



Teaching Techniques

Canter and Lope Upward Transitions

By Ramona Palm-Oslin
Photos by Ashleigh Hamill

One of the challenges faced by riders, and a test of teaching ability for a riding instructor as well, is how to execute smooth transitions into the canter or lope. Usually, a rider's early education involves getting an older school horse to move forward (and building up a whole lot of leg muscle in the process!). Once a rider learns to send a horse forward, challenges arise because intermediate and more advanced horses can be a bit more sensitive to a rider's aids. When the rider is accustomed to asking a horse more emphatically for the canter or lope departure, sometimes horses that are more sensitive to pressure will lurch forward or rush into the lope, rather than smoothly and subtly transitioning into it. So, how can instructors prepare students to make these transitions smoother?

The process of teaching a student to make smoother transitions takes time in the saddle and patience. It involves some muscle retraining,



as well as improved body control, so it will not happen overnight. However, there are exercises that will help put a student on the path to better transitions. Before we go into detail about smooth transitions, it is important to discuss why lurching or rushing into the canter or lope is not desired from the horse; first, safety reasons.

A less experienced rider may get left behind by the motion of a rushing horse and will be less centered on the horse and at increased risk for falling off. Also, a horse that is rushing will be carrying more weight in front, or "on the forehand," rather than pushing from behind. This puts the horse at increased risk for tripping and falling, causing possible injury to the rider or horse. Horses that move on the forehand too much also experience back pain and will not develop muscle as efficiently as a horse that uses itself properly. As an illustration, if a person used just his or her arms and back and not core to lift heavy objects, he or she would be setting themselves up for future back problems. This applies to horses in a similar way. A horse needs to engage his hind end in order to lift the rider and move forward. Pushing forward from the hind end prevents rushing and is more correct in form and function.

So, how does the rider encourage the horse to push from behind? To answer this question, let's look at several causes of rushing and other common transition challenges, along with possible solutions. Keep in mind that these suggestions are not a "one size fits all" model because different horses require different techniques from their riders.

The rider rushes.

This is a common problem and can be caused by nervousness on the part of the rider and lack of preparation in the transition. CHA Certified Instructor Ashleigh Hamill, of Tresor



Arabians in Fort Collins, Colorado suggests that the instructor coaches the rider to sit up, lift his chest, point his eyes out in front of him "toward the horizon", and tilt his hip angle a bit upwards to engage a deeper seat. The rider should exercise caution to make sure he does not ask for too much forward motion by leaning forward, etc. It may also help for the rider to sit a little on his outside seat bone to help the horse to get ready for the transition. Some horses may startle into the canter if they do not know it is coming, so a weight shift, half-halt, or some other type of cue of what is about to come will help.

The horse just starts trotting from the walk or trotting faster.

This happens when a horse is heavy on their forehand. CHA Clinic Instructor Cheryl Kronsberg of CRK Stable in Yorba Linda, California suggests that, a rider first collects the horse from a trot and wait for a certain "visual marker" to cue for the lope or canter. She also suggests that the student practice until they can transition at the marker without the speed of the trot increasing during the transition. She says to also try the transitions from the walk at the marker without any trot steps. Hamill suggests, "plenty of half-halts to keep the horse collected in whatever gait they are in before cuing for the lope or canter." If half-halts are not effective with that particular horse, another way the rider can approach the transition is, when the horse

begins to trot at a faster pace, stop the horse, make it back, wait, and walk off. When the rider is ready, ask for the transition again, whether it be from the walk or trot. Repeat until the horse is transitioning smoothly and softly.

The horse tries to go sideways when cued to canter or lope from a standstill OR lurches forward into a fast trot.

"From a standstill," Kronsberg says, "it may be helpful to ask the horse for a walk step to get them thinking forward instead of sideways." Once the horse starts forward and before he takes a step, cue for the canter or lope. Timing is important here. The instructor can help the rider get the timing down for this by actually telling him or her when to cue for the walk and the lope several times, then letting the student try it just by feeling the horse.

The horse takes the wrong lead.

Most horses, like most people, have a side they prefer. Many times, when asked to lope or canter on the side the horse does not prefer, if the horse is not properly set up to take that lead, they will take the incorrect lead. Hamill says, "A good way to prevent this is to make sure the horse has an inside bend, using more leg than rein to achieve this, and to make sure the rider sits on the outside seat bone."

The rider is nervous.

Because nervous riders have a tendency to tense up against the horse's motion, it is important that the rider learn to relax. Hamill says, "Students often hold their breath, even clench their toes, and lock their hip joints and stop moving with the horse, which can in turn cause a horse to get nervous themselves and think that there is a reason to rush." Instructors can help their students relax by asking them to breathe with each stride which helps them to relax and

follow the horse's motion. It slows the strides down in the rider's mind, which will often slow the rider's seat as a result. A lot of riding is mental and because the rider's body tends to follow their mind, this type of exercise helps.

The horse is strung out in transitions.

Horses that travel too heavy on their forehands don't usually execute smooth transitions. To encourage a horse to "lighten up" and carry more weight behind in order to make a smoother upward lope or canter transition, the rider should lift up on the reins very slightly, not back, and hold the horse with their calves in the middle of the horse's barrel. Only when the horse has lifted its back and come back to the rider should it be asked to make the transition. A common theme among any instructor is to build on skills of the horse and rider team. According to both Hamill and Kronsberg, it is best for a rider to learn to lope or canter first from the sitting trot, then from the walk, then from the standstill, because walk to canter and stand still to canter transitions are both physically harder for the horse, and so it will be harder for the inexperienced student to support a horse through these transitions.

Instructors and riders alike should keep in mind that every horse is different, and so they will require different things from their riders. Some horses are taught with diagonal aids for canter (outside leg and inside rein) and some work better doing lateral aids (outside leg and outside rein). Some horses need to be supported with the rider's inside leg through transitions to keep them from going sideways. Some horses will only need the rider to support them with their legs and to make a kissing sound to lope. Others will need to be given a stronger leg aid. The rider should start with less in the way of cuing and add more as needed, rather than the other way around. Some horses think they are being punished if you over cue them

and doing too much of it can make them sour. It is important for the instructor to know the individual horse's training level and personality to instruct the student on making upward canter/lope transitions. Remember that these suggestions may not work for every single horse. Lessons tailored to the individual rider and horse allow for success.

There are two suggestions that will work for every horse and rider. The most important thing an instructor can have a rider do is praise his or her horse for good behavior. Horses, like people, enjoy receiving praise and are willing to work for it. A rider that only corrects and never praises their horse will have more trouble than a rider who praises good effort from a horse. The second suggestion is to encourage the rider to start feeling the way the horse moves underneath of him or her, rather than being mechanical in his or her cues. This takes practice, but will ultimately help the rider with anything they are faced with, not limited to upward canter and lope transitions. ↻

About the Author: Ramona Palm-Oslin is a CHA Intern and just earned her degree in Equine Business at Midway College in Kentucky. She has a life-long love of horses and has ridden and shown for many years on her AQHA mare. She is currently looking for full time employment.

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