

IMPROVE YOUR CANTER



Article photography © Dana Rasmussen

Follow **Karen Rohlf's** five step plan for fabulous results this summer

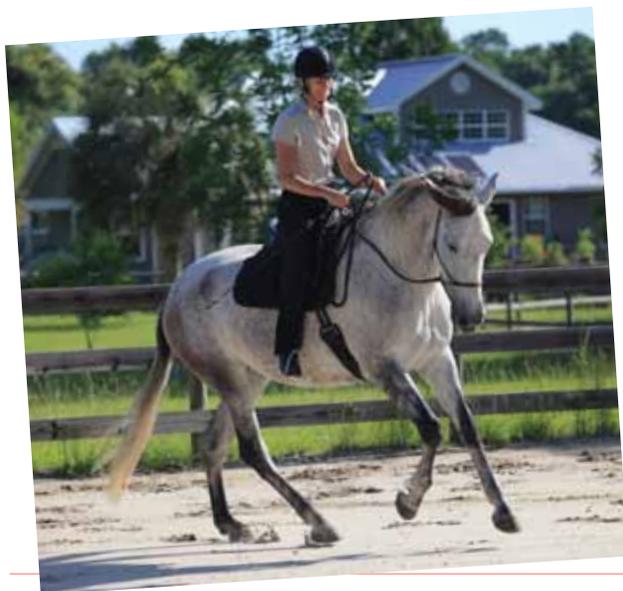
Good canter work can be gymnastically valuable for your horse. In the canter a horse mobilises his back and lumbar-sacral joint more than in any other gait. You may already have noticed that your horse often feels the best at the trot after you do the canter. For many horses the better the canter, the better all the gaits are!

1 Get off his back and off the reins.

Going into jumping position or even posting at the canter is a great way to give a horse's back more room to move. It is also beneficial to the rider as it will make sure you are balanced over your feet and are athletic enough to support your own weight.

The neck is part of the spine so you also want to make sure your horse's neck is free to move. At the very least make sure you are

following the motion of the neck with your hands. Experiment with seeing how much freedom you can give your horse's neck at the canter. If you normally have a lot of tension in the reins it may take a little time before your horse trusts the freedom enough to relax and move through his neck, but it will be worth waiting for. This is a great exercise if you feel like the canter is getting complicated, or if you and your horse feel like you are against each other.



2 Transition Exercise: Canter Recovery.

Transitions are a great way to improve the canter and also to take the qualities that you like from the better gait into the gait you are trying to improve. For example, the trot is typically the easier gait to influence. If your canter is not so balanced, get the best trot you can then transition into the canter, trying to keep many of the qualities you like. Transition back to the trot after just half a circle.

If there are any qualities that you lost while cantering, do your best to set a land-speed record for gaining them back at the trot. Pay attention to what you need to do once you are at the trot. This will be your 'canter-recovery system'. Repeat this pattern and eventually the qualities you have at the trot will carry over into the canter as you and your horse gain balance and coordination. This is a great exercise for a horse whose canter starts OK but gets worse the longer you go.

3 Transitions for strength and suppleness. Different transitions will have different effects on the horse. If you want to improve your horse's strength and balance, you can practice transitions from walk to canter. Make sure you are doing them in a way that you can sit very relaxed and not have to push or beg. You want your horse to carry you up into the canter. Also be aware that your horse doesn't start to run faster at the walk beforehand. He needs to have enough energy (which I define as the willingness to apply effort) and from there you want him to use strength and balance as opposed to momentum. You want to look for the feeling of your horse really using his outside hind leg to clearly start the canter, and that he lightens his front end a little first. Return to a relaxed walk before doing another transition. This is a great exercise for horses who tend to throw themselves or fall or run into the canter.

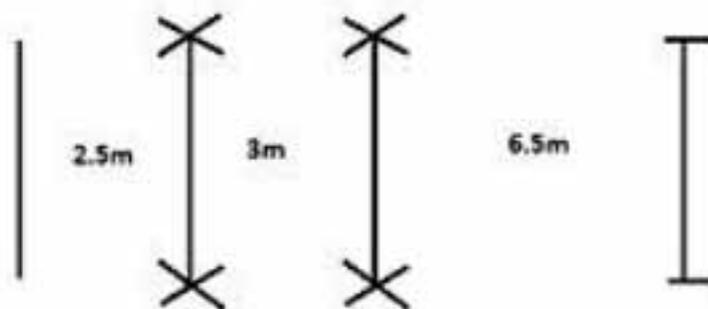
If you want to improve the looseness in your horse's back or his general 'swinginess', then you may want to play with canter - trot transitions. In order to get the benefit you will want to focus on being able to get a clear change of rhythm from one gait to the other without any 'funny steps'. It's less about just getting from one gait to the other; it's more about removing the tension and imbalances during the transition. It's also about finding the best way to sit and give the signal for the transition so your horse does not tighten his back or lose his balance as he goes from one gait to the other. This is a great exercise for horses who need more cadence in their gaits or who tend to tighten their backs in the canter.



4 Jumping and gymnastics. You may have heard your instructor say that your horse 'needs more jump' in his canter. When a horse uses himself gymnastically there is a moment where the front end is naturally more light and a moment where the back end is more light. On beat one of the canter, only the outside hind leg is on the ground and all the others are in the air. On beat three, only the leading front leg is on the ground and all the others are in the air.

Doing actual jumping can help the horse expand his abilities and range of motion. The jumps don't have to be high and you don't even need to be riding your horse to get the benefit. You can send your horse through a gymnastic grid while riding, on line, or at liberty. The most important thing is to adjust the jump to your horse's stride, encourage that he comes into it calmly and straight, then let him figure it out for himself.

Build the gymnastic slowly so he gains confidence. A nice first grid to aim for is illustrated below: A pole to a cross rail bounce to a one-stride. You can build it out from there. This is a great exercise for horses who are sloppy, flat, downhill at the canter, or are slow with their feet.



5 Go for a gallop! Many issues of the canter can be solved by going for a nice gallop. Less motivated horses can become more keen, horses with extra tension get a chance to release some of that excess energy and horses who are more flat and unrhythmic get a chance to find their stride.

Cantering up and down gentle hills can be especially beneficial to help horses find their own balance. This is great for all horses as long as you can make it fun and safe. The idea is for both you and your horse to feel invigorated and relaxed after it.

Incorporate any or all of these into your normal workout schedule. Keep aware of the qualities you are trying to gain as you do each exercise. As always, see if you can make it fun for your horse and his canter will soon be improving!



Never underestimate the potential for things to improve in ways you cannot yet imagine

Karen Rohlf

Karen Rohlf, creator of the Dressage Naturally programme, is an internationally recognised clinician who is changing the equestrian educational paradigm. Karen is well known for her student-empowering approach to teaching, her ability to connect with a wide range of horses, her virtual courses, as well as her positive and balanced point of view.
www.dressagenaturally.net