

Hi, I'm in the process of teaching my horse counter canter but I'm really struggling to keep him balanced around the short sides. Do you have any ideas that might help?

Counter canter is often made harder than it needs to be, especially when it crops up in a test. Why they stick it on the end of a diagonal and then expect you to either ride a transition or wobble your way round the short side I have no idea!

There is a post on the blog about counter canter which is well worth a read - <http://www.schoolyourhorse.com/2011/03/19/counter-canter-the-easy-way/>

The first thing you need to do is teach your horse left and right canter aids. (There's more detail here - <http://www.schoolyourhorse.com/2011/06/25/canter-wrong-legwrong-aid/>) Forget about true canter or counter canter and start to think of it as left or right. Work on the centre line initially. Asking on a straight line means your horse has to pay more attention to your aids – and you have to make sure to give them clearly. Once you can get the correct strike off move on to asking at the start of a long side. Focus on the transition. Ask for both leads and just canter for four or five strides. Leave the corners for another day.

A really important part of it too is to work with your horse straight. Forget about bend until your counter canter is well established. Any amount of bend to the leading leg can cause a lot more friction than it's worth. It's the number one cause of trouble on the corners. Even with true canter the amount of bend is what causes most trouble. Less is definitely more!

Once you can get either leg on either rein you can introduce circuits of counter canter. At this stage it's all about distance. Short unbalanced bursts are of no benefit. Treating it as if it's a normal easy pace is what will make your horse settle far quicker.

The key problem areas are the change into counter canter and the short sides. The change from true to counter canter is to be avoided at all costs until your horse can balance. Just go straight into it. Either from walk or trot – whichever your horse finds easier. Ask at the start of a long side so he has time to settle before you get to the short side.

The way to introduce corners in counter canter is by cutting them. Make the turns as shallow as you can. Almost ride a diagonal to A/C and out again. The shallower the angle the easier it is for your horse to adjust. When he can counter canter round the school as if he's in true canter (and he will) you can start to make your corners more noticeable. You can also increase the amount of bend he has around your inside leg.

Rider faults to be aware of –

1. Opening out the inside rein to 'draw' the horse round the corner. Don't do it! This allows your horse to fall in on the corner. He'll lose balance as all his weight drops onto his inside front shoulder and either break or go dis-united. Ride the corners as you would in any pace. Keep your hands at the same

- height, as far apart as the width of your horse's mouth and keep the contact even in both hands. If you stay the same and keep his shoulders together he'll stay calm and that will help his balance too.
2. Sliding to the inside. It's so important that your seat stays central in the saddle. Sit down as heavy as you can to help your horse. Tipping forward or lightening your seat will make you tighten your muscles. He'll do the same and that will make it much harder for him. Keep your seat as relaxed as possible. Almost 'slump' your way round the corner and you'll find it makes a huge difference.
 3. Don't look down! It's the worst possible thing you can do. Look up and around the short side as if you were in true canter. Treat it as if it's easy and completely normal and your horse will do the same. If you do look down it's always to the outside. As your head tips down to the outside you can guarantee your seat will slip to the inside.

The most important thing to remember with counter canter is that it's just another pace. Don't put it on a pedestal and think of it as difficult and you'll find it much easier to do. Your horse takes his lead from you. Show him it's nothing to get uptight about and you'll find wobbly corners are soon a thing of the past.

Good luck and enjoy your schooling. Lorraine.

For all the dressage enthusiasts out there I have a new 99p schooling guide out now. Prepare to Improve Your Score shows you how to find every extra mark possible by learning, reading and practising your test as you never have before! Check it out here - <http://www.schoolyourhorse.com/shop/syh-books/get-started-3-prepare-to-improve-your-score/>

'Get in Touch'

If you have any questions or would like help with your horse don't hesitate to contact me on lorraine@schoolyourhorse.com or you can now upload a video on the forum under "Show and Tell".

<http://www.schoolyourhorse.com/forum/?mingleforumaction=viewforum&f=17.0>

It doesn't have to be a perfect film – prop your mobile on the ménage fence and hit play – you'd be amazed what can be seen from a few minutes of film.