

Lesson Topic: Counter-Canter-Plan A

Purpose

To improve the engagement of the hindquarters in the canter; to collect, balance and straighten the canter; to prepare for flying changes.

Prerequisite

The student is proficient in riding a well-balanced canter. The seat is secure and follows the horse's back motion without any rotation (unsteadiness) of the upper body, which is erect and quietly independent of the seat. Arms, hands, and legs keep their position elastically (without grip). Together with seat and weight aids, arms, hands, and legs apply needed half-halts to keep the gait active and in balance into collection. The student is able to release either rein occasionally (*überstreichen*), as well as position and slightly counter-position the horse on straight and curved lines to prove straightness and balance of the canter and looseness through the poll and jaw; in short, to have him well through and on the bit. Canter-trot-canter transitions are absolutely secure on both leads. The rider is developing or has achieved good command of walk-canter-walk transitions toward simple changes.

The Aids

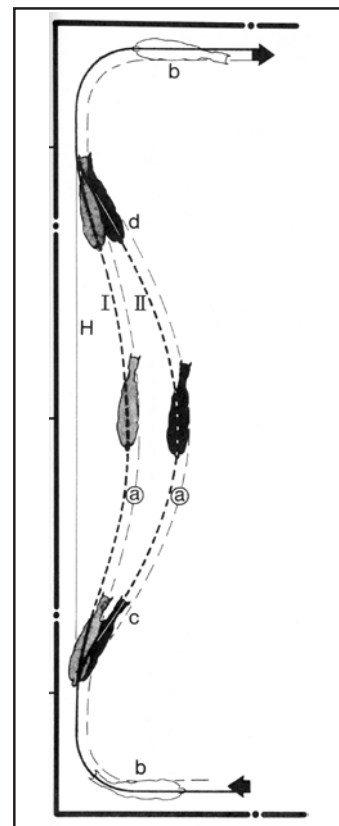
The inside seat and leg remain in advance of the outside seat and leg. The inside seat bone carries slightly more weight. The outside rein maintains steady balance, connection to the outside hind leg, and straightness through the outside shoulder. The inside rein softly keeps the position into the leading leg, enabling the inside hind leg to reach forward and under. The inside leg drives forward, staying well near the girth, while the outside leg keeps steady contact behind the girth (but not so far back that it pushes the hindquarters in). To improve straightness, ride slight shoulder-fore in counter-canter as in true canter. It is imperative that the student keeps a very steady and calm yet firm seat and position. Don't change anything suddenly, don't get tight; keep breathing correctly through the exercises. A sudden change in rein contact and seat and leg position will unbalance the horse and usually cause a change of lead, cross-cantering, or an unwanted transition to trot. If correct tempo and rhythm get lost, have the student return to larger lines. The instructor needs to be able to assess clearly whether the horse is ready for the degree of engagement being asked.

Teach the student to be generous with praise where due. Counter-canter is difficult to learn for some horses. It puts increased stress on the horse's outside hind leg, which has to travel a shorter distance in the inside of the curved lines of the exercises. This requires increased bend in all joints, including lowering of the hip to carry more. This, of course, develops engagement and collection, both of which are part of the purpose of training the counter-canter.

Discuss with your student that a great variety of combinations and lines are available for the practice and training of counter-canter. Suggest that they refer to USEF's Second and Third Level tests for additional ideas. Encourage them to be creative, and to elaborate on them and design their own combinations, but be reasonable in their demand of difficulty for the horse. Always consider their horse's and their own present stage of training and work accordingly.

Execution

Exercise #1. To prove that the rider has mastered trot-canter-trot transitions, ride working trot on the right rein and start a shallow broken line. As soon as the horse is turning into the middle loop and positioned left, ask for left-lead canter. As he finishes the third loop, return to trot, position right and ride through the short side with well-balanced corners, and repeat the exercise on the next long side. Practice in both direc-



*Counter-canter exercises:
Shallow loops of low (I) and
moderate (II) difficulty.*

tions several times to achieve precise transitions and lines. As a follow-up, you can now elaborate on this exercise and ask for true canter after the return to trot from counter-canter at the end of the loop. Continue in true canter through the short side of the arena.

Depending on the experience of the student and the training of the horse, you may instruct your students to ride onto a fifteen or 20-meter circle in the canter at B or E, or as their experience develops, you may have them ride a broken line in the canter on the long side.

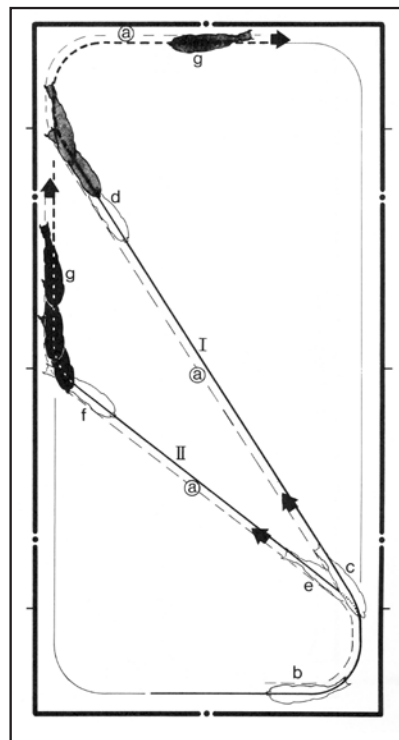
Exercise #2. Once students establish a satisfactory left-lead canter with impulsion, engagement, and balance, ride across the half diagonal (F to E or H to B) and continue in the counter-canter through the short side. Instruct him to round off the corners in order to avoid taxing the horse's right outside hind too much at this stage, which must develop bend and carrying power more than in true canter. Explain to the students that, due to the position and bend of the horse in counter-canter, they will be transcribing somewhat of a 20-meter half-circle through the short side. This makes it easier for the horse, which is learning to maintain its balance in counter-canter to come through the short side. Also, riding a little more forward will make it easier for the horse to maintain the counter-canter. But do not rush him. Have the student change rein across the diagonal to return to true canter. Reward. Trot and walk. Practice in both directions.

Exercise #3. Once the student and horse have achieved balance and confidence in counter-canter, instruct them to go in counter-canter around the track in both directions. Increase the difficulty and improve the engagement further by having the student ride progressively deeper into the corners. Now the student can start also to ride straight lines through the short sides.

Exercise #4. The student rides right counter-canter from H to K and continue through the short side. At B, they ride a 20-meter half-circle in counter-canter. From E, continue across the short diagonal to F and regain true canter.

Exercise #5. Student and horse are in right-lead counter-canter to B. At B, circle left 20 meters. Upon crossing the center line ride a ten-meter circle in true canter to refresh stride and balance. Continue onto 20-meter circle in counter-canter. On crossing the next center line repeat ten-meter circle in true canter. To finish the exercise, go straight across the half-diagonal either E-F or B-H, returning to true canter.

Exercise # 6. Student is in right lead true canter and makes a ten-meter half-circle at H, returning to the track at E and riding a 20-meter circle between E and B in counter-canter. After completing the circle, ride straight at E and make a trot transition before the corner. Depending on the success of the student, repeat the exercise on the next long side or come to the walk and reward. Practice in both directions.



Short diagonal to counter-canter through the short side.

Common Faults

1. Horse does not stay in counter-canter through the short side or a curved line. He changes leads or cross canters.
Correction: Quietly bring the horse back to trot or walk. Do not punish. Instruct the student to take the original lead again in true canter, calmly stabilize and balance the canter well and ride the line of the exercise again. Confirm that the student's seat and aid application really helps the horse into correct execution of the exercise. Repetition of the exercise does not have to be on the original line, it can be in any plausible place in the arena. Remind the student to ride a little more forward without rushing and keep a very steady seat and position. Praise upon completion.
2. The horse is ridden too deeply into corners; counter-canter breaks.
Correction: Round off line (see above).

3. The horse loses tempo, rhythm, or both through corners, turns, or circles of various sizes.
Correction: Return to larger figures.
4. The rider swings or rotates his upper body as a result of tension and lack of independent seat. Confusing aids unbalance the horse and cause cross canter, change of lead or break to trot.
Correction: Ask the rider to come back to a 20-meter circle in true canter. Once relaxation, feel, and corrected position have returned, clear aids will help the horse to maintain the counter-canter on a simpler line. Progress from there.
5. The horse gets tight and excited due to the difficulty of increased collection in counter-canter on curved lines.
Correction: Rest a moment in walk. Return to quiet trot; then canter. Bring the true canter into improved engagement and balance through various collecting exercises and figures. Once relaxation has been reestablished, modify the original exercise to decrease the difficulty. Praise at every successful effort to restore confidence. Explain to the student the importance of not making an issue out of the fact that the horse is not able yet to easily do the exercise. Rather, stress the importance of developing the horse's strength and understanding gradually. Suggest a progression of exercises to bring the horse to the degree of difficulty for work in counter-canter, particularly on curved lines, always remembering a slight shoulder-fore position to maintain straightness.