

BORROW A TRAINER

You're Never Too Good to Go *Back to Basics*

Lesson Eight: Downward transitions

**By AQHA Professional Horseman Andy Moorman
with Christine Hamilton**

DOWNWARD TRANSITIONS ARE A SOFTENING OF THE RIDER, NOT an increase of backward pressure. You have to get yourself in the right position (seat, leg and hands) but then you just get softer as you ride forward into a lesser gait or stop.

It's like easing up on the accelerator but not hitting the brakes; instead, you keep the back wheels coming. If you hit the brakes, the weight goes onto the front end, the back end starts to fishtail, and you lose control.

In a good downward transition, the horse's head and neck will stay balanced and his poll soft. He sort of compresses himself from the back end, lowering his back end, keeping his front in balance. For the transition to be smooth and maintain rhythm, the hind legs must stay up under the horse, and the horse must not be forced onto the forehand.

A lot of people don't understand that downward transitions are done with the seat and the leg and very little rein. You have to use rein correctly, but the rein is the least important part. It's the seat and the rhythm.

Keep your body weight centered. Tell the horse to transition

downward with the pelvic bone of your seat – that's all that moves. Your seat bones sit deeper, your legs go deeper, and your legs should close on the horse to keep his hind legs coming forward.

When you're learning your transitions, go slowly. Start with working on "walk to stop," then gradually move up to "trot to walk," "canter to trot" and "canter to walk." When you're making good downward transitions, the horse will feel light to your hands, because he has to be in good self-carriage to do them.

Common Problems

THE BIGGEST THING PEOPLE DO WRONG IN ANY DOWNWARD transition is to stand up and pull. That's what people tend to do when they get panicky. They either push up off the horse and get forward, or they lean back and pull on the reins and tend to stand up as they lean back.

Any time you pull back on a horse's face, it's his natural response to take a shorter step behind. When you lean back and stand up and pull on the horse's face, it hollows the



ILLUSTRATION BY JEAN ABERNETHY

1. The rider's backward pull on the reins causes the horse to raise her head and hollow her back. When that happens, she can't step deeply under herself with her hind legs in order to keep her front end up and maintain self-carriage.

2. The rider's shoulders are slightly raised as his elbows come too far back. Taking his weight above the horse lessens her response from behind.

3. The rider's pelvis is tilted forward at top, taking his seat bones off the horse's back. That causes the horse to hollow her back instead of lifting it.

4. The rider braces against the stirrups, with his feet and legs going forward. It changes his balance and makes him have a tendency to stand up and off the horse's back. That also causes the horse to drop her back and leave her hind legs behind her.

horse's back, and he can't get his hind legs under him. He will immediately go on the forehand and resist because you're pushing him out of balance.

In response, sometimes horses throw their heads down; sometimes they throw their heads up. Regardless, they lose the carriage of their shoulders and forehand. Then they can't make a nice downward transition and will just push through the reins.

Even though a horse's head is up he can still be on the forehand. His head up or down doesn't have anything to do with him being on the forehand – it's where his body weight is.

What To Do

Use the correct aids

Seat: You have to sit in the center of the horse. Think about your seat bones as if they are two sled runners. When you cue for the downward transition, you slide those sled runners down into the horse's back, from back to front, like brakes. So the lower part of the pelvis where the seat bones are comes forward, and the top part of your pelvis tips back.

As you slide those sled runners down, you let your centered body weight keep coming straight down on the horse. The back needs to be straight, not leaning forward or back. Don't

RIDER'S TIP: FINDING THE CORRECT DIAGONAL

I make all my riders (English and western) practice going from a canter to a posting trot. If you do it in rhythm, while maintaining the proper arc in the horse, you will always come up on the correct diagonal.

I have them say out loud the rhythm of the canter stride — “bumpity-bumpity-bumpity” — then say “Sit, post.” At the “sit,” they just deepen their seat and let the horse push them up into the posting trot, while they simply steady the rein with no “take-back” at all.

If the transition is performed nicely, they'll always come right up on the correct diagonal. But you can't do it at all if you pull on the reins; you've got to ride it from your seat.

It helps people start to associate the rhythm of a gait with where the horse's feet are. It's also a good exercise to practice without reins, on a longe line.

collapse or slump: Keep your ribcage up and sit up straight.

When you slide your seat bones into the horse's back and keep your body straight, from the side your body will look like a little “j”.

Legs: As you sit, you lengthen your leg down and close it softly. It's “sit, close.” That way you keep forward motion all the way through the transition, with the hind legs still coming under.

It's different from a spur stop; you don't raise your heels and poke with a spur. You just close your legs down and in, and soften your body, to soften the transition.

Reins: Don't pull back on the reins; it ruins the horse's forward motion. Instead, take the reins forward and up, just a hair. Keep very light contact with the horse's mouth, almost only the weight of the reins. It helps balance the

horse. The hands go forward and lift up a little so the horse feels the weight of the rein and knows to give at the poll.

Think of the reins not as producing the slow down but as keeping the head from falling forward and down. The reins help the head stay in place, balanced and soft; but it's the body that slows down.

Release your breath

AS YOU START THE DOWNWARD TRANSITION, TRY LETTING your own breath out. Say out loud the gait you want, and slowly let your air out as you say it: “Joooooog,” or “Troooooot.”

That helps you settle down on the horse. Yes, the horse hears it, but what's important is that letting your air out lets your body relax. When we want to do something, especially if we're worried about it, we often hold our breath, and that makes us stiffen. That affects how the horse performs and responds.

Speak the rhythm

I ALSO HAVE MY STUDENTS SPEAK THE GAIT OUT LOUD. FOR example, if they are cantering and want to drop down to a trot, I have them say “Canter, canter, canter” with the stride, and then “Trot, trot, trot,” in the exact same rhythm.

By learning to stay in rhythm with your horse, you will be able to ask for the downward transition in rhythm, so the horse's weight-bearing legs are in the proper position for him to be able to make the transition when you ask.

If you're relaxed and saying it out loud, you maintain the rhythm in your mind, and you automatically use your legs and seat correctly.

Practice without using reins

IT'S HARD TO REALIZE YOU CAN STOP A HORSE BY SIMPLY SITTING down and balancing the reins.

A good way to practice is to have someone longe you while you ride, so you can make downward transitions without reins. Hold your hands in correct riding position and work off your seat and leg.

You can also tie your reins in a knot and drop them while you ride in an arena or a round pen. Pick a time when your horse is warmed up and settled and try downward transitions



Jessica Keller and Night Deposit Chex work at the 2005 NRHA Derby in Oklahoma City.

RIDER'S TIP: SLIDING STOP

The most extreme example of a downward transition is the reining sliding stop. The horse never loses his forward rhythm: the front feet keep stepping, and the hind feet are well up under him and have to stay under him to accomplish a good stop. The horse is never heavy on the front end.

The rider is either sitting down or trying to sit down, using that seat bone, and his reins are balanced. He pushes his hand forward to keep his own balance and stay out of the horse's mouth so the horse can use his head how he needs to, to keep his balance.

The rider's seat bones start it, then the rider's legs close to encourage the horse's hind legs to keep coming under until the transition is completed. The reins keep the head balanced and keep the shoulders from falling forward and down.



ILLUSTRATION BY JEAN ABERNETHY

1. The rider's shoulders must stay down to keep his body-weight down through the horse. The rider should look up and ahead, keeping his entire spine straight from the waist up.

2. The rider's elbows soften so his hands actually go forward (which helps keep his body forward) and lift a tiny bit. There is no backward pressure, as that would stop the hind legs from stepping under. His fingers stay closed around the reins with a tiny "feel," as if he's squeezing a little rubber ball. The reins need to be short enough so that the horse can give at the poll and ride forward into the rider's "feel," especially in the learning stage. Remember you are riding the horse onto the bit from behind.

3. There is no slump in the rider's upper body. He is sitting up straight above the waist, centered above his seat so his body weight has a steady downward pressure into the horse's back. As the horse steps under and raises her back, she needs a steady seat pressure from the rider to help maintain her own balance.

All that the rider moves is his pelvis. You can see an imaginary little "j" in the shape of the rider's spine and his pelvis, as he slides his seat bones into the horse's back.

4. The rider's legs lengthen and close to help the horse begin to step under; he's not raising his leg and/or heel to apply a spur.

from a walk to a stop without the reins. Make sure you tie them so you can easily reach them if your horse drops his head.



AQHA Professional Horseman **ANDY MOORMAN** has spent decades training both horses and riders. Based in Florida, her experience in the Quarter Horse industry started with barrel racing and evolved into pattern classes, western, English and over fences. Originally from West Virginia, Moorman attended the University of Florida in Gainesville and has been based in the state ever since. She's a firm believer in the good that comes from studying riding: There's always room for improvement, no matter how good a rider you become.

Work on going down to a walk

I HAVE MY RIDERS WORK A LOT ON TRANSITIONING DOWN TO a walk, and maintaining rhythm at the walk. You have to really use your seat and legs to maintain that walk.

Once you have good transitions to a walk, then going down to a stop is easy, because all you do is sit, hold everything together and think "right now." It's just a higher degree of asking. ■

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