

Manolo Mendez Dressage



Balance, Rhythm and Suppleness: The Importance of Training Transitions in Dressage By Manolo Mendez, Specialist of In-hand and Classical Equitation with Y. Dean and Caroline Larrouilh

In this article we will discuss transitions, their importance in training, and how to develop them in the young horse.

Classical Training philosophy teaches us that the High School and Grand Prix movements – Piaffe, Passage, Half-Pass, Tempi changes – and even the Airs Above Ground – Levade, Capriole, etc. – are not tricks. Far from it, they represent the culmination of all the training to that point. In Classical Training, everything is taught step by step; one thing leads onto the next.

To execute these movements correctly, with ease and artistry requires that the horse be physically and mentally ready: fit, straight, supple, balanced and rhythmical. These qualities result from having solid training basics that are logical and progressive. To train without taking the time and effort to establish these basics which allows the trainer to develop the horse without strain and tension is to train the horse without respect.

Transitions are a big part of the horse's learning curve, one of the most important steps on the road to the Grand Prix movements. We must develop soft transitions so that when changing from one gait to another the tempo or rhythm becomes one fluid movement. But remember, the horse is still in kindergarten – we must keep everything simple and soft.

A good transition is about balance

A good, balanced transition requires that the horse move with a long (as opposed to a shortened) neck, without rushing, and without being dependent on strong hand contact. I cannot emphasize enough how very important this is, especially during the early stages of training.

First we must begin with the basics. To be comfortable and confident the horse must understand what is going on with his work, and the rider must continue to confirm the basics every day to build a solid training foundation.

Over time, the horse will develop his balance and rhythm nicely as a result from being allowed to use his body with a lengthened neck carriage. and he will start to read and understand his rider better and better. Of course, the horse will already be doing transitions as the rider will have asked him to change gait up or down in the course of his training. The rider will have encouraged his horse to do these early transitions with a long neck, without rushing, or losing balance. He will have remembered to be patient and kind, understanding that in the beginning it is very hard for the young horse who is learning to carry his own weight, plus that of his rider, to find his balance.

If the horse is happy with the work up to this point, we can start increasing or decreasing the gait for just a few steps here and there. This will lead to developing better "into" and "out of" transitions.

When we decrease the trot a little, we must be very careful how we ask the horse to go forward again – not let him go forward too quickly. We must carefully reduce the trot, and then increase it again very gradually, so we go back to the tempo we had to start with. If we push too hard to decrease or increase the tempo, the horse will become unbalanced, or argue with the bit or change his posture. We do not want him to do these things because that will lead to his losing the suppleness from his body. If we rush the horse off his feet while pulling his head in a misguided effort to create forward and roundness, the horse won't have any choice but to resist, evade or compensate for his lack of balance, suppleness and strength. His body will become more and more tense and crooked, creating long term training problems.

Developing transitions is about avoiding any imbalance, change in posture, loss of suppleness, or loss of rhythm through the transition.

An example of imbalance in transitions can be seen when a horse suddenly lifts his head very high, and goes from walk to trot with four to five very short strides, trotting with the front legs first, and leaving his hind legs behind. Of course, a young horse in the early stages of learning to do soft transitions can and will lift his head high or come down too low here and there - this is natural as the horse is learning to find his balance in and out of transitions. However, if you feel resistance then it may be because the horse is scared of the bit: the rider's hand may be too hard or the rider himself is too stiff or unbalanced.

For an upward transition it is important to encourage the horse to travel with the neck not shortened but lengthened, out in front, FDO (forward, down and out) instead of LDR (low, deep and round) by giving with the hands and pressing with the legs. This takes the brakes off the horse (hands) and encourages him to go forward (legs). For a downward transition, take the leg off, and ask gently with the hands. If we keep our hands too still, we are using them like a brake on the horse and he cannot learn to do the transition with freedom and **in** independent balance.

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When the horse is happy with simple upward and downward transitions, we can introduce trot to walk to halt here and there. We reduce the trot, and then we ask for the walk, and then for the halt. We keep the neck long, the poll supple and the nose in front of the vertical. We do not act as the horse's fifth leg and hold the horse up into the transitions, we help him find his independent balance. We ask for the halt with a fine and gentle contact, still with the neck long, as this is a comfortable position for the young horse. We maintain the halt for a little bit then walk again, and pat him after the walk by running a hand through the mane.

Note: I like to start transitions in walk and trot on straight lines, and start the canter ones in a corner or on a circle to help the horse pick up the correct lead. In all cases, the key is to only ask for transitions here and there and not drill the horse. The most common fault I see training transitions, is riders getting in trouble because they want to overdo everything (repeat, repeat, repeat...) and confuse, upset or tire the horse so much, transitions become worse and worse, not better.

Canter transitions

Before working on the transitions in and out of the canter, it is very important to establish a nice, forward, rhythmic canter first, or the horse may not be happy or comfortable about being asked to canter and do transitions in and out of canter. This can lead to problems such as rushing through the upward and downward transition, beginning the canter on the wrong lead or picking up the canter crooked.

The instinctual reaction for many riders is to ride the young horse too slow in the canter because they fear that he may be a little unbalanced, want to control it or worse, mistake a slow canter for the beginnings of collection. On the contrary, I find that when encouraged to travel in a good forward canter with good natural rhythm, the horse will get his balance quicker. To develop straightness, that is a horse who uses both sides of his body evenly, always ride with even contact in both reins, keeping the horse's neck straight in front of you, a little forward and out with the nose in front of the vertical. Always follow the horse's head with your hands. Do not try to hold the horse's head in or use strong contact to round the neck artificially because horses have to move their heads at the canter to balance, especially young horses.

You will be able to recognize if the contact is too strong because your horse will develop what I can "hammer head", and his hooves will come down hard on the footing. Blocking the horse's body in this manner makes the horse stiff in the back, what is called a leg mover and it can lead to joint and tendon problems. If your horse is rushing in the canter, simply slow him down a little, in particular through the corners, so he does not flex his body the wrong way.

Never keep the canter slow all the time or the horse's spine will become blocked little by little over time. The lumbo-sacrum joint or loin is the first place to get blocked, and the rest follows, increasing the possibility of stifle and hock problems. It is better to increase the canter a little

bit here and there so the horse is able to keep his body flexible, to use himself with nice balance.

When a horse trots too quickly, runs away from the rider a little bit, his neck will come up too high, his back will hollow, and he may canter on the wrong lead. If we allow the horse to rush like this, the canter will become very stiff. A horse doing this is confused and worried, and therefore there is something missing in the training up to this point. If we make sure that all the basics are well cemented before asking a young horse to canter, he should not need to canter on the wrong lead.

When we ask for the horse to canter from the trot, the horse should be able to pick up his cue from the rider's balance. We wait till he is striding comfortably and rhythmically in trot. We don't ask for the canter too quickly, we don't hurry, force or panic him. We let him organize himself, and meanwhile we make sure we are organized too. We check our position, making sure we use clear aids and ride with a supple and flexible body rather than with a stiff and unyielding one so that when we do ask for the canter, our horse finds it easy to understand what we want.

We ask for the canter, with the right signals, and we are kind with our legs and hands. Some horses need to get to the canter from a trot that is a little more forward; some horses find it easier to go into canter from their usual trot. If we know our horse well, we will be able to figure out what is best for him, even if we make a few mistakes first and get the wrong lead. If the horse does canter on the wrong lead by mistake, do not bring him back to trot straight away and risk frightening him or confusing him more. Let him have a bit of a canter for a while, then slowly ask him back to a trot. When the trot is established again in a soft easy going manner, and the horse isn't worrying or thinking about canter, then we ask for the canter again.

If the horse persists in cantering on the wrong lead, do not keep asking for the canter. Stop, and analyze the situation. Was the trot forward enough and balanced? Did I have enough length of rein? Was the horse comfortable? Were the signals correct and clear, or did the horse not understand, or get confused?

Some young horses do prefer to canter on one lead, or are unable to canter on one or the other lead for some reason – for example, if they are sore, or if the rider is a little twisted to one side, or otherwise not soft and balanced themselves.

But with this kind of slow and progressive training, it should not get to this point. By the time the young horse is asked to canter, there should not be a problem. He should just canter correctly. If he doesn't, we must go back to the basics, retrace our steps in part – or fully, if necessary – to find the problem and ease the confusion for the horse.

Once the horse is confident and balanced in his upward and downward transitions, we can practice them here and there on straight lines, but not drill.

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The importance of not shortening the neck

To go into a transition properly, we must have good contact - that is soft hands - and follow the horse's movement. A common mistake in developing transitions and other work is for the rider to shorten the neck by using too much hand or by literally carrying the horse with the reins. The rider thinks that by shortening the neck he can shorten or collect the whole frame of the horse. While the frame of the horse does need to be collected for Grand Prix movements such as piaffe and passage, the neck must remain lengthened so that the horse can balance properly – just as a ballerina needs a long, graceful neck to balance her body.

For piaffe and passage, we compress the body of the horse through the refined use of our leg, seat and hand to obtain collection. We do not create false collection by shortening the neck. Instead, we have a light, consistent and even contact and we seek the correct ratio between long neck and compressed body that allows the horse to be in self-carriage, balanced and centered. For a young horse learning transitions, we keep it very simple. A gentle hand is used to ask the horse to slow down, and the leg is used to ask the horse to go forward more.

Sometimes we may need to use the leg to get bend and keep the horse's posture soft and his back up if he wants to stiffen or hollow through the transition.

For instance, we can stop the horse from walk to halt with gentle, very fine, contact on the rein. But if the horse wants to go too short with his neck, or too long, then we can use the leg to keep a nice posture, although we have to be very careful not to give a mixed signal. Our hands and legs must work independently from each other so that the young horse does not become confused.

Take the time the horse needs

It is only when the transitions are soft, and the horse is fully understanding the leg and hands aids plus balance and rhythm that we can begin some lateral work with the shoulder-in. If we ask before the horse understands these things, he will resist, and yet again develop stiffnesses or crookedness. If the horse does understand and is also gymnastically prepared for the more difficult work ahead of him, the lateral work will come easily.

It is possible to introduce lateral work about twelve months (on average) after starting a young horse, but time should not be a factor. We have much to work with before this stage. If we rush anything, or skimp the basics, if we cause any confusion or create any trauma for the horse, we actually slow down his development. Then getting to lateral work can take a lot longer, because we must first undo the problems we have caused.

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Manolo Mendez was the first Head Rider, and one of six founding members of the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art. Based in Jerez, Spain, the school is one of the four classical schools which also include the Cadre Noir in Saumur, the Spanish Riding School in Vienna and the Portuguese School of Equestrian Art in Lisbon. A master horseman with over forty years of experience spanning classical dressage, doma vaquera and jumping, Manolo is dedicated to a soft, sympathetic and thorough training method which prepares horses physically and psychologically for each stage of training from training to Grand Prix and Haute Ecole. For more information and more articles visit: www.manolomendezdressage.com

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