

Why Train the Counter Canter

The counter canter is an important ingredient when schooling intermediate to advanced level horses, (I say this because the horse must first be proficient at straightness, forwardness, and be ready for collection) and is useful in both in dressage and jumping disciplines. For dressage horses, counter canter encourages collection, hock flexion, and engagement. For jumper horses, training the counter canter improves their ability to change leads and direction, and aids in their overall balance when executing a course.

There are four basic reasons for schooling the counter canter. They are: straightness (primary), agility, strength, and balance. However, the counter canter also aids in training collection, suppleness, respect for the aids, and is a good precursor exercise for teaching flying changes and canter pirouettes. It is surprising that for such an important schooling exercise, there is truly very little written about schooling the counter canter. Many people erroneously believe that riding the counter canter is exactly the same as riding the true canter with the exception that the horse is traveling in the opposite direction. If this were so, then just changing directions when cantering would have no additional effect on the horse's balance. Since the balance of the horse (and rider) is different when the horse changes directions but not leads (as on the right lead but going in a left circle), the rider should understand how he can best support the horse in counter canter whose self-carriage will suffer as a result of his loss of balance. To benefit from training the counter canter, remember the overall goal is straightness, and use effective aids and take care to prevent common pitfalls. Here's how.

Aids for Counter Canter (and pitfalls to avoid!)

Here are some things to keep in mind when schooling the counter canter. Let's use the right counter canter – the horse will be in the right lead canter but will be traveling in the left direction around the arena. (Counterclockwise)

- 1- Horse's position: The horse is bent *slightly* right. Over bending to the right usually results in loss of balance and can force the horse on to his left shoulder (remember the horse is traveling *left*), or encourage the haunches to fall out. Additionally, you will lose *connection* to the left rein and therefore you will lose the straightness. Also, connection to the left rein (with a right bend) helps the horse stay on the right lead.
- 2- Rider's position: The rider should maintain the same position as if they were cantering on the true lead (in this case, the right). The right seat should be slightly down and forward with the right leg at the girth to maintain and support the right bend. The left seat should stay in the saddle (be careful not to tip off it) and the left leg should be behind the girth to support the haunches toward the correct lead (right). Be careful your left leg does not drive the haunches to the right so as to make the horse crooked. (see "Biomechanics" section below)
- 3- Tips: Keep a slight bend to the right, collect and offer more support as you travel through the corners (to discourage a lead change), keep your upper body and your shoulders in line with those of the horse (don't turn your upper body toward the left, even though that is the direction of travel). Make sure you keep an even, 3 beat canter in a regular rhythm, and try to develop engagement and expression from behind. Most importantly, though the horse is slightly bent to the right, try to keep the horse as "straight" as you can to help the horse learn balance

(not falling on one shoulder or the other regardless of the direction of flexion).

Exercises

It is important the horse be well-schooled and balanced in the true canter before teaching the counter canter. And their transitions should be active and clean. The easiest and most common exercise to teach the counter canter (let's use the right lead counter canter again) is done on the long side of the arena. Ride clockwise around the outside of the arena, after the corner ride a single shallow loop from track to quarter line and back to track again. As horse improves, ride a two loop serpentine, then ride the loop to center line, and gradually make the loops deeper until you are able to ride a circle on the counter lead in balance, with a relaxed horse. Additionally, make sure you spend time schooling counter canter down the long sides of the arena, not just in loops and circles. Riding the straight lines of the track help the horse learn straightness.

Give your horse time to learn the balance, which will come as the horse develops the straightness, strength, agility, and collection which comes with increased engagement an training.

Biomechanics

Here's is a bit of scientific reasoning for the aids. (I'll try to keep it simple) The major purpose of riding the counter canter is to straighten the horse. It helps train horses who have the tendency to canter with their haunches toward the inside (common fault) and straighten horses who have a tendency to fall with their shoulders out and are over bent at the base of the neck (instead of bending correctly through their body, another common fault). That being understood, the counter canter will help give the horse the tools necessary for the balance he needs to bring his body into alignment, therefore developing "straightness".

In a right counter canter where the horse is traveling counterclockwise, the rider's left leg engages the horse's left hind to take deep step underneath the horse. This left hind leg is the first step in the right lead canter. This sets the horse up for the right lead when the horse is bent right. And, the left rein supports the left shoulder, while the horse is *slightly* bent right, so the horse can keep his shoulders more in line with his spine and better use his back muscles to affect roundness, lower his croup, and step deeper under his body. This happens because use of the left rein encourages straightness, with less loss of energy through the lateral displacement of the shoulders.

Confused? On a good note, you will know it is right when you feel it – an off balance counter canter feels off balance!

Until next time,

Dr. Beverly Gordon