

Flying Changes

By Danica Yates

The flying lead change is an animated, iconic movement of classical dressage. It can be a tricky movement because it requires precise balance and timing. Let's discuss good preparation for the change, the steps of executing the change and tips on practicing changes.

Before you start schooling changes, it is important that you have the counter canter confirmed. Flying changes are inherently easier for most horses than counter canter. This makes sense because cantering on the inside lead is optimal for balance and most horses will naturally swap leads to maintain balance. Strengthen your horse's counter lead by working the counter canter on shallow, then full serpentine. A good rule of thumb is to be able to go across the diagonal, hold the lead and counter canter a 20 meter circle in good balance before you introduce the change. If you train the lead change first, it will be more difficult to convince your horse to stay on the counter lead and you will run into problems with 'swapping leads' when you did not ask.

Also before executing the actual change, you can practice preparing for the change. Try going across the diagonal and doing a canter to walk transition, moving your horse off the inside leg, then cantering forward on the new lead. This is valuable to teach your horse how to move off your new inside leg. If your horse does not shift his balance to the new outside rein and instead leans on your new inside leg, chances are you will not have a successful change. The horse needs to have freedom on the inside to enable him to step through onto the new lead. This preparation exercise is also valuable because it emphasizes the half halt portion of the change. Performing an engaged downward transition before you ask for the new lead teaches the horse to collect and not run through your hand in the change. And finally, this exercise is valuable because it clarifies the cueing aids for the rider. The aids to cue a lead change are the same as to ask for that canter lead from any gait. It will help the rider be precise in her lead change cue to practice walk to canter thinking of it in substitution of 'canter to canter' (the change!)

The steps to execute the change go as follows: 1. Make sure the horse is off your new inside leg and in your new outside rein 2. Half halt 3. Lighten your hand and switch your legs. Step one may be as pronounced as a step leg yield in the beginning if your horse is tending to lean on your inside leg. Pay attention to the feel in your outside rein- you should have slightly more contact on the outside and a soft feeling on the inside with perhaps slight flexion to the inside. Step two, the half halt balances the horse back onto his haunches and notifies him that something is coming. If the horse is on his forehand, often, the change will be late behind. It is important that the horse carries power in his hind end to jump through in the change. The flying change should be initiated by the new inside leg stepping under. Step three, lighten your hand and switch your legs. Any time after you half halt, you want to soften your hand so that you do not take away from the horse, but balance and encourage moment. With the change in particular, the horse needs a place to move into as you ask for the change. If you are too heavy in your hand, first it is not very encouraging to the horse and further, does not promote 'lift' or expression in the change. You must half halt a stride before, then be soft in the hand as you cue for the change. The cue is the same as telling the horse to canter from the walk- outside leg back, inside leg at the girth and squeeze. Horses become very sensitive to the

feel of your outside leg moving back on their sides and with good training, the cue takes very little pressure from your leg.

Bend should not play a role in good flying changes. A horse should be able to track very straight and not 'swing' in the change. Remember that the bend does not cue the change, the legs cue the change. Starting all the way back in counter canter, you should not have to hold the counter bend to hold the lead. When very first teaching horses counter canter that can be a helpful trick to keep him on the lead, but eventually, your leg position should hold the lead so that you can ride straighter in the neck. When first teaching the horse flying changes, a slight flexion to the inside is helpful to optimize the balance in the outside rein. Flexion is very slight and more of a positioning of the jaw than a bend through the body. The half halt following will be most pronounced on the outside rein, preparing the inside hind leg to jump though.

The quality of the canter is everything going into the changes. If the horse is strung out and flat, the changes will be the same and likely not on the aids. You need to feel 'jump' in the canter and lift in the shoulder. It is important to not get in a hurry and school too many changes without addressing the quality of the canter in between. Transitions forward and back in the canter are a good way to freshen up the gait and reconfirm good, active collection before practicing the movement again. Accuracy should be the focus when learning or training changes. Once balance and straightness are mastered, then you can start to ride them a little bigger.

When practicing changes, mix it up. Ride them on quarter lines, circles, at the beginning of diagonals, etc. Mix in the counter canter. Do not over-school the change. A few good changes, or sets of tempi changes, is all you need in a practice session. It pays off to not drill it too much and get your horse 'skip happy.' Most horses like doing changes so as soon as they are done well, move on with something else for the day. When schooling tempi changes, do not worry initially about the count. What is more important, is setting the horse up and having him optimally balanced and on the aids for the next change. Go across the diagonal and do a change, address the quality of canter and then do another one. There is no need in practice to ask for a change if you know that your horse is not balanced in that moment. Instead, abort the count and set him up for success by achieving balance before you ask.

Flying changes are a blast to ride and fun for the horses too. Be careful to learn this movement correctly and ride to the correct level before attempting them. There is nothing like live instruction to help with the timing of the aids and quality of the canter in learning correct dressage changes.

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