

LESSON FIVE

USING TRANSITIONS TO BUILD TEAMWORK

LESSON OVERVIEW

If you want to jump courses of any height, advance in dressage, or perform any type of athletic endeavor on a horse, you must first master the art of basic flatwork.

Flatwork might seem simple, but if you can't do something at the walk, you can't do that task at the canter or over fences. Practicing deliberate flatwork and incorporating specific, accurate transitions and targeted lateral work allows us to develop a clear understanding of precisely how our bodies and aids interact with our horse and what their body feels like when they respond properly to our questions. This is the key ingredient in developing 'feel' and a deep connection.

Going Back to Basics

Transitions, as simple as they may seem, are imperative in developing connection with your horse and our 'feel.' If you can't do something at the walk, you won't be able to do it between jumps or during a difficult dressage test.

First, slow things down — practice the use of your aids and the communication with the horse during walk transitions until you feel completely in sync.

Encouraging Self-Carriage

Another purpose of transition work, in addition to developing the connection and 'feel' with our aids, is to encourage the horse to participate actively as a partner. Through support with the leg, a light but active seat, and soft, elastic hands, we encourage the horse to 'carry' himself — to stay engaged, push from the hind end, use their back, and accept contact with the bit. The horse should learn to work from back to front, using their hind end as the motor to propel the connection into the bit.

To encourage self-carriage, think about riding the horse's full body with your full body. It's a complete, full body connection from rider to horse.

Practicing Accuracy, Timing, and Elasticity in Upward Transitions

In upward transitions, focus on the lightness and self-carriage that we've developed in the walk-halt-walk and walk-trot-walk transitions that we've already worked on. Transitioning upward into the canter from a halt or walk helps us to pay attention to every detail and really feel the way our horse's body works. We can also feel if there is any confusion or resistance.

Transitions also let us practice being elastic and supportive, encouraging the horse to use their whole body in an effective manner. If we're thinking forward, the horse will be thinking forward.

This work directly translates to all kinds of jumping, as well as to dressage. Without the ability to create propulsion from the hind end, effectively communicate what we want, and work together for accurate timing, we can't expect to jump bigger courses, collect in lines, or perform exercises like flying changes.

Asking New Questions

When riding, we carry on a constant conversation with our horses. Practicing transitions allows us to develop an understanding of the way our aids and bodies interact with our horse's minds and bodies. Beginning to incorporate new questions, such as a counter canter, further deepens that connection and your horse's ability to understand you and the way that you ask for things. It also lets you gauge how effectively you're asking questions — does your horse immediately 'get it,' or is your direction unclear?

Going Further With Lateral Work

Once you've mastered the use of your aids, feel that you can effectively and accurately communicate with your horse, and your horse understands exactly how to use their body, you can start to introduce lateral work. Lateral work — here we're focusing on shoulder-ins and shoulder-outs — reinforce the "whole body riding the whole body" concept and force us to support the horse with our aids even more. This type of work is also great for the horse as it strengthens their bodies, helps with self-carriage, and gives them a challenging but very doable task to focus on.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- If you can't do something correctly at the walk, you can't do it cantering, jumping, or anywhere else.
- Flatwork builds the foundation for your partnership. You must master basic flatwork together before aspiring towards more.
- Transitions allow us to practice communication with our horses by asking specific questions, immediately being able to gauge their response, and by feeling the way that their bodies respond to our aids.
- We should always feel that our 'whole body' is riding our horse's whole body.
- Transition work encourages self-carriage, which is a key element in all types of jumping and dressage.
- Light, elastic aids encourage lightness and self-carriage in the horse.
- The idea behind transition work and lateral work is for our horses to completely understand what is being asked of them and to give it willingly.

TRANSITION WORK AT HOME

Dedicate one to two full rides per week for the next four weeks to working through the specific transitions and lateral work outlined in the video lesson. Be sure to pay attention to the videos and slow-motion footage to get a visual representation of exactly how to use your aids and the way that your horse should respond. Work systematically through each exercise, first mastering the walk transitions and working through any confusion or difficulty before moving on to the next challenge.

At the end of the four weeks, use the space below to journal your key takeaways from your transition and lateral work with your horse.

