

Lesson Topic: Teaching Flying Changes on a Schooled Horse

Purpose

To change leads cleanly and smoothly in the canter, demonstrating balance, coordination, obedience, and degree of collection in the horse and coordination and timing of the aids of the rider.

Prerequisites

The rider on the schooled horse must be able to take each lead of the canter from the walk clearly and be able to go from the canter to the walk correctly. The rider must be comfortable and competent in the counter-canter in each direction and should be competent in all of the two-track work in the trot, including shoulder-in, haunches-in, half-pass, and renvers. The rider should be competent in collecting and extending the canter and keeping the horse straight on straight and curved lines. It is best if the rider is at least somewhat competent in the two-track exercises in the collected canter as well, so he or she can straighten the horse in the canter and move him laterally as necessary, particularly having the ability to control the horse's shoulders, but it is not as critical as having proficiency in the collected trot lateral work.

Warm-up

After a good free walk on a long rein for five to ten minutes, depending on the temperature of the working environment, work the horse for 15-20 additional minutes at working trot and canter in both directions, in leg-yielding at the trot, and in transitions from gait to gait and within the gaits (lengthening and collecting). Spend a few minutes at collected trot riding briefly shoulder-in, haunches-in, and half-pass. Do not tire the horse out "warming up." Fifteen to 20 minutes after the walk should suffice.

Execution

There are four basic ways to teach the flying change to the rider and to the horse. They are:

1. Changing from one 20-meter circle to another.
2. Changing after half-pass from the center line to the long side.
3. Changing across the diagonal, asking for the flying change approaching the end of the diagonal, but not in the corner.
4. Changing from counter-canter on a straight line or on a 20-meter circle.

The flying change from one 20-meter circle to another is often the most successful for both horse and rider, although there are some exceptions.

In a 20 x 40 or 20 x 60 meter arena, ask the rider to ride on the 20-meter circle on the right rein. Use the circle that touches X. Explain the importance of the accuracy of this circle, the bend through the horse from poll to tail, and the aids that produce the bend:

- Added weight on the inside seat bone
- Right lower leg pressure at the girth
- Left leg slightly behind the girth, holding the haunches from stepping out
- Positioning through the horse's jaw and poll by light inside rein
- Careful, consistent contact on a direct outside rein.

The erectness of the rider's upper body should be emphasized so that there is no leaning left or right.

Ask the rider to change circles at the walk to a 20-meter circle to the left; touching X and the tracks at the correct circle points (see diagram below). For clarification, explain that this is a type of figure-eight using X as the crossing point and not using diagonal lines as often implied by the term "figure-eight."

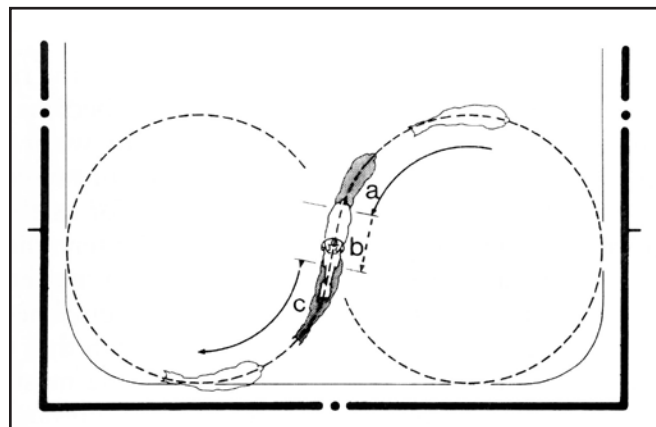
After walking the horse through this figure, ask the rider to add an important element: When approaching X from the circle on the right rein, starting at the first quarter line, ask the rider to straighten the horse and leg-yield him slightly, parallel with the short sides of the arena, to the right with the rider's left leg. The lateral distance of this leg-yield should be

no more than six to twelve inches, not two or three feet. This is important. Explain that after a few (three to four) steps of this leg-yield, the horse should be directed onto the new 20-meter circle to the left as already practiced.

The rider should then practice the same leg-yielding technique from the circle on the left rein, changing through X to the circle on the right rein. The horse is straightened approaching the first quarter line, moved a little sideways away from the right leg, and allowed to continue onto the 20-meter circle to the right.

On the circle to the right, the rider should now work on walk-canter-walk transitions in the right lead. He should be reminded of the aids for the canter depart, as the flying change aids are the same as the depart aids. They are:

- Inside seat bone
- Inside leg at the girth
- Then outside half-halting direct rein
- Slight outside leg behind the girth. (If the horse prefers only inside leg and seat bone for canter departs, this should be mentioned so the rider will not annoy the horse that dislikes outside leg pressure for canter departs. The instructor should mention that horses have a right to a preference in leg aids and that it is the rider's responsibility to discover this and respect it.)



Correct figure-eight geometry.

The rider should then prepare to change circles, as before, but this time with a walk transition and a few steps of leg-yielding at the walk, away from the new inside leg, into the new outside aids. This means that from the circle right, the horse is asked to make a canter-walk transition approaching the first quarter line, leg-yield a short distance off the rider's left leg, and then pick up the left lead canter onto the 20-meter circle to the left. In the leg-yielding steps, it is important that the horse is straight and not allowed to fall out with his haunches. This ensures a correct connection on a straight outside rein.

Crisp canter-walk-canter transitions are practiced on the 20-meter circle left, and a change through the walk is practiced from the circle left to the circle right. The horse should be clearly praised for execution of the transitions from canter to walk, the leg-yield, and taking the new lead.

The rider is now ready to ask for the flying change. The instructor reminds the rider that the pattern will be exactly as practiced and will include the slight leg-yield, but it will be done now in the canter of the first lead. The rider should be reassured that the horse knows the exercise and will most likely make the change easily. The rider should look forward to concentrating and enjoying the ride. It is good to remind the rider that going through the steps he or she has practiced successfully with the walk transition will be followed precisely while merely staying in the canter. The rider should be reminded to verbally praise the horse immediately upon completion of the change. The instructor should say "Good!" immediately, so the rider knows.

It is best to practice the flying change three times in the same direction before asking the rider to do it in the other direction. It can then be done in the new direction two or three times. That is enough for the first day. Changing back and forth, left to right to left, is usually too much in the first lesson but can be done in subsequent lessons.

Common Faults

With a schooled horse, the problems are much less than with a green horse. At this point in his or her training, the rider should be getting the feel of a flying change. This is why it is not a good idea for an inexperienced rider to be asking an inexperienced horse to do his first flying changes. They both end up with the wrong "feel" and a bad psychological experience. If the schooled horse makes a mistake, it is likely to be that he changes late behind or possibly does not change at all and goes onto the second circle maintaining counter-canter.

In the first instance, the rider has most likely omitted the half-halt on the new outside rein. In the second instance, the rider has maintained the bend of the first circle, and the horse has understood by this to maintain the lead of the first circle. He thinks he is being obedient. In the late-change-behind scenario, it is best to go back to the canter-walk, leg-yield, canter exercise. The instructor should emphasize the feel on the new outside (old inside) rein, explaining that rein contact together with the canter-depart aids were what was missing. In the second scenario, in which the horse does not change at all, the rider needs to be made aware that he did not straighten the horse sufficiently before asking for the change. As long as the horse is positioned in the direction of the first circle, he will maintain that canter lead. That is the way he was taught counter-canter.

The aids for the flying change from right to left are:

- Sit on the right seat bone in the right-lead canter
- Right lower leg at the girth
- Left lower leg slightly behind the girth
- Horse bent very slightly to the right.

Approaching the first quarter line, begin to straighten the horse's neck, equalize the weight on the seat bones, move the horse to the right a few inches with the left lower leg, take a firmer contact on the right rein, change leg position, right leg slightly back, left leg at the girth, use right leg in the second beat of the canter, and put weight on the new seat bone. The horse does the flying change. Then bend the horse slightly in the new direction. It is very important that the rider is instructed to keep the horse straight through the change. If the horse is bent in the new direction too soon, this prevents his inside hind from coming through and can cause a late change behind.

It is good to have the rider practice the flying-change aids at the walk. This saves wear and tear on the horse and provides the practice riders need.