

Why You Should Ride Transitions by Influencing the Footfall

BETTER BALANCE | CLEARER AIDS | A STRONGER FUTURE

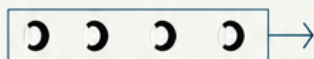
Transitions aren't just about changing the gait — they're about reorganising the horse's body while maintaining rhythm, balance and connection.

*Keep a
Brighter
Future*

The Footfall of Each Gait

Every gait has a specific sequence of footfalls. When we understand these, we can influence how the horse organises its steps — and make the transition smoother and more balanced.

WALK (4-beat)



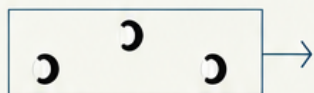
Right hind, right fore,
left hind, left fore.

TROT (2-beat)



Diagonal pairs
(e.g. right hind + left fore).

CANTER (3-beat – right canter)



Right hind, left hind
(diagonal pair), right fore.

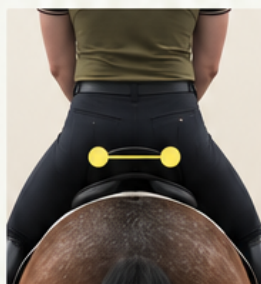


= Hind leg (left or right)



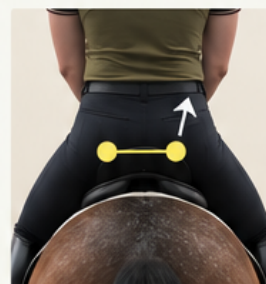
= Fore leg (left or right)

Your Seat Bones Communicate the Next Footfall



TROT

Seat bones even and square.
Reflects the symmetrical
diagonal footfall pattern.



CANTER (right)

Leading seat bone (right) slightly
forward. For right canter, the right
seat bone forward helps organise
the right hind leg to step under.

*This isn't about
pushing the horse
sideways with
your seat or
twisting your pelvis.*

*It's a subtle
change that
helps the horse
organise the next
sequence of
footfalls.*

*It works best
when the horse is
engaged, connected
and in balance.*

Trot to Canter (right) and Canter (right)

TROT → CANTER (RIGHT)

- 1 Keep the seat bones even and square in trot.
- 2 Maintain the activity of the hind legs and your connection.
- 3 Subtly bring the right seat bone forward as you prepare for canter.
- 4 Use the outside rein for balance and alignment, inside leg for bend and connection.
- 5 Don't just make the transition happen — influence the next step.

CANTER (RIGHT) → TROT

- 1 Return to a more even, square seat.
- 2 Keep the hind legs active and the connection steady.
- 3 Influence the next footfall so the horse reorganises into the two-beat diagonal rhythm.
- 4 Maintain your aids — don't just slow the horse down.
- 5 The transition is complete when the new gait is established with balance and connection.

Start Early – Build for the Future

Practice this from the very beginning. What you teach your 3 or 4 year old already sets them up for the higher level movements — passage, piaffe, and even the flying changes and sequence changes later on.

"A young horse learning to listen to your seat, maintain rhythm and reorganise its balance is learning far more than just the basic gaits."

It's a Journey, Not a Switch

Transitions aren't just about the gait — they're a test of balance, engagement and communication. The more balanced and responsive your horse becomes, the less you need to exaggerate your aids.

*Teach the seat.
Teach the footfall.
Build the balance.*

Why You Should Ride Transitions by Influencing the Footfall

Transitions are often described simply as changes from one gait to another — walk to trot, trot to canter, canter to trot and so on.

But a good transition is much more than changing the gait.

A truly balanced transition is about **changing the organisation of the horse's body while maintaining rhythm, balance, engagement and connection.**

One of the most effective ways to achieve this is to learn to ride the transition by **influencing the horse's footfall**, rather than simply giving a stronger aid and asking the horse to change gait.

And one of the most important tools we have for doing this is the **position of our seat bones.**

Think about the footfall, not just the gait

Every gait has a specific sequence of footfalls.

In trot, the horse moves in diagonal pairs, creating a two-beat rhythm. In canter, the horse moves through a three-beat sequence with a leading hind leg, followed by the diagonal pair and then the leading foreleg.

When we understand these sequences, we can start to influence *how the horse organises those steps.*

Instead of thinking:

“I want to go from trot to canter.”

We can think:

“I want to influence the next footfall so the horse can reorganise its balance and change into canter without losing its rhythm or alignment.”

That is a much more precise conversation with the horse.

Your seat bones help communicate the footfall

The position of the rider's seat bones is particularly important when transitioning between trot and canter.

In trot, we want our pelvis and seat bones to remain **even and square.**

This reflects the symmetrical nature of the trot's diagonal footfall pattern.

When preparing for canter, however, the rider can influence the horse's organisation by bringing the **leading seat bone slightly forward.**

For example, if we want left lead canter, the left seat bone can become slightly more forward. For right lead canter, the right seat bone can become slightly more forward.

This isn't about pushing the horse sideways with the seat or dramatically twisting the pelvis.

It is a **subtle change in the rider's position that communicates the direction and organisation of the next movement.**

The rider is essentially saying:

“Organise yourself for this new sequence of footfalls.”

Trot to canter

Consider a balanced trot-to-canter transition.

In trot, the rider's seat bones are relatively even and square.

As the rider prepares for canter, the horse needs to reorganise its balance and change from the two-beat diagonal rhythm into the three-beat canter sequence.

The rider can maintain the activity of the hind legs while subtly bringing the intended leading seat bone forward.

The outside rein helps maintain the balance and alignment, while the inside leg maintains the bend and encourages the horse to stay connected through the body.

The important point is that the **seat bone isn't creating the canter on its own.**

It is part of a coordinated set of aids that influences the horse's balance and footfall.

When the horse is engaged and in balance, this small change in the rider's seat can be remarkably effective.

Canter to trot

The same principle works in reverse.

In canter, the rider is sitting in relation to the horse's three-beat sequence and leading side.

When asking for the transition back to trot, the rider needs to return to a **more even, square position through the seat bones.**

The rider isn't simply saying:

“Stop cantering.”

Instead, the rider influences the horse to reorganise its footfalls from the three-beat canter sequence back into the two-beat diagonal rhythm of trot.

The seat becomes more symmetrical.

The hind legs remain active.

The rider maintains the connection.

And the horse changes the rhythm without losing balance.

This is a very different feeling from using the reins to simply slow the horse down until it falls into trot.

The crucial condition: engagement and balance

There is, however, an important qualification to this concept.

The horse must be engaged and sufficiently balanced for this communication to work effectively.

Changing the position of your seat bone alone will not magically produce a correct canter transition.

If the horse is running onto the forehand, disconnected through the back or lacking engagement behind, moving one seat bone forward may simply cause the rider to become crooked or the horse to become confused.

The seat bone is most effective when it is influencing a horse that is already **connected, responsive and carrying itself with some degree of balance**.

This is why preparation is so important.

Before asking for the transition, establish the quality of the gait you already have.

Then influence the next step.

Teach this from the very beginning

This is something I believe should be taught **from the very beginning of a horse's education**.

You don't need to wait until a horse is doing advanced dressage to start thinking about footfall, balance and the rider's influence through the seat.

If you're riding a three- or four-year-old, the transitions you teach them today are already laying the foundations for the work you may want to do several years from now.

A young horse learning to respond to a subtle change in the rider's seat, maintain rhythm, stay connected to the aids and reorganise its balance through a transition is learning something much bigger than simply *walk, trot and canter*.

You are teaching the horse to **listen to the rider's body and to change its balance in response to a subtle aid**.

That becomes incredibly important as the level of training increases.

The same principles eventually underpin the more advanced movements.

Passage and piaffe require the horse to have an exceptional understanding of rhythm, balance, weight distribution and the influence of the rider's seat.

The flying changes — and eventually sequence changes — require the horse to respond to very precise changes in the rider's aids and to reorganise its footfall pattern while maintaining balance and straightness.

These things don't suddenly appear when you introduce the movement.

You have been preparing them for years.

The quality of the transitions you teach a young horse can therefore have a direct influence on the quality of its future advanced work.

Don't chase the transition

One of the biggest mistakes riders make is trying to *make* the transition happen.

They use more leg, more rein, more movement and sometimes more speed.

Instead, think about influencing the **next footfall**.

In trot-to-canter, don't think:

“How do I get my horse to canter?”

Think:

“How can I influence the next step so the horse is ready to reorganise into canter?”

Likewise, in canter-to-trot:

“How can I influence the next footfall so the horse returns to the diagonal rhythm while staying balanced?”

This approach creates much smaller and more sophisticated aids.

Balance before movement

This is ultimately what good transitions are about.

The horse doesn't need to be thrown from one gait into another.

It needs to **reorganise its balance so that the new footfall pattern becomes possible.**

The rider's seat bones can play an important role in that communication.

Even and square through the seat bones = trot.

Slightly leading seat bone = canter on that lead.

But these positions should never be viewed as rigid formulas. They are subtle influences that work because they are combined with correct engagement, alignment, rhythm and the other aids.

The more balanced and responsive the horse becomes, the less the rider needs to exaggerate these changes.

Feel the transition rather than make it happen

Ultimately, riding transitions through footfall develops a much more sophisticated feel.

You begin to notice what the horse is about to do rather than reacting after it has happened.

You feel the rhythm.

You feel the weight shifting.

You feel which foot is about to land.

You feel whether the horse is sufficiently engaged to make the next transition.

And then you use your seat, legs and reins to influence that next step.

This is where transitions become so valuable in training.

A good transition isn't simply:

Trot → Canter

or

Canter → Trot.

It is a reorganisation of the horse's balance, posture, rhythm and footfall — influenced by the rider without disturbing the horse's equilibrium.

And importantly, this isn't something we should suddenly introduce when we reach the higher levels.

What you teach your three- or four-year-old today is already setting the horse up for what you will ask of it tomorrow.

Teach the horse to listen to the seat.

Teach it to respond to subtle changes.

Teach it to maintain engagement through transitions.

Teach it to reorganise its balance without losing rhythm.

Then, when you eventually ask for passage, piaffe, flying changes and sequence changes, you're not introducing an entirely new language.

You're simply asking the horse to apply the principles it has been learning since the beginning of its education — with greater collection, strength, precision and expression.

Don't think about simply changing the gait.

Think about influencing the footfall.

That is where the foundation of the advanced work begins.

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