

CANTER BOOT Camp

Fix common canter fails with help from a four-star eventer.

BY NATALIE DeFEE MENDIK

We all dream of riding that perfectly rhythmic, uphill canter. Sometimes, however, the wheels come off and the canter turns into a hot mess. Here, four-star international event rider Leah Lang-Gluscic shares her tips and tricks for conquering common canter problems, whether you ride a greenie or an experienced campaginer.

Back to Basics

As with any training problem, difficulties in the canter may have physical origins. You may need to have your horse checked for saddle fit, dental issues, chiropractic concerns, or a soundness workup by your vet to check for hock and stifle pain, among other potential factors.

Whether you're plagued by a slow, four-beat canter, a fast and flat canter, lead issues, or problems with the depart, you first have to take things back to basics.

"Make sure all of the aids, even at the walk, are working," says Lang-Gluscic.

Start by testing to see if your horse is listening to your leg. "With all of my horses, I have my leg hanging softly by their side," she continues. "I put my leg on the way I want to ask the horse to go forward; if he responds the way I like, he gets a pat. If he doesn't, he gets a spur nudge or the stick behind my leg."

Re-test with a light leg aid again, and if the horse responds appropriately this time, make a big fuss over him. "You have to have the basic expectation: I put my leg on and this is the response I get every time."

Leah Lang-Gluscic rode her OTTB, AP Prime, at the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event in 2016.

Still at the walk, Lang-Gluscic suggests addressing maneuverability with turn on the forehand, turn on the haunches, and shoulder-fore. By being able to move your horse's body both sideways and forward, you'll have greater control over straightness, tempo, and rhythm, all of which help overcome canter problems.

Cue the Canter

Lang-Gluscic asks for the canter with her outside leg slightly back, where it guards the hindquarters from swinging out; a nudge with her inside heel at the girth prompts the canter, allowing the horse to jump

READY FOR DEPARTURE

Getting into the canter on the correct lead with a nice depart is all about having control of the horse's body before and during the transition.

"Any time I get on a horse I don't know, the first thing I'll do is walk a 20-meter circle and yield the shoulder from the outside rein in both directions, so I can place the shoulder both ways," says four-star eventer Leah Lang-Gluscic.

This is a less sophisticated version of a shoulder-in that gets the horse moving his body from side to side, becoming more supple laterally.

"For me, the correct lead is all about the horse's straightness. When the horse's shoulders are in front of his hips, he can actually bring his hind legs up underneath himself in a way that's going to propel him correctly into the canter.

"For example, I have a horse that has a hard time on the left lead, so on a circle at the trot, I'll bring the shoulders out, then in, then out again. As I'm bringing the shoulders in and I feel that he's stepping under with his hind, I'll ask for the canter in that moment.

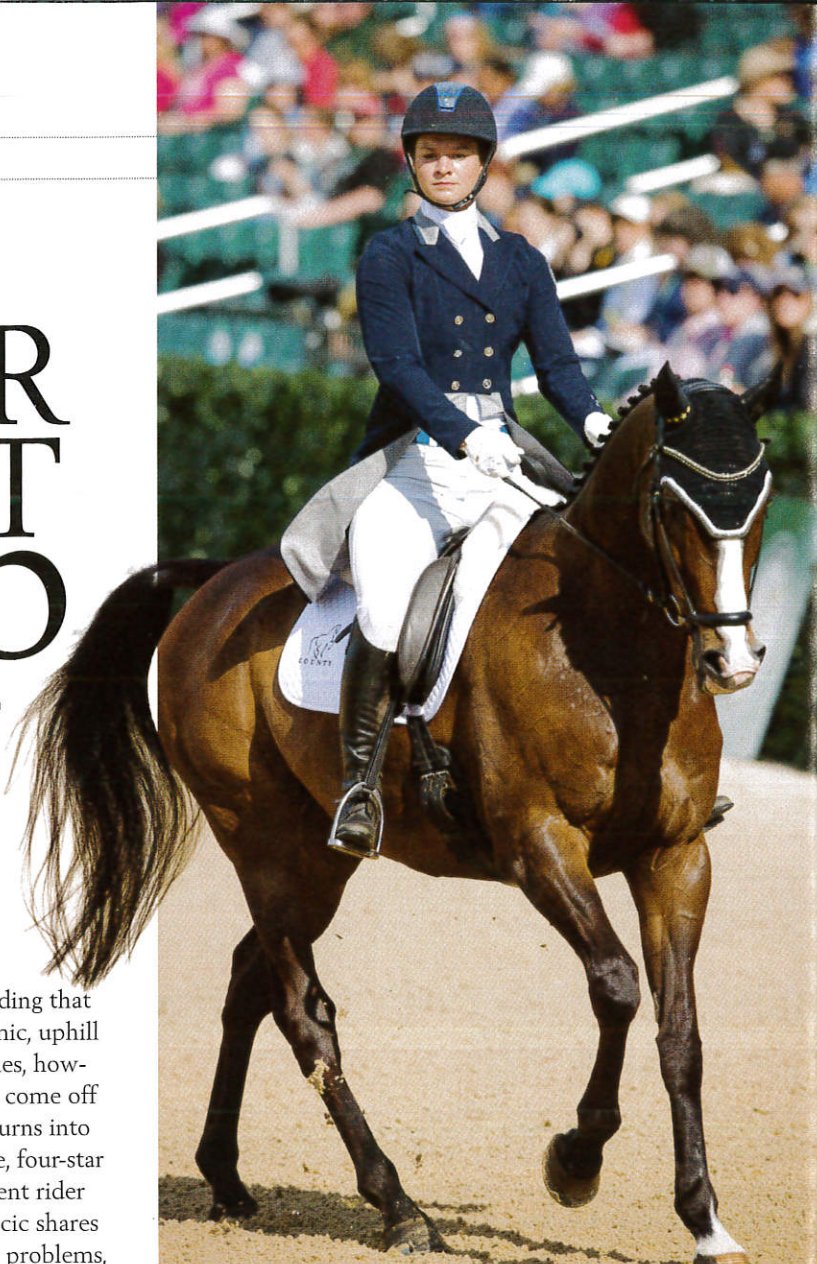
"The lateral work from side to side is what eventually allows us to have the ability to ride our horses straight."

into the gait.

From there, riding a slight shoulder-fore position in canter (a slight bend through the body putting the shoulders just inside the track) helps straightness and engagement.

"Riders often don't keep the horse connected or keep the inside leg closed—there's this moment when they stop breathing and stop riding," explains Lang-Gluscic. "Horses are so in tune that they also freeze and come off the bit. Just by remembering to ride through the transition, you'll have a great result."

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Leah Lang-Glusic shows a quality canter with Secret Storm KD.

Positive Reinforcement

Sometimes you have to keep things really simple to get the basic idea across.

"With a young horse, it may be just about getting that canter the first time, and then making a huge fuss over him like you just went through the finish flags at Rolex," she says.

"Horses feed off that reinforcement. I find when I go back and ask again, they understand and are so much more willing. For the depart with a young horse that doesn't know where his legs are, sometimes I'll trot a small cross-rail and get the canter depart out of that."

Solid Fundamentals

All in all, you can only have as good a transition as the quality of the gait you're starting with, explains Lang-Glusic. If you find your horse is running in the trot before the canter transition, first re-establish a quality trot before you ask for canter again.

"Really make sure the horse is balanced, straight, and responsive to the leg, whether you have a hot horse that needs to become acclimated to the presence of your aids or a dull horse that you have to sharpen up," she says. "Those fundamentals play a role both ways. Without straightness and balance, it's going to be hard to canter anyway, and without being able to place their body, getting the correct lead can be quite difficult."

In Front of the Leg


While a pokey, four-beat canter and a fast and flat canter may seem like opposing problems, they both often have a common source.

"I find the problem is often the same, which is a lack of suppleness," says Lang-Glusic. "I address those problems the same way, which is to lighten my seat. Whether you're in a dressage saddle, jumping saddle, or western saddle, get

up out of the tack and really think about getting the feeling of the horse rolling over his back. That comes from the hind legs. If I have a horse that's

slow and four-beating, my objective is to send the horse forward and get a reaction. If I have a horse that's long and flat, I'll do the same, but my objective will be to get my leg on and a steady, elastic contact with the bit."

This is where establishing your basics in the beginning helps in the long run. "When the horse is responsive to the leg and will let me supple him and work him through his back, he will become looser over his topline and come through from behind," says Lang-Glusic.

With a little targeted riding, your best possible canter is yours for the asking. 

Improving the quality and adjustability of the canter helps with riding jump courses, as well.

SHANNON BRINKMAN

NATALIE DeFEE MENDIK is an award-winning journalist specializing in equine media, whose personal horse passions include dressage and vaulting. Visit her online at www.mendikmedia.com.





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