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TRANSITIONS ARE EVERYTHING! THEY AFFECT HOW YOU RIDE patterns, over jumps, your rail work, working a cow – everything. Transitions are the moments when you really balance your horse and influence his movement.

The goal with a transition is to put the horse into a balance so that whatever he does next is going to be the best you can get. The challenge is to make a change without letting a horse lose his balance or rhythm.

One of the main considerations with transitions is to improve the horse's gaits. You don't improve a gait by going, going, going. You improve it by doing a lot of transitions and rebalancing, rebalancing, rebalancing. The more transitions

you do correctly, the more you improve your horse's gaits.

The biggest reason why people have problems with basic transitions is that they don't have a good, fundamental understanding of what truly balances a horse.

When people watch other riders, they see the obvious; they don't see the things they need to understand. They see the hands, but they don't see the "feel," in the seat and leg. So lesser horsemen focus on the rider's hands and the placement of the horse's head, and not on what's *really* important to balance – the rider's seat and leg and the alignment of the horse's body.

When I do clinics, I see so many problems resulting from riders not knowing how to sit or use their legs. They try to make

BORRQW A TRAINER

Improving transitions

By AQHA Professional Horseman Andy Moorman

with Christine Hamilton

Illustration by Jean Abernethy

everything happen with their hands, and that makes nothing happen. They worry about the horse's head and don't think anything about his hind legs or back or body. The rider is frustrated and the horse is messed up and the fight is on, because the rider has no idea how to do what she wants to accomplish.

When you show people simple things that help them understand what's going on with a horse's balance, they're amazed at how the horse responds. They can sit still and do a few things right, and that horse thinks "Thank you," and does a nice job. Our horses are willing if they understand what we want.

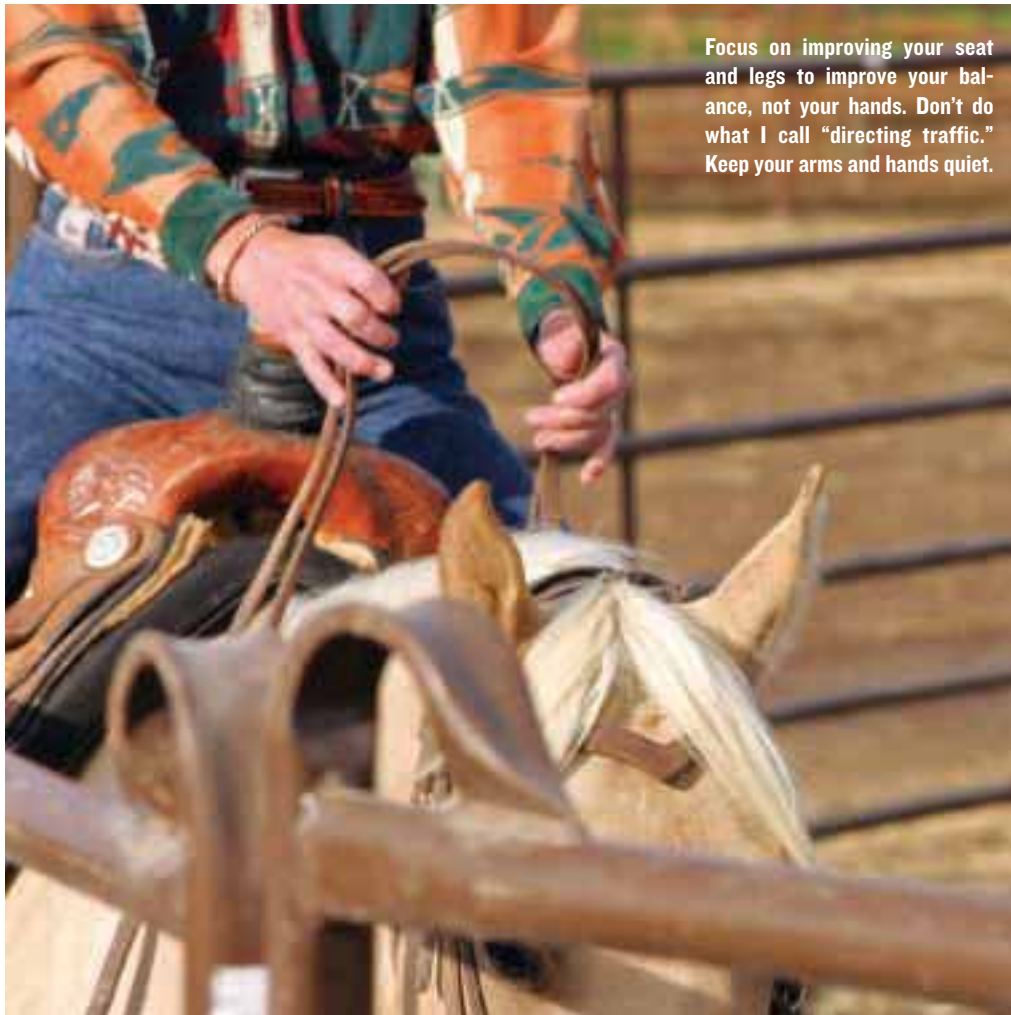
Transitions are about communication. During the transi-

tion, tell your horse exactly what you want. You tell him where you want his body parts, what rhythm you'd like and how you're going to keep his balance. And you do it with your own balance in your seat and leg first, then your hands. If you do all that right and you understand it, it's really very easy.

I think everybody needs to back up and understand balance, not just beginners.

Common Problems

HERE ARE THREE BASIC PRINCIPLES ABOUT BALANCE THAT RIDERS typically don't understand, and it affects the quality of their transitions.



Focus on improving your seat and legs to improve your balance, not your hands. Don't do what I call "directing traffic." Keep your arms and hands quiet.

1. *Weight distribution and legs.*

When a horse has balance and self-carriage, his weight is distributed onto his hindquarters. From there, he can shift his weight and legs to be able to do anything.

For example, when a horse is going to canter, which leg does he support himself on to step off? Most people don't know: It's the outside hind leg.

Now stand square on your two legs. Without shifting your body, if you pick up one leg what happens? If you don't shift your weight, you are going to fall over.

The horse is the same. To push off his outside hind leg, his leg must be under him, ready to support his weight. As the rider, you've got to get it under him. Push his hip to the inside a little.

Sit up straight in the middle of his back, put your inside leg at the girth and your outside leg back and balance his head

and shoulders between the two reins. If you get all that done, most horses will step off into a canter really nicely.

Instead, I watch people leaning and turning the horse's head and using all kinds of reins and things.

Everyone wants to know, how can I make a horse step off into a canter and stay slow? Well, that's the start right there: Where does the horse's body need to be to maintain balance and step off?

If he's balanced when he steps off, you can set the speed very softly, by feeling your rein a little bit, and saying this is the rhythm I want. If he's balanced, he'll give it to you. If he's not balanced, he'll fall on his shoulder and be on the forehand, and when he steps off you can't do anything about his speed.

2. *Maintaining rhythm.*

If you're going to make a transition, you need to know what your rhythm is and make your transition without any stop in rhythm.

That's true in any transition, from walk to trot, walk to canter, canter to trot, canter to walk, whatever.

Keeping forward motion is critical to rhythm. Even in the stop you maintain rhythm and keep the hind legs of the horse coming forward.

3. *Sit still.*

You have to be balanced on the horse. People must understand how to sit still and stay in the middle of the horse. With nice posture, good seat contact and your legs under you, you cannot collapse right or left, lean forward, back or sideways.

Keep your shoulders down and arms down and quiet. When you raise your shoulders, you raise yourself above the horse. You must sit down straight in the middle of the horse, keep your head up and be still.

Those are such basics, but so many people have problems with them. If you work at mastering those basics, all of a sudden an unruly horse can be very nice.

USE THE CORRECT GAS PEDAL

Too many people try to use their seat as the gas pedal instead of their leg. They really need to sit still and motivate their horse with their leg.

It's like a car. If you jump your rear around on the seat, is the car going to go? No. If you step on the gas pedal, is the car going to go? Yes.

Don't try to push the horse forward with your seat. When you do that, you're not effective with your leg. Your seat has to be in place and firm, and your leg makes him step up to that feel.

What You Do

HERE ARE THREE THINGS TO DO to begin to work on those problems.

1. *Think of the weight and legs.* To work on a canter departure, I

have riders track at the trot on a large figure-8. (You can do it at the walk, too.) As they circle right and have a correct bend to the right, I have them keep that bend when they go to circle left, maintaining a counter-bend as they circle left. When they circle back around to come off the counter-bend and circle right again, that's when I have them ask for the canter departure for a right lead. That's when the horse's body is set up for a correct canter departure, in bend and weight distribution.

It's usually really easy. You have to sit up and turn your upper body and shoulders in the direction of the lead you are going to take, but don't lean into it.

Push up off the inside, steady the outside rein, push the outside hip to canter and step off. It also works with green horses. Be sure to practice both ways, for a left and right lead canter departure.

Remember, horses can only make a good transition if their legs are in the proper position to be able to respond and make the change.

Try this: Stand square on two legs, and then shift all your weight to your left leg. Now try to pick your left leg up – you can't! It's the same with your horse. If you want him to move a leg, you have to ask him to move it when his weight is off of it. You must work on your timing and rhythm to do that.

For example, if you're going from a canter down to the trot, try saying the three-beat rhythm as you canter, "bum-pi-ty, bum-pi-ty, bum-pi-ty." Then, when you go to make the transition, go "bum-pi-ty, bum-pi-ty, ask."

That causes you to ask for the transition to the trot during the pause in the canter strides when the hind legs are coming through the air. That's when they are able to change position because they're not bearing weight.

2. Downward rhythm. I have riders do a lot of transitions down to the walk while maintaining rhythm into the walk.

Riders usually want to slam a horse into the ground and then try to walk off. But all that does is teach the horse not to put his hind legs under him to keep his balance and rhythm through the transition. If you lean back and pull on the reins, the horse's head goes up, his back drops and he can't get his hind legs under him to stop.

Instead, think of the transition as a softening and allow the horse to do it rather than make the horse do it. And be ready to absorb some shock through the middle of your body.

If you ask riders to come to the walk *and* maintain the rhythm, as they practice and learn to do it, they will instinctively use their leg to maintain the rhythm, and that keeps the horse's hind legs coming under him. Then the transition is nice.

3. Work on balance. You have to really think about and work at keeping your body in the correct position. (See "Borrow A Trainer: Correct body position," February 2006 the *Journal*, pg. 66, or online at www.aqbajournal.com.)

Keep your arms and hands quiet. That's a big problem for most people. They do what I call "directing traffic" – their hands are all over everywhere.

Just touch your body with the inside of your upper arm. Don't hug yourself, just have a light enough contact so your shoulders are down and your upper arm is touching your body. Then ride out of a soft elbow with a straight line from the elbow to the horse's mouth.

Sit straight and in the middle of the horse and get your leg under you, putting weight in your stirrups. A lot of people don't keep weight in their stirrups. They grip with the upper leg and/or the lower leg to try to hold their bodies down. All that does is push them up off the horse. Instead, think about your seat going down into the saddle.

Work on not leaning forward – that makes horses jig and jog to try to balance with your center of gravity. You have to really think about sitting straight up and down in your seat, keeping your leg under you. ■

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