

As you and your pony progress in your riding and training, and perhaps begin showing or competing for the first time, the whole issue of 'canter leads' and even 'counter-canter leads' will come into play. Six legs between horse and rider are an awful lot of limbs to keep track of...but according to Michelle O'Neill from Cherry Tree Equine, the secret to correct canter leads is to **KEEP CALM and CANTER ON!**

Hi Michelle,

My name is Renae and I am having trouble seeing which leg I'm on when I canter. My instructor says 'just look down', but when I do this, I get the feeling I'm going to fall off! Do you have any tips to help me?

Hello Renae

The feeling of 'falling' when you look down from a horse is very common in young riders when they first begin to canter, so you're not alone. You are already busy trying to develop a strong seat, hold your hands still, be aware of what your horse is doing, watch where you are going, and work out what canter lead you are on...and all while trying not to fall off at the same time! It is hard work and a lot to remember! But the good news is that with practice, things will get easier.

What I recommend you do is to learn to 'watch your horse's shoulder' whilst still holding your head up. I am guessing you already know about your trot diagonals? If you do, you will be used to watching for the shoulders of your horse to 'move' or 'rise' so you can check which diagonal you are on. So keep practicing that, but don't forget to hold your head up (always looking up and ahead of you) and only move your eyes to briefly watch the shoulder.

Once you have perfected checking your trot diagonal in this way (you can get somebody to watch you ride, to see if you are getting your diagonals consistently correct), then see if you can do it at the canter. If you are riding to your right (so in a clockwise direction) your horse's right shoulder should be leading the canter and his right hip should feel like it is slightly towards the inside of the circle. Riding to your left - so in an anti-clockwise direction - your horse's leading shoulder would be the left shoulder and his left hip will



Photo by Karl-Heinz Frierer

In this photo, dressage superstar Ingrid Klimke and her horse Dresden Man are pictured during a left lead canter when the inside hip is slightly to the inside of the circle.

be slightly inside the circle. Always remember to sit deep in your saddle. Because as you become a better rider, it actually becomes your seat and not your eyes that will tell you what canter lead you are on.

This is what we horse people call 'feel'. Feel is probably the most important thing you will ever learn as a horse rider; and all great riders, no matter what discipline they ride in, have great feel, in both their seat and their hands, and an experienced understanding of how their horse is working and moving beneath them.

If you are still having trouble seeing your lead and/or balancing your seat, perhaps ask your instructor to lunge you at the canter, so you can focus on your 'feel'. This way, you don't have to worry about where your horse is going, but you can simply focus on the canter lead and your seat. Obviously, make sure that both the person lunging you and the horse you are riding are experienced and that they are both willing to help you achieve your goals. Good luck and 'keep on cantering' Renae!



Rising as the outside leg rises - and 'dropping' when the outside leg drops' - is a great way to remember your diagonals



Here Michelle rides 'Te' on a left circle, trot diagonal, so she sits as his outside leg hits the ground, which a rider will see as the horse's outside shoulder dropping slightly on that stride

Dear Horsewyse,

I was wondering if you could help me and my 13hh 15yo gelding, Casper. I have had Casper for 1 year and 5 months and we make a great team but my main problem is show jumping. Casper's old owners were very competitive showjumpers and taught Casper to go fast around the course. I have lost my confidence when jumping him because he was taught to go fast and I want to go at my pace...which is not necessarily THAT fast. Casper doesn't do anything naughty - he is just a very keen showjumper and I have lost my confidence. I was wondering if you could give me some tips on how to get my confidence back when show jumping. Thankyou for your time, Pippa

Hello Pippa,

Losing your confidence is something that lots of people go through at some stage in their riding career. We are all scared of things we can't control, it's just that in your case it happens to be your horse on a show jumping course!

Something you don't mention is if Casper travels too fast for you at other times or if it is only when you are jumping. I am assuming that he is well behaved normally, but that he gets excited at the thought of jumping!

You need to get yourself back in a position where you feel like you are in control. I am a big believer that confidence comes through control and control comes through consistency. Consistency means asking our horse for the same reaction to the same request every time.

For you to increase the control you have over Casper, you will have to be consistent. I have an exercise that I use a lot to help with this; I let my horses travel on a loose rein at the speed I want them to travel. The instant they go one stride faster than what I want them to, I will ask them to do a one rein stop (we covered this in Autumn 2011 issue of HW). I do this at the walk, the trot and, when they are ready, the canter.

Another great exercise to use is to go from a big circle to a small circle and asking your horse to slow his pace as he makes the smaller circle. If you ask your horse to canter on at a nice forward pace (like you would when you were on a show jumping course) on the big circle and then sit down deep in the saddle and ask your horse to slow down on the small circle, you are teaching Casper to slow down when you want.

To help you get your confidence back, I would then use these two exercises on a show jumping course. You will need to practice this in a non-competition environment, where you can take as much time as you need to use your two new tools.

Ask Casper to go around the course at a comfortable canter. As soon as you feel him start to speed up, sit down and ask him to canter a small circle and then let him canter off again. Every time he gets too fast, just repeat the exercise.

If Casper speeds up and you feel uncomfortable and not in control, then take control of the situation again by doing a one rein stop. As soon as he is calm, ask him to canter off again.

You may need to repeat both of these exercises lots of times before you feel you are in control enough to take Casper to a competition situation. But remember the foundation that you are laying down now with Casper is a long term project; the better the job you do getting back to basics and re-building your confidence, the longer you will be able to reap the benefits of your hard work.



Photo by Andrew Hennell

michelle o'neill



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