

With better engagement, your horse's paces will start to show more expression



Creating expression



MEET THE EXPERT

STEPHEN CLARKE is a world-renowned dressage judge. He's judged at all the major dressage competitions including the World Equestrian Games (WEG), Europeans and the Olympics. He's competed internationally and holds regular training clinics around the world.

Developing your horse's paces so he has lift and elevation takes years of training, but everyone can achieve it, says **Stephen Clarke**

WATCHING MAJESTIC HORSES like the mighty Valegro makes the hairs stand up on the back of your neck – the effortless power and expression he exudes is truly amazing.

Many assume it's the movement he was born with. But while Valegro has correct paces, the expression he shows is the result of years of correct training.

Esteemed dressage trainer and judge Stephen Clarke explains that before you can move onto training for expression, you need a horse that accepts the aids and goes happily into a true contact. You should be able to influence his frame to encourage the back to swing and have real suppleness and elasticity.

"It's only when the whole body of the horse is supple and elastic that the strides can also be supple and elastic," says Stephen, talking at a Centaur Biomechanics rider workshop. "Once these fundamentals are in place you can start to ask your horse for more engagement, which will help to develop more expression in the paces."

To do this, it's those trusty transitions that need to be perfected, while also adding in lateral work to help your horse step through more and create more lift and expression.

PHOTOS: MATTHEW ROBERTS

Fine-tuning transitions

All transitions need to be balanced and fluent, and that takes time and consistency to get right. However, the canter to trot transition can be particularly tricky and many riders don't do it well.

"In the grand prix tests, there are 10 marks awarded for a transition from canter to trot," explains Stephen. "It's one of the most difficult transitions to ride, especially at a higher level when your horse understands collection. I see many grand prix horses stuttering with this transition because they aren't sure whether it's preparation for a canter pirouette or a trot transition."

It's true what they say – practice makes perfect. Avoiding practising and hoping it will just happen rarely works.

Riding from canter to trot

- The first thing to get in your mind is 'wait'.
- Stop riding the canter rhythm – sit still.
- Keep your horse in balance by using your core muscles and lower back.
- Close your hands, without pulling back on the reins and killing the energy.
- Wait – even if it takes several strides.
- Your horse will eventually think 'there's something happening here' and trot.
- Reward him with a pat on the neck or using your voice.

According to Stephen, this is one of the very few times that you sit and wait for your horse. Usually, you're looking for an instant reaction from him.

"I often see riders hurrying, thinking 'I must ride forwards through the transition' and they ride forwards too early," says Stephen. "You need to wait for the horse to trot and then ride forwards."

Stephen firmly believes that training your horse like this from day one will mean you're less likely to have problems later on as you progress through the levels.

"The quality of the canter to trot transition will only be as good as the canter beforehand. If the canter is behind the leg, the transition isn't going to happen"

Direct transitions, when ridden correctly, teach your horse to step under with his hindlegs and lift his forehead



Nailing direct transitions

Teaching your horse to make direct transitions encourages him to step under with his hindlegs and improve engagement. It's a learning process, but he has to learn to do these transitions. When you ride walk to canter, or canter to walk, there should be no trot – your horse should go when you ask.

"It's about that instant reaction," says Stephen. "It doesn't matter if you have to be a little powerful in your aids sometimes to get what you want. But as soon as your horse understands what you're asking, the trick is for you to instantly relax."

Use your body

A common mistake when moving from canter to walk is over-preparing. When you're training, Stephen suggests surprising your horse with these transitions – so you get the reaction, rather than preparing and making them perfect.

"I put into the rider's mind to forget about the walk and think 'canter, stop' – then, as the horse goes to stop, change your mind and let him walk.

"The primary aid is the rider's back, but many forget this," adds Stephen. "We talk a lot about creating reactions from our legs and hands, but it's also about your ability to influence your horse by the way you sit in the saddle. This is why having the ability to maintain a correct position is so important."

How to ride from canter to walk

- First, brace your position and stop

following the movement of the canter.

- Close your hand against the contact to block your horse, but don't pull back.
- As your horse feels you brace your position, he steps under with his hindlegs. As you close your hand, he feels the front brake being applied as well.
- He should react by stopping.
- The split second he does, take your aids off, relax your body and open your hand.
- Over time, and when done consistently, your horse learns what you're asking and will lower his hindquarters in the transition.

Walk to canter

For walk to canter there must be an instant and clear reaction – you should just think 'canter' and your horse must go. If the reaction isn't sharp enough, you need to turn up the volume a little – he must go.

If your horse isn't sharp enough in the transition, you can back up your aid with a schooling whip. It needs to be in your outside hand so you're using it in conjunction with your outside (announcing) leg. Just touch him with the whip as you give the aid.

How to ride from walk to canter

- Your inside leg creates the activity.
- Your inside hand indicates the direction.
- The outside hand controls the position of the outside shoulder.
- It's your outside leg that announces the canter because it's the horse's outside hindleg that begins the canter sequence.

Moving through the gears

Making little gear changes within the pace helps develop expression and impulsion. You're going to ask your horse to make some bigger steps, then come back again.

- The onward transition is about creating a reaction from the hindlegs to develop energy and forwardness.
- The return transition is about taking that energy more onto the hindlegs, so the working or slightly collected trot develops more cadence, is more active, uphill and off the ground.
- All of this is done in the same tempo. You don't want a slower trot or a faster trot, you want to see energy in the same rhythm.

As you play with this exercise, it's important to establish the working trot in a natural frame first. Your horse should be in front of the leg and moving with activity so your leg can just hang there. If he's balanced enough, the rein contact will be elastic and forward. If the trot isn't active enough, you need to do something about it. If he's running away from the balance you'll need to give a balancing half-halt or ride a transition.

GET TO GRIPS WITH TEMPO

Your horse should maintain the same tempo through the collection, lateral work and extended paces.

If your horse gets quicker in the extended trot and more slow motion

in the collected, with the tempo varying, then these paces aren't honest or correct. It's about being able to maintain the same tempo within all the gears and lateral work.

Asking your horse to move up a gear develops energy and creates the push from the hindlegs



The return transition helps create engagement and lift off the floor

"Any reaction is good and no reaction is hopeless. He has to react, even if it's not the right one"

Lateral learning

Lateral work is a good way to encourage engagement. Before teaching leg-yield, your horse should react to the basic aids and understand that the outside leg will keep him straight and the inside leg activates him.

He now needs to learn that when you put your inside leg on, you may want a sideways reaction as well. It takes time for him to learn that the inside leg doesn't always mean forward; sometimes he needs to yield (move away) from that leg pressure. You need to control the amount of forwardness and balance, and then create a reaction away from the inside leg, while your outside rein keeps your horse straight in his frame.

If you're training a youngster or a horse who doesn't understand lateral work, Stephen uses turn on the forehand, as this makes it clear he should move away from the leg pressure, not forwards.

Once you've ridden the movement a few times, when you move back up to trot you should be able to see and feel that the hindleg is more engaged.

Once straight on the diagonal line you can ask your horse to leg-yield



Turn on the forehand teaches your horse to move away from your inside leg

How to turn on the forehand

- Position your horse slightly to the right with the right rein.
- Your left rein stops your horse escaping through the shoulder, or moving forwards.
- Your right leg is going to put pressure on your horse's side and create a reaction.
- Your left leg will do nothing, just allow him to move his quarters to the right.

As you apply the aids, your horse will work out that he has to move somewhere to get away from the pressure that your right leg is putting on. Ask for one step at a time. If you don't get a reaction from your leg, back up your aid with a tap from your whip.

When your horse moves, stop the pressure.

Leg-yield across the diagonal

Once your horse understands moving away from the leg you can start to leg-yield. Stephen suggests using this movement as you ride the diagonal.

"As you turn onto the diagonal, stay straight for the first few steps," he instructs. "Then bring the shoulder over and ride your horse along that diagonal line, virtually parallel to the long side of the arena."

Riding on the left rein, you turn across the diagonal and want your horse to yield to your right leg, therefore moving over to the left. The aim is for your horse's bodyweight to shift in the direction you're riding. When it does, you can take the pressure off. 🐾

With thanks to Russell Guire and the team at Centaur Biomechanics for their help with this feature. Find out more at centaurbiomechanics.co.uk.

"It's always good to interrupt lateral work with little gear changes to refresh the pace. Also change the frame. Let him really stretch and take the contact point forward"

Next month: suppleness and elasticity