

Lesson Topic: Tempi Changes

Fourth Level: Bridge to FEI **How to develop pirouettes and tempi changes.**

Tempi Changes

The final big skill in Fourth Level is the flying changes in sequence (tempi 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. 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 black-and-white aids for changes, then subtle weight 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 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 the 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 over reactive 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 much in 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 this level of comfort with the concepts of expectations 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 the 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-tempi 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, 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, you can get the feel for the correct timing of the change aid. Soon you can progress to emphasizing this leg aid for a few strides before you give the aids for the change. This exercise helps to build confidence in the timing and the dosage of aids for sequence of changes.

The confidence of both horses and riders can be lost more quickly than it is gained. It is important to proceed slowly, but it is even more important to proceed successfully. Any time the quality of the canter deteriorates, the harmony between the horse and rider is lost, or horse or rider becomes anxious about sequences of changes, the exercise should be discontinued at once. It is especially important to quit training changes while you are ahead and to progress each day only as far as is possible without great pressure.

Learning to Count

Counting tempi changes is like counting music. Four-tempi are counted in four-time: “one-two-three-four; two-two-three-four; three.” The initial one is counted as the aid is given, not when the change happens on the next stride. At first you may be tempted to count “one-two-three-change (aid); one-two-three-change (aid).” However, if you do so, two problems will arise. The first is that, at Fourth Level, there is room to count four strides, do the three required four-tempi changes, and finish the diagonal. But at Prix St. Georges, the five required four-tempi must start as soon as the horse is straight on the diagonal or they won’t all fit!

The second problem you’ll encounter if you get in the habit of counting each tempi change from one is that, particularly when you reach Intermediate I or II, with its numerous required three- and two-tempi, you’ll be apt to lose track of how many changes you’ve done. With the “music counting” system, you’ll always know what number you are on: “... three-two-three; four-two-three; five.”

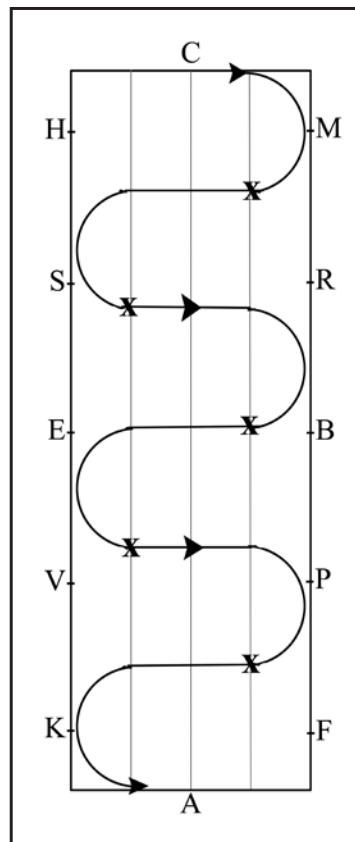
Recovery

If your single flying changes are well established, you might reasonably expect that changes in sequence will be easy. The surprise challenge that you’ll discover is the difficulty of “recovering” from each change to return to that ideal “change canter” before the next change. Often, the first couple of changes in the sequence are fine, but the changes deteriorate thereafter.

To help prevent this falling-off in quality, one of my favorite exercises for preparing for tempi changes is to ride a six-loop serpentine with a flying change at the first quarter line, immediately upon straightening. Having to straighten and change immediately improves your ability to prepare quickly for the change. (This speed will become critical at Prix St. Georges, when the four-tempi must start right out of the corner in order to fit on the diagonal.) This serpentine exercise, which requires you to keep your horse straight across the school after each change, also improves the recovery from the change, as it teaches you to rebalance and confirm his straightness immediately after each change. Note that some horses require a slightly different dosage of aids for recovery in each direction.

When you can make your horse’s canter fully balanced and straight within just a stride or two after each change, you’ll find that the changes in sequence actually are as simple as the simple changes. Start with the four-tempi, as is required at Fourth Level; and the threes and twos will follow easily with a little time. With the aiding system that I’ve given you in this article, even the one-tempi (changes of lead at every stride) follow logically for both horse and rider; the aids happen faster, but they are essentially the same aids, whether you are riding single changes or one-tempi.

The Fourth Level work firmly establishes collection, which is the top block of the



6 loop serpentine with changes on the quarter line

pyramid of training. To reach Fourth level is a considerable achievement, and it is the key transitional level between medium-level dressage and advanced FEI-level work. A world of challenge still awaits you when you begin to develop and enhance the FEI horse, but the skills and qualities desired in the advanced dressage horse are all introduced in principle at Fourth Level.