

Straightness and Balance Through Counter-Canter with Karen Pavicic

by Karen Robinson

The main purpose of counter-canter, which is introduced in first level tests, is to develop straightness. It is an excellent tool not only for improving straightness in the canter, but also for testing it. If a horse's canter is not straight, when he is taken into counter-canter you will see how crooked that canter really is. While it is also a useful schooling exercise for increasing balance, collection, and suppleness, straightness is the primary purpose for schooling the counter-canter.

An exercise I use often with my students and with my own horses is one that can be introduced early in the horse's training in the counter-canter. The exercise (diagram 1) is actually a modified version of the loop from the corner to centre line and back to the corner that is found in first level test 3. Let's say I am cantering on right rein through the corner between A and K. At K I ride out to the first quarter line or to centre line, but instead of turning back to the track again, I stay on either the quarter line or centre line and ride straight down that line.

I like to use some shoulder-fore positioning on that line to reinforce the aspect of straightness. In my experience, horses often fall onto the outside shoulder and get too much neck bend in the second half of the loop; straightening on centre line or the quarter line helps the rider focus on straightness, keeping the horse between both legs and both reins.

After I have finished the quarter line or centre line, I turn at the end of the ring in the direction of the lead and will either lengthen stride down the next long side or immediately repeat the exercise. Even though I use this exercise with young horses, I use it in the warmup with my more advanced horses, too. This counter-canter exercise tests the quality of the contact on the outside rein, and also helps to improve the connection on the outside.

Another good counter-canter exercise (diagram 2) builds on the previous one with an increase in difficulty. It's suitable for horses that are confirmed in their understanding and balance in the counter-canter. If I come through the corner on right lead to K, I now ride a short diagonal all the way to B, and into counter-canter on the second half of the long side at B. I stay in counter-canter through the next short side, then change rein across the next diagonal in medium canter. You can give the horse a bit more room before the medium canter diagonal by turning a bit later than the first letter out of the corner.

Be careful not to put the horse too deeply into the corners in the counter-canter through the short side. A more advanced horse can ride a deeper corner, but a less developed horse should be asked for more of a half 20-metre circle shape. Like the first exercise, the short diagonal into counter-canter helps improve the connection to the outside rein, which in turn improves balance and straightness.

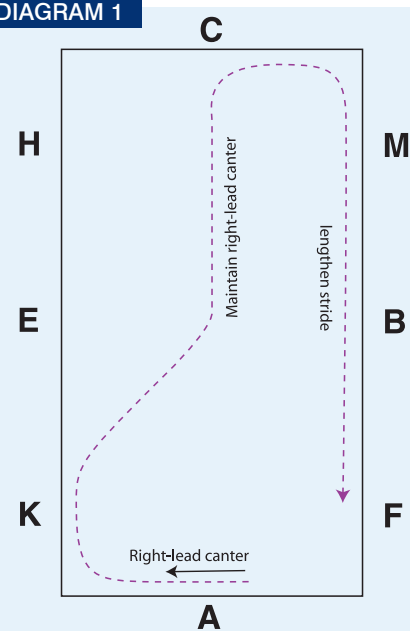
Riders often struggle with their own balance and correct aids in counter-canter. Maintaining the position that reflects the horse's lead and not the direction of travel is key; to help my students remember how they should be positioned and using their aids, I use a visual image. I tell the rider to imagine that the rail is on the other side of the horse when in counter-canter. In other words, if the horse is on right lead and on left rein, I tell the rider to pretend that the rail is on the left side and to think of riding the horse in a shoulder-fore position to the right.

Karen Pavicic is a Level III dressage coach who has trained a number of horses and riders to success at the FEI levels. She trains out of Centre Line Stables in Richmond, BC.



In counter-canter, the rider should maintain the position that reflects the horse's lead, not the direction of travel. If the horse is on right lead and left rein, imagine that the rail is on the left side and ride the horse in a shoulder-fore position to the right.

DIAGRAM 1



Two good counter-canter exercises.

DIAGRAM 2

