

TIPS FOR TRANSITION WORK

Learn to use half halts and make transitions work in your training.

By: Susan Dutta.

I use transitions to make each of my horses stronger, to work through his problems and, in the end, to make him a better ride. Transitions simply require excellent communication between horse and rider. The value of transition work is twofold: Transitions benefit both training and test results so they are incredibly important in daily training.

Here's how to ride a transition well: First, half halt. Close your fingers on either your outside rein or both reins, depending on your horse. Close both legs on your horse's sides and sit up straight and a little deeper in the saddle. Think of shifting your horse's weight backward by resisting slightly in your back and seat, without pulling on the reins. Keeping your legs on and your upper body straight, soften your reins and allow his energy to go forward. The goal is to lighten his front end by shifting his weight backward to his hind end. The half halt makes the horse balance himself for the change of gait. Next, give the aids for the transition, and then soften and reward if the horse responds well. If he does not, patiently repeat the above until you get the response you want.

Horses come in all forms: strong, hot, lazy, responsive or a combination. Decide what transition work is best for your horse's personality. For example, with hot and strong horses, ride trot-halt and trot-walk transitions to encourage him to engage his hindquarters and lighten in front. Mixing trot-halt and trot-extended walk work also will help relax a hot, strong horse. A sensitive horse usually responds well to trot-canter, canter-trot exercises that also alleviate tension

Transitions within the canter are my favorite exercises. When I canter my horses, I never think about the actual movements. I just think about how to make those movements very rideable. First, I canter forward until the horse is round and through. Then I begin a few steps of collected canter and after a few strides, transition to working canter. I repeat this often. Once my horse has mastered this exercise, I try going from collected canter to a pirouette canter and back to collected canter, making sure the horse remains soft and light in the bridle. I add medium or extended canter to change pace. Then I add more complex movements to my workout. Here's a series of transitions that will keep your horse waiting for your next command. Begin at collected canter on the short side. As you come out of the corner, ask for four steps of pirouette canter, then transition back to collected canter. Follow this with a shoulder-in to half pass. Remember that it will take the horse several transitions before he is accurately on the aids. Don't punish him if he doesn't obey immediately. Repetition will solve most problems. Reward your horse when he responds correctly.

Now that you've done the training, bring your program of transition training to the show. I use my transitions in every warm-up on every horse I ride, and the horse focuses on me rather than on distractions. When he engages his hindquarters and softens in the bridle, I know my chances of riding a nice test are good. I continue to use transitions around the ring before I enter. Make transitions a big part of your training. Use them every day and on show day.

Susan Dutta is a USDF gold medalist and a Grand Prix competitor with recent successes at the USET Festival of Champions and World Cup Qualifying Classes. She has been the reserve member of the U.S. team for the Pan American Games in 2003 and 2007. She trains at her farms in Brewster, N.Y., and Wellington, Fla.