



BORROW A TRAINER

Working toward a high-quality lead change.

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with Christine Hamilton

TO GET A HIGH-QUALITY LEAD CHANGE THAT IS PRETTY AND simultaneous, you have to pay attention to positioning, pace and timing.

I always want my horse to get his body in the right position before the lead change and hold that position until I ask for the change.

For a lead change, you don't have to worry about the hips as much as you have to worry about the shoulders and the rib cage. If your horse is on the right lead, what has to happen for him to change leads smoothly is the left shoulder has to get out of the way and his rib cage must move away to open up a space for the hind leg and front leg to come through.

You also have to go at the pace that is easiest for your horse to change leads. If you're just starting out working with a horse on lead changes, that ideal pace is usually faster than what you want to show at. But if you make it easier on the horse at first and have that little extra speed or extra pace, the lead change will get easier for him. Once you get him broke or to a certain point in his training for the lead change, then you can slow him down.

If you try to go too slowly at the beginning, it usually doesn't work, because it's too hard. To change leads, the horse has to have lift and engagement from behind, and you need pace to get that. It's a higher degree of difficulty to get engagement and lift at a slower pace.

Timing is what you have to have, as the rider. Timing is when to ask the horse to change leads, when to push the buttons saying "change leads now." You either naturally have it or you have to develop it.

What I try to do is as his feet go down, I ask him to change leads so he comes up on the other lead. I try not to ask for the change when his feet are coming up. It's a feel thing: The more you practice it, the more you get that timing down and the easier it is.

Common Problems

ONCE HORSES START CHANGING LEADS, THEY START TO THINK, "I'm ready to change, ready to change, ready to change," and anticipate too much. But a really good lead changer waits for your cue. That's what the Harley D Zips and Majestic Scotches do, they wait as long as you want, holding that position, until you give the cue.

That's why you get such a high-quality lead change, because the horse is patient and obedient. He'll hold that position until you can go in with the right timing to ask him to change leads.

If your horse leans into a lead change – say he's on the right lead, he leans to the left to change – he can change leads, but it's not pretty. When he leans, he's on the forehand, and he has to lift his shoulder up first to change. But if his body is in the right position, he can flow straight through the change with engagement behind.

A lot of people lean into the change, too; they want to use their upper bodies to change and almost throw the horse into it. Eventually, that will work, but it won't be a quality lead change, and it won't be pretty. You have to sit up and have the lead change come from underneath you, from your seat and your leg.

What to Do

TO PUT MY HORSE IN THE RIGHT POSITION, I USE TWO HANDS.

If we're on a right lead wanting to change to the left, I lift my left rein and put his head a little bit to the left – the direction we are going to go. I use my left leg to push his rib cage to the right in a slight arc, so his body is moving out of the way, and I ask him to hold, hold, hold that position. Then I release my left leg and ask for the change with my right leg at the spot I want the change.

From a left lead to the right, it's the opposite: right rein to put his nose to the right, right leg moving the rib cage left,

hold, hold, hold, release your right leg and ask for the change with your left leg.

When you pick up your rein, be sure to keep driving your horse forward to keep your pace.

As you lift your rein, think about taking it up toward your opposite shoulder, but adjust your reins so you don't cross the line of his withers with your hand. You don't want his head turning; just tip his nose in the direction you're going to change. You want to get his shoulder out of the way.

Ride a Big 'X'

I USUALLY WORK ON LEAD CHANGES JUST RIDING A BIG "X" IN THE arena, coming across the diagonals. You can use cones in the corners to help you stay on track where you want to go.

1. I start out working on positioning. Again, riding with two hands. I establish a steady pace just loping in the arena. Then I work a on a big X in the arena, coming across the diagonals.



If you start on the right lead, as you come across the diagonal, toward the middle of the arena, ask your horse for the position for a left lead change and ask him to hold it for a few strides. Then release him without asking for the change. Continue across the diagonal and go on around keeping that right lead on a counter-canter. As you come back across the diagonal, do the same thing and ask for the position for a left lead change in the middle of the diagonal, then continue across still on the right lead.

I'll do that a time or two, and then turn around and do the

same thing on the left lead, asking for a right lead change position. All I want to do is work on getting my horse's body into that position.

This is a good exercise for a green horse just learning lead changes. You're just asking him to get in that position and accept it. I never ask for a change until my horse accepts and relaxes in the correct position.

It can also be really good for a finished horse that knows how to change leads, to teach him patience to wait and relax.

The counter-canter works to help him move off your inside leg.

2. Once your horse understands the position and is relaxed holding it until you release, then ask for the change across the middle of the diagonal.

First get your pace. Then start thinking about how you are going to get to your position.

If you are on the right lead as you begin the diagonal, look up toward that cone at the end of the diagonal and sit up. As you come across the middle, lift your left rein, don't lose your pace, push your left leg in, think one, two, three and then change – release your left leg and ask for the change with your right leg.

Everything else stays the same all the way through the lead change, your hand and your position: Don't drop your hand when you change leads and don't lean with your upper body.

Continue on across the diagonal on the left lead and come back around to do a change again, back to the right lead. Really concentrate on the position. If you don't get it, or he trots or stops, re-establish your pace and try again.

Remember, if you ask a horse to go too slowly through a lead change, too soon, you'll make him anxious. Let him go forward and learn to relax as he learns the body position. When I first start changing leads on a horse, sometimes I'm almost galloping around the X.

As your horse understands what you're asking, eventually you want to use less cues. Try using less hand first. My legs work constantly when I'm changing leads. I never use less leg until he gets really solid and relaxed with what I'm asking.

And work on your timing. Once you get the position down and the cue to change, start thinking about where you want to start to ask your horse for the position, so you can time the change at the spot you want. ■

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