

Riding Quality Transitions with Karen Pavicic

by Karen Robinson

“To understand the importance of transitions in training and in competition, one need look no further than the dressage tests themselves. In the grand prix test, there are a total of 17 transitions between gaits. Even the very simplest test, training level test 1, has nine transitions.

As in any other exercise, the quality of the gait is the biggest single influence on the quality of the transition. Besides schooling complete transitions between gaits, I make frequent use of transitions *within* the gait, and what I call ‘almost-transitions,’ as exercises to improve the quality of my horses’ transitions. Because the quality of the gait is so important, the use of forward and back within the trot or canter has two benefits: it improves the gait itself, and it develops the horse’s responsiveness to my aids for both downward and upward transitions.

Taking trot as an example, I use transitions within the trot as a preparation for schooling transitions to the halt. These forward-and-back exercises tell me if my half-halts are working, and if they are achieving the correct response in the horse. Transitions within the gait help to engage the hindquarters; the engagement of the hindquarters will determine the quality of the transition. I often use a circle for this exercise, because the requirement to bend on the circle also makes the horse engage himself even more than on straight lines. If I am riding forward and back on straight lines, the good use of my corners is essential. Corners reinforce the balance and suppleness that will translate into better transitions or almost-transitions.

Once I feel that the horse is staying balanced and engaged in transitions from a more forward trot back to a working or collected trot, I will introduce an almost-halt transition in preparation for performing a halt. I frequently remind my students that when they ask for any downward transition or almost-transition, they should always be riding from the leg and seat into the hand, and to give with the hand once the horse has done what was asked.



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That important first transition (and first impression), the halt-and-salute, takes place in every test. When schooling downward transitions, if your horse doesn’t want to stand still in the halt, stay halted long enough for him to settle and become comfortable there. If your horse is lazy, exit the halt almost immediately to remind him that he must be ready to respond to your driving aids. Karen and London demonstrate.

Exiting the almost-transition is as important as entering it. I want to feel that I can give, but that the horse remains in the almost-halt for a moment before I ask him to move forward again into the hand. The horse should remain on my seat, and connected to the hand from behind. Almost-transitions can be performed on or off the track, and on centre line, where that important first transition, the halt-and-salute, takes place in every test.

When the almost-transition is smooth, the horse is ready to perform a full halt. I use this idea for canter transitions as well, once the horse is advanced enough in his training that his canter is adjustable.

One exercise I use often with my horses and students is to ride a downward transition at every other letter around the arena. The frequent

repetition of transitions should result in them happening more and more easily. As I’ve said in other training articles in this series, your training should also reflect a response to your horse’s natural tendencies. When you are working with a horse that is tense and doesn’t want to stand still in the halt or remain relaxed in the walk, stay in the halt or walk long enough for the horse to settle and become comfortable there. If your horse is lazy, you should exit the halt or walk almost immediately, to remind the horse that he must always be ready and willing to respond positively to the driving aids. ”

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.