

Introduction to the Counter-Canter

This gymnastic exercise can help build your horse's straightness and collection.

BY GERHARD POLITZ

In nature, horses seldom canter on the wrong lead or counter-canter for any length of time. They'd rather do a flying change when changing direction. Occasionally, we see a horse that canters only on one lead when turned out. In such cases, I suspect one-sidedness and stiffness. It is usually quite difficult to train such horses to become supple dressage horses.

The counter-canter is a rider-invented gymnastic exercise, as are shoulder-in and half-pass. The purpose of the counter-canter is to improve the horse's balance, suppleness, straightness, and collection. Counter-canter is not the same as a horse's being on the wrong lead. For instance, if you ask your horse for a right-lead canter and he strikes off on the left lead instead, he is on the wrong lead, not counter-cantering. In the counter-canter, the horse is intentionally asked to canter on the outside lead instead of the usual inside lead.

Prerequisites to Teaching Counter-Canter

It is advisable that your horse has already learned to go in a somewhat collected canter before you begin to teach him to counter-canter. Simply attempting to counter-canter will not automatically collect or straighten him; the exercise must be performed correctly to be beneficial to his gymnastic development. He also should be able to make correct and relaxed transitions from canter to walk and from walk to canter.

Counter-Canter Basics

Some riders erroneously think that they have to use their aids differently when riding the counter-canter. I think that the best advice is the simplest: Sit and apply

the aids just as you would if you were cantering on the true lead. Above all, do not make any contortions with your upper body when counter-cantering on curved lines. Just sit quietly and allow yourself to be carried by your horse's movement. If you have a good understanding of how to ride shoulder-fore, you will be better prepared to ride a correct counter-canter. You should always ride the counter-canter in a slight shoulder-fore manner (with the leading leg toward the rail) on straight lines as well as in corners and on circles. Doing so will help to straighten your horse, and the straightness will then help him to develop collection.

I recommend introducing the counter-canter when the horse is working at First Level. I begin with a kind of "baby version" of the counter-canter by riding a shallow loop along the long side (see Figure 1, right) that requires only a few strides of gentle counter-canter. Be careful that your horse's haunches do not fall out of alignment; they should stay straight underneath his body at the deepest part of the loop and also when he returns to the track. These common early mistakes may come back to haunt you later on in your training if you are not aware of the problem and do not take steps to correct it (see "Common Mistakes" at right for more).

As your horse becomes more balanced in various arena patterns and as his collection improves, make sure that you work toward the same quality in the counter-canter on both leads. This will further enhance his balance and suppleness (*durchlässigkeit*), which will help you later on when you begin schooling flying changes. School simple changes (canter-walk-canter) often as well; these will also improve *durchlässigkeit* and collection.

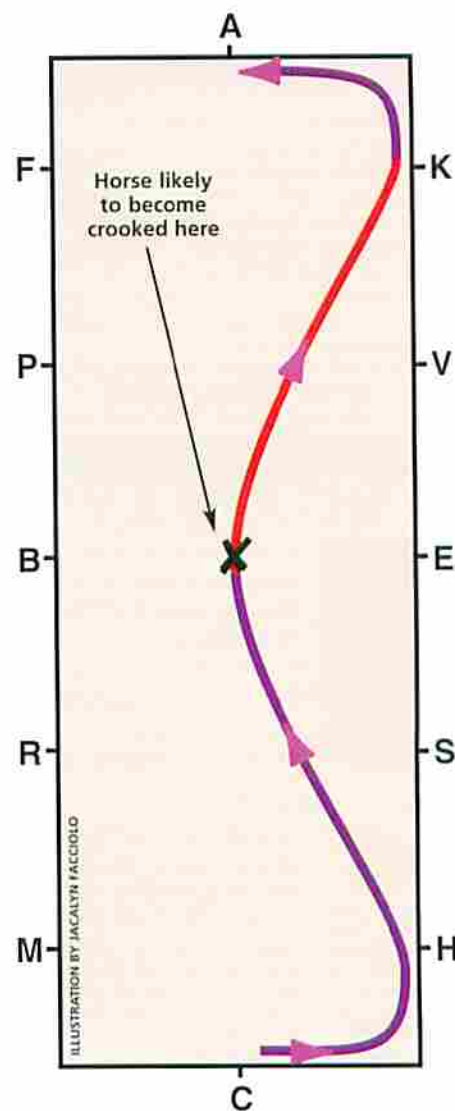


FIGURE 1.
First Level Canter Loop

Common Mistakes

Incorrect rider position. Many mistakes are rider-related and often are the result of an ineffective seat or incorrect position.
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Perhaps the most frequent mistake riders make in the counter-canter is to sit on the wrong seat bone—a mistake that becomes particularly obvious when riding corners and circles. Instead of sitting on the inside seat bone (the seat bone on the side of the lead), the rider “hangs behind” the horse’s motion and throws the horse off balance. Or, even if the rider attempts to sit on the inside seat bone, the shoulders tilt in the wrong direction when riding through corners. Your weight should be on your inside seat bone at all times, and your torso should be slightly directed toward the leading leg—without collapsing your inside hip.

Overbending the neck. This is another serious mistake that’s frequently seen in the counter-canter. Don’t fall prey to the common misconception that exaggerating your horse’s neck bend will prevent him from changing leads! Overbending the neck just throws the horse onto his opposite shoulder, forcing him out of balance and alignment as a result. For instance, if you are counter-cantering on the left lead and you overbend your horse’s neck to the left, he will fall onto his right shoulder. If you approach a corner in this manner, he is likely to lose his balance and change leads in front or trot behind, or in some other way to get discombobulated in an effort to keep his balance.

Exaggerated leg aids. Some riders exaggerate their leg position in an attempt to prevent their horses from changing leads. However, if you draw your outside leg back too far and use it too strongly, you’ll make your horse crooked and probably cause him to lose his balance as a result. Riding counter-canter in this way pushes the haunches to the rail and causes the shoulders to come off the rail. This position totally defeats the purpose of riding counter-canter and prevents the horse from becoming straight. And, of course, without straightness you cannot achieve collection.

Poor geometry. The three-loop serpentine across the whole arena can be a challenging exercise, especially for less-experienced riders who are struggling with their own balance in the counter-canter. It is essential to ride straight across the center line so that the shape of the circular tracks can be maintained accurately as

you ride toward E or B (see Figure 2 below). This principle will also be important later on when you practice riding flying changes as you cross the center line. If you cross the center line at an angle instead of straight, the middle loop of the serpentine will be V-shaped instead of round. As a result, your horse’s haunches will fall out, and the combined weight of rider and horse will be directed toward the horse’s shoulders. Your horse will speed up as a result, and you will probably apply stronger half-halts and leg aids in an attempt to maintain the collection and to prevent your horse from changing leads.

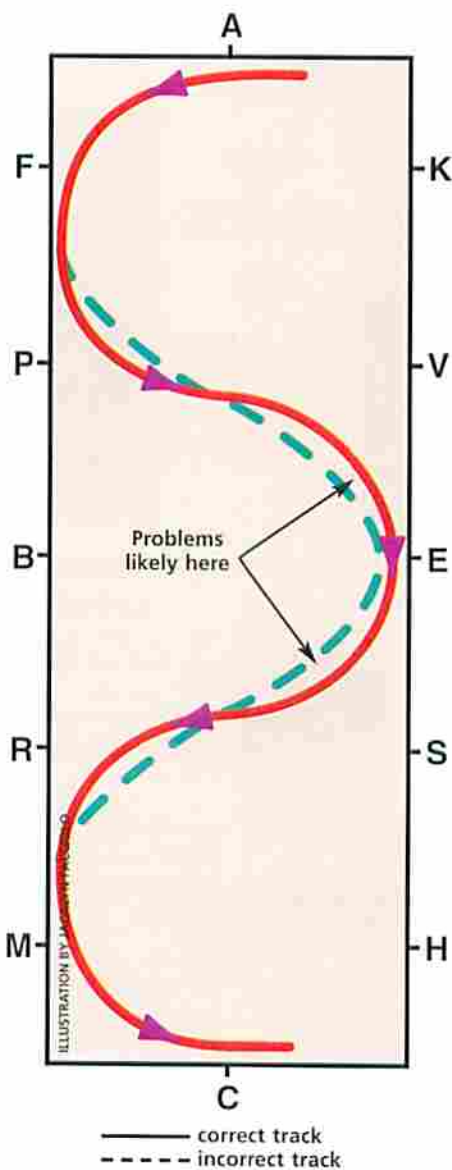


FIGURE 2.
Second Level Serpentine of Three Loops

The result: even more crookedness. This vicious circle can be avoided fairly easily by riding absolutely correct geometrical figures and striving to keep your seat balanced.

Some Useful Exercises

As you strive to achieve better collection in the counter-canter, your horse may lose impulsion and even the basic rhythm from time to time. If this occurs, “freshen up” his stride by riding more freely forward, then collecting him again, all in shoulder-fore. But keep in mind that shoulder-fore in canter should be ridden with less angle than shoulder-fore in trot. Many riders overdo the angle, which actually may contribute to loss of balance and of purity of the gait. The shoulder-fore positioning needs to be moderate in order not to stress the horse, and to enable him to collect. Always keep in mind: No collection without impulsion.

Another helpful exercise is to ride a 20-meter circle in counter-canter, preferably in the middle of the arena. When you cross the center line, make a fifteen-meter circle or a ten-meter volte to the outside, on the inside lead. Then return to the original circle in counter-canter. Ride the circle or volte on the inside lead in shoulder-fore, which will emphasize the concept of controlling your horse’s inside hind leg and outside shoulder. This exercise will help to improve his balance and collection when you return to the counter-canter circle.

Finally, to prove that your work in counter-canter has achieved the desired objectives—enhancing your horse’s balance, straightness, suppleness (*durchlässigkeit*), and collection—release the reins occasionally (*überstreichen*) in the counter-canter. When you release the reins, the quality of the counter-canter should not change; and your horse’s outline should remain the same, thus demonstrating that he is moving in self-carriage. If he responds like this, you have done an excellent job. ☺

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