

LEAD CHANGE TRAINING CHEAT-SHEET

The most important exercises I use, in the order I teach them under saddle:

FROM A STANDSTILL:

1. Flex left and right
2. Yield hindquarters
3. Yield forequarters

AT THE WALK & TROT:

4. Circle cones / guiding / loping patterns

- Lots of “move out” and “follow your nose” exercises at this stage. In my steering and guiding, I soon start to introduce some indirect rein (drawing the outside rein across the neck) to help move the shoulder, get the horse comfortable with accepting that indirect contact, and have it be tied to causing a change in their feet. Gradually I wean the horse on to accepting more dynamic contact on their face (lateral and vertical) , instead of just steering with one rein or the other like in the beginning stages with a green colt. No need to single out and teach vertical flexion at a standstill... this approach is much more natural for the horse and ensures you don't “disconnect” his mouth from his feet.

5. Bending stage one

- The first true “suppling” exercise with the horse's feet in motion. Bending forward and around on a circle, using only inside leg and inside rein to soften the horse and create shape.

6. Circles with three-quarter turns

- I'll start doing little transitions where I spiral in on my circle and bring the front end through; tipping the horse's nose with the inside rein, drawing the outside rein across his neck, and using a little active bumping pressure with outside leg to help draw

the horse around in a little 270-degree pivot. Doesn't have to be pretty, just need to get the front end broke loose.

7. Bending stage two

- Advanced bending with vertical flexion added. More dynamic contact on both reins, being pickier about balance and the horse maintaining shape and forward motion semi-independently.

8. Drive the hindquarters off the circle

- This is the first time we ask the horse to move laterally off our leg while maintaining forward motion. I teach this on the circle because (1) it's a comfortable starting position from the bending exercise which the horse already knows, (2) the bend in the horse's body gives me more leverage and discourages stiffness/resistance, and (3) I can control the horse's front end by using the indirect rein as a "brake rein" to slow the shoulders down and allow the hind end to lead the way... to step "out and around" the front end. I'll use my off-side leg in the same way; "blocking" the shoulders and keeping them where they need to be, while reaching back with my other leg and driving the hindquarters out and around on the circle. I refer to this as the "Poor Man's Two-Track" because it's basically just a leg yield, but with some bend in the horse's body. As the horse gets more advanced you start taking them straighter and straighter until you're doing a true leg yield or two-track. Having bypassed much of the resistance and fuss by teaching it on the circle first, your job here is way easier.

9. Drive the shoulders off the circle

- Same idea, but this time the front end is leading the way. This is also known as "shoulder in/shoulder out" or a "Poor Man's Counterbend". It's not a true counterbend because we're not driving the horse's hips up under him as we move forward on that counter arc. But we're still getting the basic idea across: Bend the horse to the left, drive his shoulders off to the right, while maintaining that left bend. And vice versa.

- 10. Bend, counterbend & push the hip up**
 - Now we refine things, practice changing shapes more smoothly and fluidly; getting both the front end and hind end working together.
- 11. Leg Yielding from a Straight Line (two-track)**
 - Again, this is way easier now that your horse knows how to handle all that dynamic pressure of your legs/reins with confidence.

AT THE CANTER:

- 12. Lope Circles & Shape to the Inside/Outside**
 - Same exact bending/counterbending exercise, but now you're loping a circle instead of walking or jogging.
- 13. Countercanter Circles & Shape to the Inside/Outside**
 - Nothing changes from step 12, except now you're doing everything on the opposite lead.
- 14. Leg Yielding from a Straight Line (two-track)**
 - Same thing you already practiced at a walk and jog earlier, now at a canter.
- 15. "Cigar" Exercise to Set Up/Simulate Lead Change**
 - Creates habits of the horse being relaxed and "honest" about your approach to the lead change so they don't anticipate it in a negative way. From the canter on a straight line, heading diagonally across the arena, you'll pick up and push the hip off for just a few strides; feeling that lateral movement of the two-track, and the "lift" from the horse driving his hindquarters up underneath you. Then release, round the end of the arena and head back across. This gets the horse used to staying relaxed about your leg coming on, while still responding and yielding his body to it. It's the perfect setup for an actual lead change. Do this a few times and when the horse is listening, relaxed and isn't expecting it... go ahead and ask for the change.

16. “Cigar” Exercise With Actual Lead Changes Slipped In

- IMPORTANT: Bring your leg on to ask for the change SMOOTHLY.
- Why? Because (1) you don't want to create habits of the horse lurching forward because they're anticipating a stab in the gut, and (2) the more relaxed your leg is, the easier it is for you to stay balanced in the saddle. Kicking aggressively or having a big, dramatic “switch!!!” of your legs will throw you out of balance and cause more problems than it solves.
- Never play into a horse's anticipation. Only change leads when he's relaxed and ready, but not necessarily expecting it. Do this SPARINGLY and don't rely on the geometry of the arena (for example, always changing leads in the center of the pen). Keep things casual and a bit unpredictable. This keeps the horse honest and listening to your legs, instead of anticipating and taking the decision away from you as the rider. Once the horse has the basic concept, sprinkle this into the rest of your overall loping program.

Congratulations! You're now changing leads on a straight line :)