

CANTER Departures

As you progress in your riding, developing your sense of feel and improving communication with your horse, you will also start to ‘mirror’ your horse’s movements. In this first photo (left), see how the angle of my body and head mirrors that of the horse? I’m looking where I want to go, and Larry, being focused on me, mirrors the feel of even the slightest shift of weight in my seat. This is a good way to show you what ‘feel’ is and it’s the essence of real communication. It’s something that makes more advanced exercises, like the canter departure, easier for both you and your horse.



In earlier articles, we discussed how ‘feel’ gives you a better understanding, focus and ability to know when your horse has understood and responded to your request. In that article (September 2007 issue), we explored ‘feel’ at the walk, trot, and canter to establish that connection between your seat and the horse’s feet.

We’ve also looked at being balanced and achieving an awareness of how your body and timing affects your horse’s movement in an upwards transition from a trot to a canter. How balance is vital for the horse to be able to carry himself and respond softly and lightly to your requests.

We also worked bareback—something I like to do when I’m developing feel, timing and balance in both horse and rider. Like I say, you ride the horse, not the saddle. It is easy to ‘hide’ in a saddle and become lazy, since it allows the rider to be less well balanced and use less precise

movements and still not fall off. But through the eyes of the horse, all that is just plain confusing! At the same time, you must be aware of your horse’s condition and acceptance of bareback riding, as well as your own riding skill. If, for instance, your horse’s topline is not well developed

(that is, there is not sufficient muscle protecting the spine), or you are not able to move with the horse and lift your weight from the spine at the correct time, it may be best for you to work in the saddle and gradually build to this bareback work.

So let’s break it down and look at how it all comes together in the canter departure. While it’s an advanced move, if you have a good sense of feel, timing and balance; your horse is focused on you and your communication is clear and consistent, it doesn’t have to be difficult. This 13-year-old ex-racehorse was consistently doing it after only a few attempts.

To do this exercise, you will need to be able to feel and sit the canter and understand how to consistently deliver the canter cues, which are (for a left lead):

- Shift your left hip forward, which automatically moves your right (outside) leg back slightly to indicate

you want him to push off with his right (outside) hind leg.

- With your left (inside) leg on the girth for impulsion, and your right leg still slightly back to keep the hindquarters from swinging out, you give the cue with your right leg for the horse to push off onto the first of the three beats.

For the right lead, it’s just the opposite – shift your right hip forward, which will move your left (outside) leg back slightly. You keep your right leg on the girth to cue the impulsion forward and use your left leg to keep the hindquarters from swinging out.

If a horse has difficulty understanding the cue to pick up a particular lead, I will exaggerate the cue by keeping my inside leg away from his body. If your horse isn’t comfortable with his leads, it’s not important at this stage. We can work on establishing leads in a future article. Also keep in mind that while you need to work both leads, you may need to work more on the difficult lead, which is often the right lead.

When you’re doing a canter departure, however, you first ask the horse to move back slightly on his haunches (picture 2). This is so he learns to shift his weight slightly back and be more on the haunches, which will prepare him to work from behind



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In picture 3, you can see that I've broken forward slightly, lifting my weight off the horse's back to allow him to bring his hind leg underneath for the push off, ensuring that he can work from behind in a nicely rounded way. I've also slightly lifted the inside rein, although you can see that I'm careful to keep only light contact—don't ask for a canter departure when you've got the handbrake on!

On the second beat of the canter (picture 4), see how the inside hind leg (left) and outside forefoot (right) diagonal pair move forward? I've broken a bit further forward, increasing the energy in my body to encourage the horse forward, and mirroring the uphill angle of his body.

On the third beat of the canter (picture 5), you'll see the inside forefoot is the only foot on the ground. My body position has returned to a centred position, and my inside (left) leg is on the girth to apply light pressure if needed to maintain the canter strides.

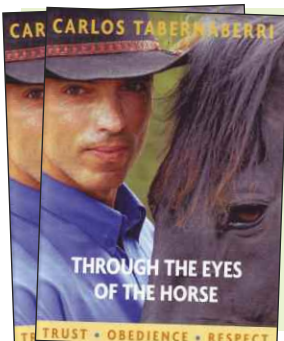
After the third beat of the canter, all four feet are off the ground in suspension. In picture 6, the outside hind (right) leg comes back to the ground just before the inside hind leg

(left) and right outside foreleg (diagonal pair) come back to the ground in the second beat of the canter stride.

If you and your horse are comfortable working bareback at the canter, I think you'll find this exercise a revealing one. It will tell you a lot about how good your feel, timing and balance are, as well as how clearly and consistently (from your horse's point of view) you are able to communicate the canter cues. It doesn't have to be difficult for either of you. But it is an excellent opportunity for you to check the consistency and accuracy of your cues.

And don't forget to end on a good note. If your horse gives you one or two good departures, let that be the lesson for the day and give him some thinking time. Remember, you want your horse to be smart—and that means you've got to give him the time to work things out for himself.

Good riding—and I hope your horse has a smaller wither than this thoroughbred! It was a good thing I was writing this article, and not trying to explain it from the horse's back. I would have sounded like Pee Wee Herman!



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