



SARAH LOVE - TULLOCH ARD

## Following the Horse's Motion - Canter work...

WORDS: NANCY WESOLEK STERRETT - PHOTO: © DEREK O'LEARY

Some riders sit the rocking momentum of the canter with their seat glued to the saddle. Others find their seat slapping against it as each new sequence of canter footfalls begins. Why the difference? One rider is following the horse's motion, the other is not.

Following the motion means that your hips swing in rhythm with the horse's hips as your seat remains in contact with the saddle. Following the motion of the horse is a basic riding skill

you must master before you can correctly apply individual aids and coordinate a group of aids as a corridor of pressures that is clear to the horse. With this skill set, you can influence your horse's speed, direction, and shape in the way you want.

In a 'neutral' position at the halt, your ear, shoulder, elbow, hip and heel should align vertically, perpendicular to the ground. Your spine should be straight and your lower back should neither arch

nor round. Maintaining your upper body in this neutral position as your horse moves at the canter requires swinging your hips in rhythm with the horse's hips.

The canter is a three-beat gait followed by a moment of suspension. The horse's inside hip then outside hip first move down and forward in quick succession as the canter's sequence of footfalls begins. The hips then rise as the horse's hind feet push off the ground and 'hang' in a moment of suspension before the sequence begins again.

Many riders find the canter's rhythm easier to follow with their hips than that of the trot because the canter does not have the bounce of the trot. The swing of your hips as they follow the swing of your horse's hips absorbs the motion and follows it through the sequence of footfalls. This allows your upper body to remain in 'neutral' over the horse's center of gravity. Simply think of sweeping the saddle with your seat in order to find the forward and back swing of the hip at the canter.

You need strong core muscles to lift, swing or tip your hips. If your core muscles are weak, swinging your hips in rhythm with the horse's canter footfalls will be difficult. Do not confuse stiff or tense muscles with strong muscles. Strength is the ability to use a muscle without tension. Strong core muscles can hold your upper body in the neutral position while allowing the muscles moving your hip joints to remain relaxed and flexible so they can absorb the horse's hip movements. When your core muscles are weak, you compensate by tensing other muscles and stiffening joints in an attempt to feel secure in the saddle. Ironically, this tension makes your seat more insecure because it locks your hip joints and makes the necessary swing impossible.

Hollowing or arching your lower back may make you feel like you are swinging your hips properly but you will be unable to maintain your upper torso in its neutral position over your horse's centre of gravity. If you hollow your lower back, your hips will swing, but they will swing too much. Instead of swinging forward from the starting point of the canter's footfalls then back to the starting point at the

end of the sequence, your hip swing will go beyond the starting point to the arch point. You will be pushing or chasing the horse with your seat which makes a horse quicken or rush. You may wind up with lower back pain.

As an exercise to find and feel the upward and downward motion of the horse's hips at the canter, consciously relax your hip and thigh muscles enough to allow your legs to gently lift away from your horse's sides and return without muscular effort on your part. This helps unlock the hip. Go back to frog position and dog position exercises at the halt and walk to help you feel what it is like to open your hip joints. While holding your upper torso in a neutral position, you lift your knees upward into the frog position. For the dog position, lift one leg out to the side away from the saddle, then the other, then both legs. Yoga exercises can help strengthen core muscles while also stretching tight hip and thigh muscles.

When you develop strong core muscles that can hold your upper body in a neutral position while allowing your hip flexors and abductors to remain loose and relaxed so your hips can swing, you can practice regulating your horse's canter rhythm using just your seat. The swing in your hips can either maintain the gait, slow the gait or increase the gait. You use your core muscles to regulate the swing in your hips which, in turn, regulates the gait.

If you are following the horse's motion and simply want to maintain it, no adjustment is necessary. If you want your horse to slow his rhythm, you use your core muscles to reduce the swing of your hips. You can ask the horse to go faster by using your core muscles to hold the upward swing of the hips momentarily.

This helps redirect the horse's energy forward and upward as he springs off the ground.

As you learn to combine your ability to regulate the horse's canter rhythm with the correct application of your aids in corridors of pressures that suggest shapes to the horse, you can eventually ask your horse for rollbacks, side passes, pirouettes, tempi changes, and other advanced movements. First, learn to follow the motion.

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