



GET TO SECOND BASE

Transitions

Part 5 of a six-part series on finding success at Second Level

By Beth Baumert

Photographs by Susan|Stickle.com

Last month, we talked about half-halts. Half-halts ask the horse to balance under you. Transitions, the subject for this month, also ask the horse to balance under you: by thrusting energy through his topline to the bit in upward transitions, and by transferring weight to the hindquarters in downward transitions.

In the warm-up phase of your schooling session, we'll concentrate on transitions between and within gaits. Then in the work phase, we'll look at the transitions that develop collection directly. These are the tran-

sitions that skip a gait: trot-halt-trot and canter-walk-canter.

Transitions and Engagement

Roughly speaking, transitions are either successful or unsuccessful. The successful ones engage your horse. Unsuccessful ones disengage him. Disengagement leads to further problems, such as loss of straightness and balance.

What's engagement? Misunderstandings abound around this term.



ENGAGEMENT: *Infanta HGF demonstrates the moment of engagement in canter. Her hind foot steps under the center of gravity and carries both herself and Mica.*

In an attempt to clarify, the USDF not only defines what engagement is but also what it is not.

According to the USDF Glossary of Judging Terms, engagement is "increased flexion of the joints of the hind legs *during the weight-bearing phase* [italics mine], and of the sacro-lumbar joint, thus lowering the croup relative to the forehand. A prerequisite for thrust/impulsion."

And here's what it is not: "Engagement is not 'hock action,' and it does not refer to the length of the stride of the hind leg, which is 'reach.'"

When and where does engagement happen? Engagement happens only when the horse's hind foot is flat on the ground and bearing weight. But *where* is the hind foot? Ideally, it's exactly under his center of gravity (see photo above). When you, the rider, have a nearly ideal position, your center of gravity is stable and is directly over your horse's center of gravity. When your horse's inside hind foot is directly under both of you, your horse is in "self-carriage." This is the situation that feels glorious, and you wonder, *Why doesn't it feel like this all the time?* The reason is that the placement of the inside hind foot needs to be ideal in order for this nirvana to happen.

In Part 2 of this series (July/August), we talked about shoulder-fore positioning. You'll be doing your tran-



THE RESULT: *Mica Mabragaña and Infanta HGF demonstrate a fluid, cadenced, springy collected trot. Mica achieved that by retaining the power from Infanta's medium paces while using half-halts and transitions to create this beautiful balance.*

sitions in shoulder-fore, so let's briefly review this important concept.

In shoulder-fore, your horse places his inside hind leg under his center of gravity—in the space between his two front feet. The outside hind stays in the same track as the outside fore. When he's positioned in this manner, he carries himself and you too.

When do you use shoulder-fore? All the time. Shoulder-fore isn't exactly an exercise. It's the position in which experienced trainers ride. It's simply riding in balance (as opposed to out of balance).

Placing your horse's inside hind hoof in an exact location may sound ridiculously difficult, but with persistence you can do it, and your horse will be so happy that he'll start to meet you halfway—because being in balance makes him feel good.

Mica's Thoughts on Transitions

From Fourth Level USDF-certified instructor/trainer Mica Mabragna (our photo model), here are a few great concepts and ideas about riding transitions.

- Transitions create freedom. The lazy horse will become sharper to your aids, allowing you to be quieter with your driving aids. The hotter horse will learn to wait for you, allowing you to *let* him move. When we are able to let the horse move freely, we create harmony.
- I also like to add transitions within movements; this is a great way to keep checking the honesty of your work. Can you do a walk-trot transition within your shoulder-in, for instance?
- You want to feel that you whisper the aid and the horse shouts the answer—not the other way around.

A Special Challenge

The goal in all downward transitions is to make them in an “upward” way—to ride forward with activity into shorter strides. No one ever pulled her way back into piaffe, shoulder-in, or any other movement.

Review last month's article on the half-halt, and look at the section describing the half-halt that makes your horse's neck longer. If you can achieve that, you can ride downward transitions in a upward way.

Likewise, if your horse isn't engaged in an upward transition, he'll push himself onto the forehand and away from your seat. You want to make upward transitions in a way that retains the engagement of the downward transition.

Transitions in Warm-Up

The first thing I ask almost any student is: “Show me the best free walk your horse can do.” This test reveals what the horse offers in terms of

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rhythm, energy, and suppleness when he is relatively unimpeded by the rein aids. (See the photo opposite for an image of an impressive free walk.)

Always start your warm-up with a free walk. Then go on the diagonal and transition to a medium walk through the corners and on the short side of the arena (see photo opposite). Repeat until it's good. These transitions help everything.

Transitions between and within gaits. Start with transitions be-

tween gaits: walk-trot-walk-trot. Trot-canter-trot-canter. Do your best to stay straight (your horse's shoulders aligned with his hindquarters) by using shoulder-fore. The inside hind steps in the space between the two front hooves, and the outside hind should stay in the same track as the outside front. It shouldn't drift out.

Test whether your upward transitions are successful. When you go from walk to trot or from trot to canter, does your horse step to your hand



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FREE WALK: *The free walk uses every muscle in the horse's body in rhythmic relaxation. This free walk would get a very high score. It has a pure rhythm, sufficient energy and overstride, and beautiful reach through the topline.*



FREE WALK TO MEDIUM WALK: *In the transition, the rhythm, tempo, and energy stay the same. Only the frame and length of stride change.*

and “draw on your reins” in the transition? Does the thrust from the hind leg “connect” him from back to front?

Next, test whether your downward transitions are successful. When you go from trot to walk or from canter to trot, can you feel the inside hind hoof under your seat in the transition? Can you add a tiny bit of weight to it so it “connects” the front to the hindquarters? In profile, your horse will look as if he connects in his frame from behind and keeps his neck long. ➔

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Now ride transitions within the gaits: working trot-lengthened stride-working trot. Working canter-lengthened stride-working canter. Again, help your horse stay straight by riding in shoulder-fore.

Stretch. Stretch your horse often during your warm-up and also during the work session. The stretch reminds him that he is always to follow the rider's hand in a downward-forward way and to reach for the bit. If he stays connected in the stretch, his back will come up. If your horse can stretch at any time, you'll always be able to lower his neck and lift his back, which you'll want to do frequently in developing collection.

Transitions in the Work Session

After your warm-up, pay attention to the transitions that skip a gait (halt-trot-halt-trot and walk-canter-walk-canter). These are the transitions that directly create collection. In the up-



EFFECTIVE STRETCH: Although we could find prettier photos of Infanta stretching, this one clearly demonstrates her straightness in bend and the way she's reaching with the inside hind leg toward her center of gravity.

ward transitions, the horse has to lift his forehead instead of pulling with his front legs. In the downward transitions, he's required to add weight to the hindquarters.

Tips for Riding Transitions Between Gaits

Change one thing at a time. In the case of transitions between gaits, you're going to change only the rhythm. You'll go, for example, from a two-beat trot to a three-beat canter and back to a two-beat trot. Keep everything else the same.

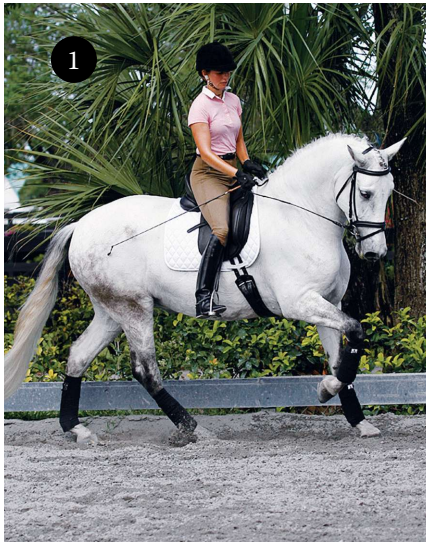
- Keep the flexion and bend the same.
- Keep the outline the same. Your horse shouldn't sprawl and get longer in the upward transition.
- Keep the circle of energy the same. Unless you *want* more energy, there's not necessarily more energy in the faster gait than in the slower gait. A transition is an energy conversion: You are converting trot energy to canter and canter energy to trot.
- Keep the line of travel the same. Don't change direction at the same time that you're changing the rhythm, and don't let your horse fall off your line of travel.

Look for the right moment. The transition will be most successful when you ask for it when you have access to your horse's hind leg. Look for that moment in a quiet way. Many trainers talk about "prompt" transitions, and that's often misunderstood. Prompt, in dressage, means timely, obedient, and in front of the leg. It doesn't mean hurried or tense. In fact, a prompt transition is rather thoughtful and deliberate because it's from an engaged hind leg.

Keep your horse's neck relaxed. Make these transitions occur because your body is communicating with your horse's body.



TROT TO HALT: *In response to Mica's half-halts, Infanta shortens her stride and comes to a square halt*



CANTER-WALK-CANTER: *At the time of this photo shoot, Infanta was just learning canter-walk-canter transitions; but in a matter of a few weeks, she had gained a little strength and a lot of coordination and confidence*

Be picky about making these transitions “clean”—no shuffly steps in between the gaits. Go from halt directly to a two-beat trot and back to a halt. Go from a deliberate four-beat walk to a three-beat canter and back to a deliberate walk.

Try this exercise: Canter-walk-canter. To develop a more collected canter, ride a ten-meter circle at each of the RSVP letters. Count twelve strides of canter on each circle (six strides per half-circle); then count twelve strides of canter straight down



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Tips for Transitions that Skip a Gait

The same rules apply here as for transitions within and between gaits. Only the rhythm will change. The bend, line of travel, and energy stay the same. The neck stays relaxed. The hindquarters initiate the transition.

Trot-halt-trot transitions require collection. The exercise directly lowers the hindquarters and lifts the forehead. Here are some tips for riding trot-halt-trot transitions:

1. Be playful in your schooling because your horse definitely will need practice. He'll make mistakes. Don't punish him. Play it like a game, and you'll both be winners in the end. Do these transitions at predictable places (A, B, C, and E or R, S, V, and P) so he learns to anticipate and meet you halfway.

2. If your horse is blatantly disobedient in an upward transition, don't punish him during the transition. Use the leg, spur, or whip as an encouraging aid after the transition.

3. The same is true of the downward transition. If he's disobedient, do a few steps of rein back after the downward transition. The rein back is another movement that directly creates collection, and it puts the hind legs in a position to carry in the ensuing upward transition. Take advantage of that position: Ride out of the rein back in collected trot by initiating the transition with the engaged hind legs.

Canter-walk-canter is one of the prerequisites for the flying changes you'll need to do at Third Level. Special tips for these transitions:

1. Make sure that the walk is marching and somewhat collected. Many riders make the mistake of asking for collected canter from a medium or even a disconnected walk. Likewise, the canter has to be collected to get a transition to collected walk.

2. Your horse will probably be inclined to consider the walk a rest period. You know better! Work the walk. Teach him to keep the walk marching by doing a movement soon after the transition to walk. For example, ride a turn on the haunches or a walk pirouette to keep him active and collected, thereby helping to ensure an engaged upward transition to collected canter.

3. Take advantage of the other things you've learned about developing collection. For example, practicing canter-walk-canter transitions on a 20-meter circle won't help you much, but doing it on a ten-meter circle will give you a bit of collection for free. Then ask for the downward transition when your horse is facing the wall so that he'll be more inclined to stay under you.

4. If your horse doesn't come back easily in the downward transition, ride half-halts with a long neck until he learns to take small, active steps that will put him in a better balance to do the downward transition. If he misunderstands and breaks (which he will), just canter again. That's the only way to teach him that half-halts don't always mean that you're going to trot; sometimes they mean that you're going to take smaller, more collected steps. Make the canter very round and cover the same amount of ground as the walk, and it will be easy to walk. When you're in the short canter, he'll ask you, "Can I walk now?" You might say, "OK"—or you might say, "Wait a second." Don't wait too long, though, because you'll lose the activity. It takes strength to maintain such a collected canter.

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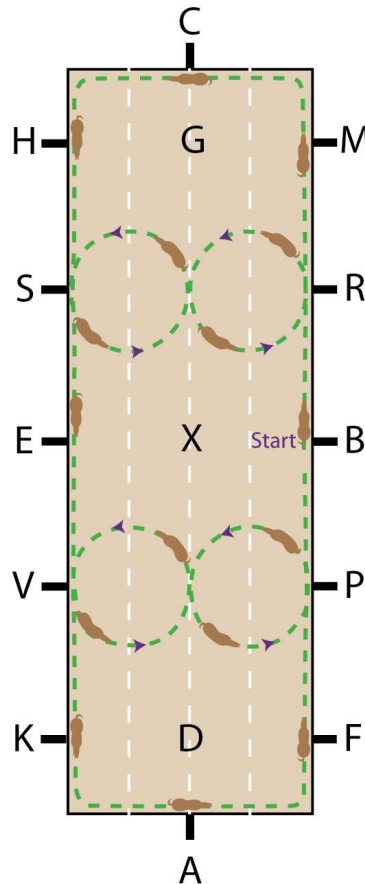
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CANTER DEVELOPMENT: Ten-meter circles at the letters RSVP. Each circle comprises twelve strides, with twelve strides on the long side between each circle.

the long side before you make another circle (see diagram). Counting the strides helps you to get the right length of stride within each half-circle and on each 24-meter straight line. This puts your horse in a balance in which it's easy to achieve a self-perpetuating collected canter.

Next, add to each canter circle a downward transition to walk as you approach the wall. Teach your horse to accept three half-halts before your transition to walk. He should prepare on the first two half-halts and walk on the third. Walk to the next RSVP letter and then ride a walk-canter transition into your next 12-stride circle.

After the work session, stretch your horse forward and down in an outline and a balance that remains connected. Ride the stretch in both directions. As collection develops, the difficult work will become easier; but always stretch your horse's muscles afterward, and reward him so he feels like a star. ▲

Next month: I'll introduce you to my student, Jessica Morgan, who was the 2010 Adequan/USDF Adult Amateur Second Level champion with her mare, Welt dancer. In the Adequan/USDF Second Level Horse of the Year standings, Welt dancer was reserve champion by a fraction of a point. Jessie is proof that amateurs can sometimes ride as well as—or better than—the pros. Next month, we'll show you how Jessie made that happen, and you can too!

Thanks to our photo model, Mica Mabragna, of Bedford, NY; and Wellington, FL. Mica is riding Infanta HGE, a seven-year-old PRE mare by Idilio, owned by Mary Magee and bred by Hampton Green Farm.

Beth Baumert is a Fourth Level USDF-certified instructor/trainer based at her family's Cloverlea Farm in Columbia, CT.

Tips for Riding Transitions Within Gaits

Focus, again, on changing only one thing at a time. In transitions within a single gait, the only thing that changes is the length of the horse's outline and stride. Rhythm, tempo, and bend stay the same. The line of travel doesn't waver. Your horse's neck stays relaxed. The circle of energy stays the same (unless you expressly want more energy or less).

Take a page from last month's article about half-halts: Lengthenings need to come from behind. If the front legs initiate the transition, your horse will be on the forehand in a flash, and you'll end up sitting in a hammock with the hind legs trailing. Ride the hindquarters first while you tell the forehand to wait a second.