

## *How can I learn to collect and balance my horse's canter?*

**BILL**—Easier said than done, doncha know! But here are a few thoughts along those lines. Number 1—you need a *seat* because that's where the changes you have in mind come from. A seat that's independent of your hands, a seat that's balanced and doesn't rely on grip, a seat that lets you be deep when you need to be but unobtrusive when that's called for. In other words, a seat which you can control.

Number 2—incredibly helpful but not essential, you need to have felt what a balanced canter is like. When I first rode an upper level horse 40 years ago after only having been on field hunters and hours-off-the-track Thoroughbreds, I literally didn't recognize its canter. It just didn't feel remotely like anything I knew as a canter. Obviously, if you've previously experienced what you're trying to create, it's a heck of a lot easier than if you're casting around blindly in the dark looking for who knows what!

As a precondition to collecting and balancing, we need to make some assumptions. The horse has to be in front of the leg. He has to accept contact and actively accept the bit so that the half halts which you make will “go through”.

Then comes the counter-intuitive part. If you only sit with the motion, you reinforce the status quo. Nothing will change. But if you sit tactfully slightly against the mechanic of the gait and intervene at the right instant stride by stride, you can alter the horse's balance to the rear.

There's only a certain part of the canter stride where your intervention can do any good. Once the horse is totally off the ground in his suspended phase, gravity rules. A half halt during freefall isn't a half halt at all. However, just at the moment of the stride as your seatbones come most forward, if you brace your lower back and parry with a non-allowing outside hand, you can make the horse sit down a little more behind which redirects his jump more up and not just forward over the ground.

There are important timing issues, and your lower leg must support the action of the other aids so the horse doesn't misunderstand and just stop! And the overall changes take time because for him to use his back end differently, it must develop physically and become much stronger. Consequently, at first ask only for a handful of strides in a row, for instance, as you cross over the centerline on a 20-meter circle. If you feel the rhythm losing its clarity, you're overdoing things, and the horse must be sent more forward to keep the gait pure.

Ultimately, bits of counter-positioning during which you shift the horse's weight onto his inner hind leg as well as carefully managed moments of shoulder-in while you canter will contribute to building the new balance you are seeking.

As an aside, sometimes I'm asked “on which beat do I make the half halt (or give the aids for a flying change)?” Ever since I rode with Frau Rosemary Springer back in the mid '70s, I've given that question short shrift. She had won the German Dressage Championships regularly back in the '60s, and when I posed that very question, she looked at me, puzzled, and said, “Why do you care?”

It's an intellectual point, but that's about all. Figure this: an average horse makes roughly 90 canter strides a minute or 1.5 strides per second or 1 stride every  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a second. In that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a second, he must make three actual beats and make a period of suspension. So to hit the right beat consciously and accurately with your left brain, you

need to be on the mark to *within 0.1875 parts of a second*. Doesn't it make more sense to trust your right brain and learn it by feel?

One further thought— many times when inexperienced riders think “collect,” they drive with their seat *more*, using a longer, stronger back-to-front pelvic motion. This is actually more of an indicator to a horse to lengthen so, in essence, those riders are telling the horse both to stop and go at the same time. The hips and abdominal muscles do have a role, but the abs should contract and produce a shortened, concentrated motion in the rider's core.

And finally, a collected, balanced canter is all about teaching a horse to carry himself. If you hold him up, he'll never get it. If you follow too much with your hands— rowing the boat—he'll never get it. Having in your mind that your hands work the same as they do in a proper rein-back can be a helpful image. Meet the bit with lightness. The rein portion of your half halts should remind you of those days in your youth back on the farm. Remember when your parents sent you down to the barn before school to milk the hamsters, and learn to be as subtle and tactful as that.