to immediately transfer his body weight sideways, toward his inside foreleg.

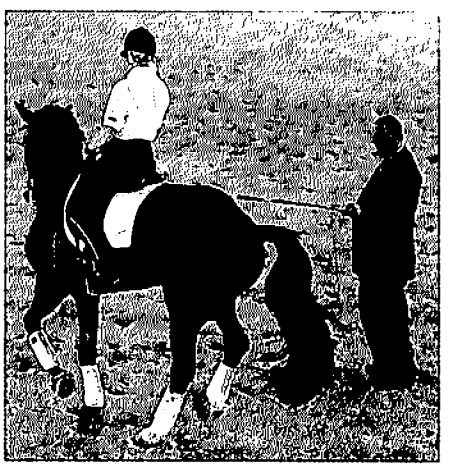
To correct these evasions, you can try to put your horse's outside hind leg back underneath his weight by entering the pirouette in more of a haunches-in position or by applying more haunches-in aids during the pirouette to drive the outside hind forward and toward his midline. Alternatively, you can use the counter-canter aids to bring your horse's body back and to the outside, over his outside hind.

In other words, you can address the lateral deviation of the outside hind leg either by bringing the hind leg under your horse's body, or by bringing his body over the hind leg.

Use of the driving aids can make canter pirouettes more physically difficult and mentally confusing to your horse. I find that the half-halts and weight aids that produce the counter-canter volte are more in keeping with the loading and lightening of the forehand that are desired in pirouette work. Once the haunches are well loaded, it is hard for them to deviate and relatively easy for the rider to direct the lightened forehand around to the inside for the pirouette.

The counter-canter volte is a challenging exercise for the horse's outside hind leg, which carries his weight alone. The counter-canter helps the rider from First Level through FEI to ensure that the horse remains fairly perpendicular to the ground in the canter, thus improving his engagement and lateral balance. The counter-canter volte is also useful in correcting the horse that throws himself sideways in the half-pass, an indication of a lateral-balance problem that must be resolved before the canter "zigzags" can achieve any measure of grace.

The quarter-pirouette may be easier for the horse physically because the extreme engagement is short in duration, but it is more challenging than the half-pirouette to ride well because all of the difficult elements—the entry, the turn, and the exit—are closer together. The easy part of the pirouette for the rider is the middle of the turn; but in the quarter-pirouette, that part is practically nonexistent. For this reason, I find that spiral work in haunches-in, in which the horse "spirals in" to a smaller circle, is good developing work for pirouettes. This exercise helps both horse and rider to develop some mental and physical mastery of the pirouette concept and can be schooled smaller or larger so that it is sufficiently challenging to develop the horse yet not so arduous that it causes the horse to become tense and resistant.



Wild One is a bit wide behind in this pirouette; his left hind leg (the outside hind) is pushing slightly sideways. This slight loss of balance is making it more difficult for him to bring his forehand around. Conrad Schumacher is assisting rider Arlene Page by using the butt of the whip to hold the haunches out. This is a situation that can be improved with the counter-canter volte, which helps to strengthen and "load" the outside hind leg.

True Pirouette Canter

At some point, however, you'll want to push the envelope and dare to take the spiral in to a true pirouette. This is where the finesse is learned and the feel for true pirouette canter is established.

Riders who are new to pirouette work tend to be shocked to discover that there is very little feeling of impulsion in a good pirouette canter. Let me explain why this is so.

By definition, engagement is the bending of the hind joints while loaded. In contrast, the definition of impulsion is the release of energy stored by engagement. In other words, when the well-coiled spring of the bent hind-leg joints uncoils or straightens out, this action produces the thrust of impulsion. However, in the pirouette, as in piaffe, the joints remain very flexed for the duration of the movement and uncoil only as the horse leaves the movement.

When an inexperienced rider feels alarmed by the lack of impulsion, she may drive her horse out of the movement or punish her horse with her legs just as he is offering his best effort. The eyes of an experienced instructor (or a mirror) and an ear for rhythm can help you to trust the correctness of the

deeply "sitting" pirouette canter and not fight the inevitable lack of impulsion. The pirouette should have activity, but not the thrusting feeling of true impulsion.

Assessing Pirouette Quality

The canter tempo may slow slightly in the pirouette canter because it takes a little longer for the hind legs to bend so deeply. This may be too much of a good thing in some eyes, but it is not a fault in the way that an evasion of engagement would be. At times, the rhythm of the canter may alter slightly from the absolute three-beat because the horse is so "uphill" from his engagement that his light forehand touches down a fraction of a second after his inside hind leg. Again, this is not a fault.

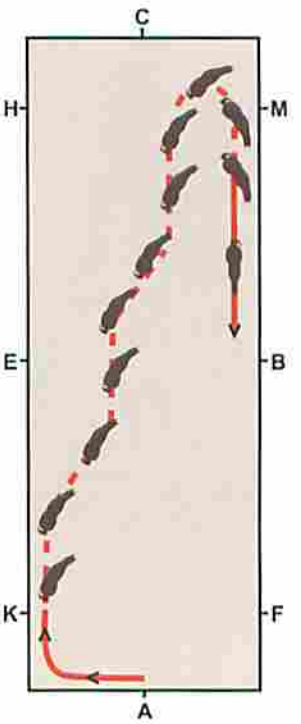
A red flag, however, is a loss of rhythm wherein the canter becomes lateral or the outside fore lands before the inside hind. If this happens, it indicates extreme stiffness and unloading onto the forehand; and it must be corrected before the pirouette work can continue. Lowering your horse's neck can help to develop the needed relaxation and softness in his back. At the same time, a higher neck can be helpful in shifting his balance properly to the rear. Throughout the development of the collected canter and pirouettes, the neck can be negotiated into whatever position is most ideal for facilitating your horse's balance, lightness, and throughness.

Assessing pirouette quality can be tricky. Here, has It's Me H's right hind leg landed early to help the left hind carry the weight (known as crow-hopping behind), or has rider Kathy Priest simply achieved a super-loaded pirouette? A little of both in this moment, I think.

Eventually, the pirouette's difficult beginning and end have to be developed as well. A common error in riding half-pirouettes is starting them too big, with the horse's haunches moving too much to the inside and becoming properly engaged only at the conclusion of the movement. The "very collected canter" work (Fourth Level Test 1) and the quarter-pirouette work (Fourth 2) exist to help riders to avoid this problem by teaching them to collect their horses before they turn. The placement of the quarter-pirouette, on the short wall, emphasizes that the highly collected strides before the movement should remain straight or in shoulder-fore, and that the horse's haunches should not deviate from the line of travel. After this correct engagement has been established, the pirouette becomes infinitely easier and can be ridden relatively small from the first stride.

Stairstep to Passade

The remaining challenge of beginning and ending the pirouettes well is the coordination of the guidance aids. A classic exercise for developing pirouettes is the "stairstep to passade" exercise. This exercise involves alternating between half-pass and shoulder-in down the long side of the arena, followed by a half-volte in haunches-in at the end of the arena until the horse is facing the opposite direction (see diagram, above right). This half-volte in haunches-in is termed *passade* in the classical literature and is, in practice, a large or schooling pirouette. This exercise is even more effective at sitting the horse down if the passade is ridden close to and toward the wall.



Pirouette exercise: "Stairstepping" between half-pass and shoulder-in, followed by a half-volte in haunches-in (passade)

The skills required to ride good transitions from half-pass to shoulder-in to passade are the easier versions of the skills required to enter and exit pirouettes gracefully. These transitions school the horse's response to your inside and outside leg aids and help to place his inside hind leg forward and underneath his body rather than wide and to the inside. This stairstep-to-passade exercise, combined with half-halts, develops the lightness and mobility of his forehand and can help you learn how to use the reins to guide his mobile forehand around his engaged hind end. As with pirouettes, this exercise can be effectively schooled in the walk to allow you to assess your weight, leg, and rein influences in slower motion.

Tempi Changes

The final big skill in Fourth Level is the flying changes in sequence (tempi

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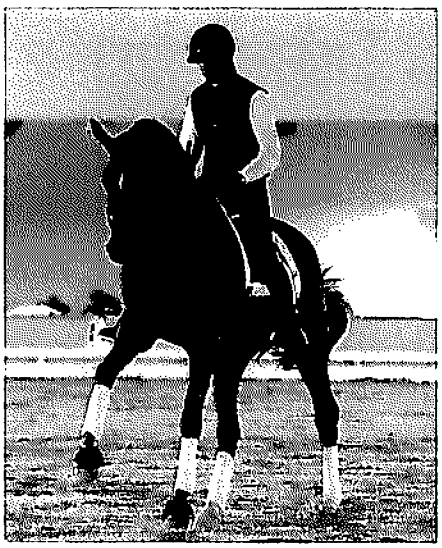
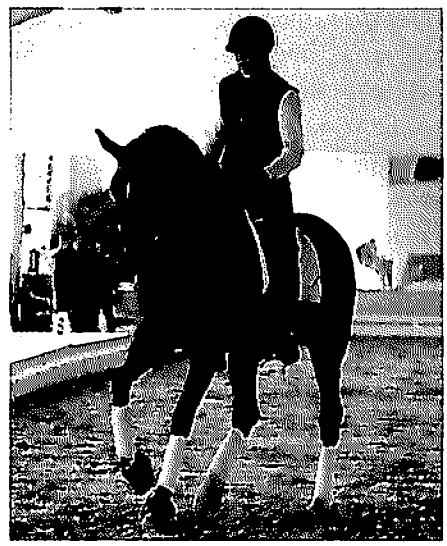


Debra Wiedmaier and Donnerstern in mid-flying change from left lead to right. Debra has asked for the change by positioning her left leg behind the girth and her right leg at the girth.



Here are Debra and Donnerstern again, the moment before the flying change back to the left lead. The horse is very straight, and Debra is switching her leg position in preparation for the change.

changes). This is the point at which changes have to clean up their act and get simple. The hundred ways to work out the kinks in the single change are a broad subject for Third Level discussions (see August's "Clinic" for more on single flying changes). I would like to preface my remarks by stating that the aids for changes differ quite a lot among the best of trainers. Riding piaffe and changes require a great deal of feel, and executing them well cannot be described in a quick "recipe" of the correct aids.

That said, I find it invaluable when training horses and riders in both single and tempi changes to establish a simple aiding system. The system that I use is widely used, with a few variations. In my system, the primary aid for the flying change is the positioning of the rider's new outside leg several inches back from the normal placement at the girth. This leg positioning, coupled with a half-halt into either the new outside rein or both reins, constitutes the aid for the change.

The precise timing of the flying-change aids is as important as their placement. In my system, the rider's outside leg arrives on the horse's barrel exactly with the third beat of the canter (as the leading leg of the current lead touches the ground).

Just as the rider's new outside leg moves back to initiate the change, the new inside leg moves forward to the girth. The legs then "live" in this position, telling the horse to maintain the current lead, until the legs are switched for the next change. A more responsive horse may come to perceive the release of the old outside leg as the aid for the change, without waiting for the application of the new outside leg. Adjust the dosage of the flying-change aids to suit your horse's level of sensitivity.

Your seat bones will move perceptibly as you change your leg position, but when I ride I focus on keeping my seat balanced and as even and still as possible. I have found that focusing on the seat and weight as the primary flying-change aids often leads to leaning and to seat-displacement problems, which can plague even the best riders throughout their careers. When a flying change has a problem moment or even just exceptional jump and the rider is not erect and straight, any deviation is thrown to the extreme. Then, not only is the position of the rider less than ideal for that change aesthetically, but she may also find it very difficult to get "back to the middle" in time to aid correctly for the next change in the sequence. If your leg aids are the black-and-white aids for changes, then subtle weight aids will accompany the legs automatically; and you can also use the weight and other aids as modifiers to improve your horse's balance, straightness, and positioning.

There are many advantages to the basic method of riding changes that I've described, not the least of which is that the outside leg and rein aids work well together to introduce changes to young horses cantering boldly in a field. These aids work with the physics of the canter stride to "close" the side of the horse's current leading leg and allow the new inside legs to "fly through" to the new lead on the "open" side. In this way, young horses may be introduced to changes on a relatively straight line from the get-go.

I ask my horses to tolerate a little bump from the rider's leg and often tell students to think of their horses in the changes as percussion instruments. You can tap a drum very lightly to make delicate music, but you can't make percussion music by rubbing. The value of the percussive aid, however light, is that the timing of its application is beat-specific. The timing of the aids makes them consistently effective, while the dosage and quality of the aids makes them harmonious and the horse more expressive. Some horses become more relaxed and elastic over time if the rider uses a less-percussive aid, but the exactitude of a percussive aid is the best baseline for training reliable tempi changes. An experienced rider can learn to "pull his punches," so to speak, as soon as he feels the horse responding to the aid, so that the aids are never too

strong. But that is a tall order for the rider who is still learning to master the change aids.

Another reason that the combination of outside leg and outside rein is an effective flying-change aid is that it ensures that the horse does not move his haunches to the inside, away from the rider's outside leg, because the outside rein is there to keep him from bending. The more percussive leg aid that I've recommended is useful in this regard as well because it does not tend to have as much of a bending influence as a "rubbing" leg.

After the changes in sequence have been confirmed, most horses learn to perform changes from increasingly soft and subtle aids.

Dealing with Anticipation

In learning anything as challenging as flying changes in sequence, most riders and horses begin to anticipate. Rider anticipation takes the form of giving the aids too early, and horse anticipation is expressed as changing before the aids are given—which can be particularly troublesome when the intent is counter-canter.

Some riders need a few strides to get in the groove of their timing for aiding sequenced changes. With an experienced or settled horse, a developing Fourth Level rider can ride "change canter"—without actually changing—by using a slight rhythmic emphasis of the current outside leg in the rhythm of the horse's leading footfall. This allows the rider to get the feel for the correct timing of the change aid for a few strides before she gives the actual aids for the change.

To combat the horse that anticipates, one logical but problematic approach is to ride the change aid in two parts: 1) a preparatory phase, such as a half-halt or flexion the stride before the change; and 2) an executive aid that says "change now." This preparatory aid may combat anticipation somewhat, but I stay away from a two-stride or a two-part aiding system because I don't want to have to teach a whole new aid system when I get to one-tempi changes (changes of lead at every stride).

On the other hand, a complete lack of a preparatory aid has huge drawbacks. The horse may not anticipate changes at first; but when he realizes that a change aid may come out of nowhere, he may become anxious or overreactive or throw in unauthorized changes.

I try to create a positive anticipation and preparedness for changes by establishing a "change canter," which functions for changes in much the same way that "pirouette canter" functions for pirouettes. This prepared canter puts the horse in his ideal balance, contact, tempo, straightness, and collection for changes so that he is both physically prepared and mentally ready. I start by establishing this "change canter" and then encourage him to maintain that canter for several strides at a time before asking for a change. Developing his level of comfort with the concepts of expectation and waiting helps to eliminate both tension and unauthorized changes. I then follow this "change canter" with either a change aid or a release to a lesser degree of readiness. The principle is the same as in developing "pirouette canter": The horse realizes that either a pirouette or a release may follow, and he awaits the aid. My goal is to embrace and train anticipation as a desirable state of preparedness and waiting, rather than to classify anticipation as a problem of jumping the gun and to fight it accordingly. I appreciate the anticipation and train the waiting. The horse learns that in "change canter" he must be ever-ready, but he has no anxiety about whether that half-halt or other action indicates a change or the stride before a change. He knows that he should remain on the current lead until my legs move.

The ideal "change canter" varies from horse to horse, and it also may evolve as he becomes confirmed in his tempi changes. For some horses, the desired canter is bold. For others—particularly bigger movers—"change canter" is more bouncy and short, especially as two- and one-tempis are introduced. Another characteristic of "change canter" is exceptional straightness, even to the point of negligible flexion of the poll. Extreme straightness can be a means of inspiring constructive anticipation, while emphasis on positioning can be an indication that no changes should be expected.

The various sorts of anticipation strides that I've described can be schooled in sets without the changes themselves to set the stage for relaxed, fluent changes in sequence. Once the tempi changes are confirmed, you can develop their scope by expanding the range of "change canters" in which they are ridden.

When learning to ride changes and especially changes in sequence, riders may struggle with their own anticipation. This anticipation often takes the form of hurrying, of overemphasizing the aids for changes, or both. Some riders need a few strides to get in the groove of their timing for aiding sequenced changes. These riders may benefit from a preparatory exercise which establishes a sort of "change canter" for the rider as well as the horse. With an experienced or settled horse, a developing Fourth Level rider can start riding the horse's "change canter" without actually changing. By using a slight rhythmic emphasis of the current outside leg in the rhythm of the horse's leading footfall, as if tapping an aid at each stride of the current lead,

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