

Craig Cameron

Double Horn Ranch—The Making of Great Horses & Horsemen

IT'S ALL IN THE TRAINING

How do I get more and better control of my horse? The answer to that question will come back to you as different as the Rocky Mountains are vast and as varied as the temperature across Texas on a February day. In other words, the subject is unending and the answers are many. As always, it depends on the horse, the situation and the circumstances. Success will also depend on the experience and training of the horse and who is at the helm.

Adequately warming up one's horse, however, would always be a primary step in obtaining control in a training or trail riding session. Working from the ground, in the round-pen or on a lunge line first is always recommended. This work should be done smoothly and methodically until your horse has the fresh off, his head down, and putting effort into slowing down. At this time, a great method for developing control from the horse's back is through a methodical routine of transition work.

What are transitions? Transitions are the changes from one gait to another. An example would be to go from a stop to a walk, a walk to a trot, a trot to a canter and so forth. It is amazing how few people use this effective method of developing control. Think about it...most riders saddle up, and then immediately ride-out on the trail or straight into the arena. At this point almost all riders immediately push their fresh mounts right into a canter to *warm-up*. Inappropriately warming up or lack of it, is often-times a recipe for disaster.

This is the point where problems may originate. Almost all riders agree that horses learn from and by repetition. If riders continually and repeatedly canter their horses the first thing each session, what do you think your horse is learning from you? He anticipates that canter, and if he is fresh, many times that canter is going to be fast. When he canters fast, then we pull on our horse. It is quite true, when we press on the accelerator and then immediately put on the brakes the result is contradiction, question, and confusion for the horse. The problem compounds over time. The quick fix much of the time is using a bigger bit which just makes a bigger problem.

Remedy: Transitions

Here is a suggestion of how to use transitions. At the Double Horn Ranch, we always use the round pen to warm up any horse that is green, or has excessive energy. We work from the ground until the horse is relaxed, then we transition to the saddle. It is a standing rule that we always start and end all training sessions with a walk. If you always walk first, that horse expects, and in my opinion, looks forward to and enjoys that beginning walk. The walk may only last a couple of minutes, but what I am looking for is that horse to relax and walk out on a loose rein.

The walk is where I flex my horse's head to the right and left as well as vertically. Remember, although we start at a standstill, a lateral and vertical flexion are not much good if you cannot do them while the horse's feet are moving. This walk and flex exercise is a super warm up routine that will give you both, position and control with all your horses down the trail. Remember,

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flexibility gives you position, and position gives you control. When horse and rider are walking nicely, that is when I recommend transition to a controlled trot.

I believe the trot is the true training gait of the horse—not too slow, not too fast. At the trot, I also practice my flexion exercises; right, left, and in the vertical position. While trotting, do not forget to use your legs. Gentle hugs or squeezes for speed control and the position that you want. You must have your horses broke in the belly. This means, accepting your leg queues, without speeding up, or being scared. If done softly and slowly each day, almost all horses will get used to and understand leg pressure. I work at the trot until my horse trots soft and on a loose rein.

At this point, you might think we are ready to move into the canter. There is no exact procedure, but you might try this first. Transition your horse to a fast trot before cantering. Posting the trot will help to achieve the transition from a moderate trot to a fast trot. Do not be in a hurry. Allow your horse to trot for a while. I like to fast trot until I feel I have to push my horse to maintain a fast controlled trot. Listen to your horse, and adjust to the situation from session to session. Be patient and your horse will get better and begin to listen to your queues.

Notice when your horse is trying to put effort into slowing down; reward him with softness and a pat on the neck. Ask any experienced rider; it is a heck of a lot easier to speed up a horse than it is to slow one down. Now gently transition to a slow trot, stop posting and sit down. Slow your body and sit back. You will be amazed how well your horse will respond. He will want to slow down. This is a good time to collect your horse and really slow his feet to find that Hollywood trot. Give your horse time to find that feel and when he does carry it for a while then transition.

It is best to move or transition to a slow canter, but never canter without asking for a particular lead. Ideally, if you are traveling left, ask for a left lead. Sit deep, sit back, sit slow, and do not lean. You can work on circles, big and small, or straight lines; it is all about control.

If your horse rushes, check him up and immediately release. Remember, queues should only last one second. Keep that lope soft and when he is loping slow on a loose rein, then transition.

Lean forward, move your hands toward his ears and ask for a fast lope. You can ride circles or just ride the rails in straight lines. Do not be any more aggressive than required. Let the horse tell you how much or how little it takes to achieve this fast lope. Do not ride too fast or too long and now transition. Remember, there is not a set pattern.

If your horse was very aggressive, maybe transition from the lope to a walk. Perhaps you have enough control to move from a fast lope to a slow canter, it is your choice. Maybe you decided to switch gears from the fast lope to a slow trot again it is your choice.

That is what is so great about transition work. You dictate the pace. You determine the speed. Transitions, when done correctly, over a period of time, give you control. The horse accepts the queues, accepts the pace and believes in you as the leader.

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It is really quite simple, and very natural. For instance, walk, slow walk, trot, fast trot, slow trot, slow canter, slow walk, real slow walk, canter, fast canter, slow canter, walk, stop, back, and stop.

When we practice transitions, this natural sequence of events will give us incredible control and unity with our equine partners. They accept us as the herd leader and over time and repetition, learn what we want, when and where to go, and do it at the speed we request.

As usual, be patient with your horse, and be patient with yourself. Great horsemanship takes time and remember going from beginning to winning, is a transition all its own.

—*Craig Cameron*