

FLYING CHANGES

Flying changes are generally no problem for those horses that have a naturally good canter. These horses are already changing leads by themselves as youngsters, as they go forward freely. For other horses, though, learning to make flying changes can be quite difficult.

WHAT DOES A CORRECT CHANGE LOOK LIKE?

The flying change should be developed from an active canter with large, bounding strides. The change takes place during the moment of suspension, when the horse changes both his outside hind leg and diagonal pair (inside hind and outside front) to the new lead. The horse must execute the flying change in a relaxed way, but still thinking forward, reaching for the bit.

To initiate a change, the rider changes the horse's bend slightly at his poll into the new direction, bending the horse only enough to just see the inside eye. The head and neck of the horse should absolutely not be allowed to swing from one side to the other. At the same time, the rider changes the position of his legs. The outside leg, which initially was placed slightly behind the girth slides forward to the girth. The inside leg that was initially on the girth is moved backward to act more strongly and to signal the horse to change leads. Simultaneously with the repositioning of his legs, the rider pushes his new inside hip forward. He also drives the horse forward at this point. His inside hand moves a little forward to the horse's mouth to allow the change to come through.

These aids are given just before the moment of suspension in the canter, or to be more precise, at the moment when the inside hind leg and outside front leg (the diagonal pair) are on the ground. The rein, seat, and leg aids are all given at the same time. The repositioning (change of bend) takes place a moment before the rider's legs are moved and the inside hip is pushed forward. In order to learn the correct timing of the aids, the rider can look at the initial inside shoulder (the inside shoulder before the change). The moment to give the signal for the change is when the shoulder is on its way back.

It is very important that the rider sits quietly, and that he can change the position of his legs without losing control of his upper body. It is a bad fault to swing the torso around, to collapse the inside hip, or to stand in the stirrups.

HOW TO TEACH FLYING CHANGES

It is highly recommended that a rider that is experienced in riding flying changes teaches the young horse how to change. An inexperienced rider should learn how to make changes on an older, experienced horse before he attempts them on a young horse. If the horse has learned to do flying changes in an incorrect way, becomes tense, or is afraid of the movement, it can be hard to correct.

It is not the execution of the flying change itself that takes the skill, it's the preparation. It is important to prepare the horse in such a way that he finds it easy to execute the flying change. When it comes to flying changes it is very important to have all problems and all preparation behind you and only the movement in front of you.

Before starting flying changes, the horse must know how to make reliable canter departs, be confirmed in counter canter with large, bounding strides and be able to do walk-canter transitions. He should also understand the aids for shoulder-in and half-pass.

It is also important for horse and rider to have achieved the following before attempting flying changes:

- The horse is supple and through
- The horse can move straight on straight lines as well as bent tracks
- The rider is in control of the horse's shoulders
- The horse answers the outside leg, as in half-pass
- The horse understands how to answer the half-halt
- The horse can canter in balance and without tension
- The horse has learned through collection to lower the hind quarters
- The horse is working with energy
- The horse can stay centered right under the rider
- The rider understands the aids and has good timing

In a few unusual instances, with very talented young horses ridden by **experienced** riders, it may be possible to start changes at an earlier stage in the education. This is under the condition that the horse can produce a lively, balanced canter, and that the horse changes leads when the rider shifts his weight.

For most horses it is easier to stick with changing in only one direction to begin with. When the

horse understands how to do that, then changes to the other direction can be started. It is also a good idea to begin by making the changes in the same place in the arena. Remember to ride past this spot often without making a change so that the horse doesn't start to anticipate the change. Once the changes are confirmed in this spot, they can be done anywhere in the arena. Avoid making too many changes in a single training session, and give the horse a rest in free walk when you are done with schooling changes for the day.

A good exercise to prepare for changes is riding haunches-in alternating with haunches-out. Transitions from walk to canter are also helpful, especially when the rider gives a stronger than usual signal with his outside leg to draw the horse's attention to it.

There are many different ways to introduce flying changes to the horse. A good way to practice changes in the beginning is by riding from a small circle into half pass toward the track, asking for a change near the track, and immediately using the inside seat bone and outside leg (without collapsing the inside hip) to push the horse forward and slightly sideways back toward the center line in the new direction. When the horse understands how to do this, the changes can be ridden on a straight line.

Making changes from true canter to counter canter is another good way to practice flying lead changes. First decide which direction you want to work on. If, for example, you decide you want to change from left lead to right lead, begin by riding on the left rein on the track and make transitions between walk and canter and walk and counter canter, back and forth until it is easy and consistent. Next, still in left rein, make a left lead canter depart. After the corner (at the beginning of the long side) move the horse a little towards the center line, as in a half-pass, with the horse slightly bent in the direction of movement. About 10 feet inside the track straighten the horse, bend in the new direction and think half-pass to the right, while at the same time asking for a change to the right. Make a transition to walk when the horse arrives at the track. Then once again canter left lead and repeat the whole exercise until you get a good response from the horse.

If the horse wants to run off after the change, move him closer to the centerline so that you have room enough to make a circle to the right toward the wall immediately after the change. Then continue out to the track and make a transition to walk. By working on changes in this way, the horse will have less of a tendency to change on his own when you are riding counter canter. With a horse that has a good counter canter, the changes can be made from counter canter to true canter on a circle.

Regardless of which approach is used to teach the changes, it is important to do them on a straight line as soon as possible.

PROBLEMS AND HOW TO CORRECT THEM

The most common problem is a 'flat' change, lacking impulsion and cadence, with the hindquarters too high. Or the horse resists and throws his haunches sideways instead of remaining straight. Another common problem occurs when the horse does not come through with his hind leg, resulting in the horse cross cantering – the change is not 'clean'.

The first thing to do in these situations is to decide if the horse is far enough along in his education to be ready for changes. If he is, then these problems can be corrected by improving collection so that he steps further under himself with his hind legs in order to lower the hindquarters. The rider should push the horse forward energetically with seat and legs during the change. It is very important that the rider has light hands and that they in no way disturb the horse.

It is very important to achieve good impulsion. If the horse increases the speed a bit when first working on flying lead changes, it doesn't matter too much, as he only does it because he is unsure of himself. However, the horse may also increase the speed when he is on his forehand. In this case the rider should use half-halts to move the center of gravity further back, and then support the horse with his seat and lower back.

If the horse swings his haunches in the change, or if he changes a little late behind, it is a good idea to practice the change along the wall of the arena, from true canter to counter canter. It may be helpful to think of a slight haunches-out throughout this exercise.

Often the rider does not have a feel for how to place the horse's shoulders correctly. It is important to be able to ride on a straight line and then move the forehand slightly (only a few inches) first to one side, then the other, without moving the hind legs off the straight line. While on a circle, the rider should also be able to move the forehand a little bit inside the path of the circle to prevent the horse from leaning on the new inside shoulder in the change.

Nervous horses tend to want to rush away before the change, or to change before the rider asks. When this happens, make a transition to walk. Then pick up the canter again, on the same lead as before, and wait until the horse is calm again before trying another change. Make the next change in a different spot in the arena. When the horse wants to rush his changes, it is often because he is not sufficiently supple or he is not well balanced, or because he does not have enough confidence in his rider.

When a horse swishes his tail during changes, it may be because the rider has used too much spur. It may also be a way for the horse to express his feelings of tension.

Finally, it is important for the rider to proceed with a lot of patience, and not to be afraid at any point to go back to basics.

After schooling changes for a while it is a good idea to pause for a week or two, especially with horses that have a tendency to get nervous.

Have fun!