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Influencing Leads Over Fences

By Katharine Lark

Look in the direction of your next fence, which will shift your weight slightly as you apply the aids for a change of lead.

You can influence the lead on which your horse will land over a jump just as you influence which lead he will take in a canter depart. Every course of jumps you face will contain turns into fences and into lines.

Here are some schooling exercises that can dramatically improve your leads over fences. Before trying the following exercises, you must first be able to strike off on either lead on the flat, with your horse fully understanding your aids.

Start on a Circle

To begin your in-flight influence, place a single jump pole on the ground on the track of a large circle. Be sure the footing is good all the way around.

Establish a quiet canter on the circle. Just canter over the pole, in stride, each time you come to it. Sit very still and do not try to jump the pole. Let your horse approach it at the same pace he is using on the rest of the circle. Stay soft in front, with a quiet, supporting outside rein and a spongy, elastic inside rein. Hold his lead and his bend by keeping your outside leg back, inside leg at the girth and active, and your inside shoulder back.

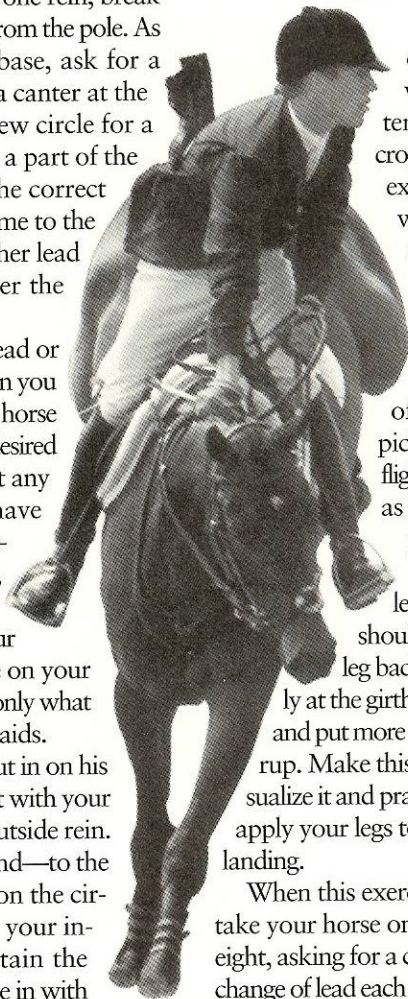
As you canter-step over the pole, add a little extra weight to your inside stirrup and squeeze your inside rein to tell the horse to "land" on that lead.

After some circling on one rein, break to a trot about six strides from the pole. As your horse reaches the base, ask for a change of direction and a canter at the same time. Canter the new circle for a while, taking the pole as a part of the track and maintaining the correct lead. Then once again come to the trot and change to the other lead with a canter depart over the pole.

If you get the wrong lead or have a change of lead when you do not want it, bring your horse to a trot and establish the desired lead at the canter without any punishment. You may have done something that shifted your horse's balance, causing him to change his lead. Become aware of your position and its influence on your horse so that you will ask only what you intend through your aids.

If your horse tries to cut in on his circle, move him back out with your inside leg, not with the outside rein. Keep his flexion—his bend—to the inside. If he swings out on the circle, put more weight on your inside seat bone to maintain the bend and ask him to come in with your outside leg.

Figure Eight



When the single pole exercise has been going well, change your center obstacle to a small crossrail. Repeat the circle exercise on one rein for a while, then the other at canter with the figures including the crossrail. Now, when you come to trot to change direction to the other half of the figure eight and pick up a canter, do it in flight over the crossrail. Just as before, simply change your body position—from left lead to right lead, you pull your right shoulder back, pull your left leg back, place right leg actively at the girth, touch your inside rein and put more weight in your right stirrup. Make this change all at once (visualize it and practice in your mind) and apply your legs to keep the canter upon landing.

When this exercise is going smoothly, take your horse onto a continuing figure eight, asking for a change of direction and change of lead each time you jump the cross

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rail with no break to trot. For this work, you will maintain your bend, position, and pace all the way round the circle, jump the center of the crossrail and, during that moment of flight, instantly change your aids to land on the other lead. Then ride the circle on the other rein, coming to the center point, where you change your body in flight to land on the other lead again.

When this goes well, you can add two more crossrails directly across from the center of the figure, one jump at the far side of each circle. Now, you'll keep the same lead over the outside jumps and change the lead over the center one.

Remember to point your chest in the direction you want your horse's chest to point and look up and in the direction you will go as you take the jumps.

Jump a Serpentine Line

If you have the room, set some jumps on a huge serpentine. Ride this exercise like a figure eight at canter, changing leads over the fences and riding a few circles each time at each end.

You can now add width and height to the fences while you ride calmly to them as obstacles within the line or track of your figure. Wait for your horse to close your angles as he lifts his forehead up to jump. Remain soft in front, use an appropriate release, and keep calf contact at all times. Your deep heel will secure your base.

These exercises are good for a horse that has lead problems because the act of jumping, actually a large canter stride in itself, adds enough suspension of stride to allow that change to take place. Unlike a canter depart, which takes place on the flat from the haunches, a change over a fence takes place with the leading forefoot striking the ground first. This can help a horse who is not quite balanced in his flying changes avoid a cross canter (one lead in front, the other lead behind).

No matter what your goals, this work will help polish your communication skills with your horse and, in turn, polish his performance. ■

Katharine Lark has taught riding for over 30 years in Virginia, Florida, and Colorado. She now lives in New Mexico and does her teaching with a pen, writing for several national horse magazines.