

DRESSAGE, EVENTING, HUNTERS, JUMPERS

VOL. 29

PRACTICAL HORSEMAN

# EXTRA

## MASTER DIFFERENT CANTERS

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Coup de Chance

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FROM THE ARCHIVES OF PRACTICAL HORSEMAN

# THE RIGHT CANTER FOR EVERY SITUATION

A grand prix jumper rider's simple exercise for mastering different types of canters.

By Elizabeth Gingras ■ Photos by Susan J. Stickle

**W**hen you canter to your first fence on course, do you wonder if you have the correct canter? Amateurs and Juniors commonly struggle with this dilemma for good reason: When you have the right canter—your horse is traveling in the correct balance and frame at a suitable pace for the fence—he'll be able to jump it to the best of his ability. If he's on his forehand, inverted, too slow or too fast, he can't jump his best. Having a good-quality canter also allows you to see your distances better, so it should be every rider's top priority for multiple reasons.

There's more to it than just having a well-balanced canter, though. In the jumpers, different types of jumps and lines require different canters. For example,

To help your horse jump his best over every fence, practice finding the right canter in your approaches to cavalletti. Here, I'm riding 11-year-old Coup de Chance (nicknamed "Chance") in a balanced, straight, relaxed canter, maintaining a good connection with the reins and dropping my weight down into my heels without clamping my legs on his sides.

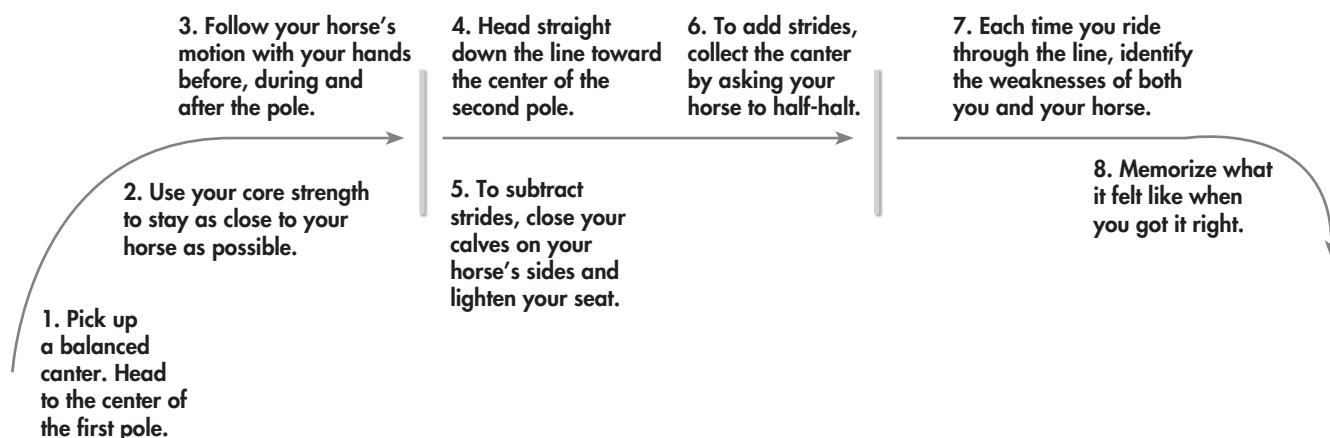


## About Elizabeth Gingras

Canadian native **Elizabeth Gingras** competed in her first grand prix at age 18. Since then, she has represented Canada on many Nations Cup teams, both in North America and Europe. Among numerous international successes, she won the 2014 \$100,000 Spirit of the West Cup at the inaugural CSI\*\*\* Royal

West Show Jumping Tournament in Calgary and the 2015 \$2,250,000 MXN Veracruz Grand Prix at Coapexpan and was the highest-placing Canadian at the \$3 million CP International last fall. She and her current top mount, Zilversprings, were the traveling alternates for Canada's 2015 Pan American Games team. Elizabeth is based part-time in Wellington, Florida, and part-time in Belgium.

# Exercise: Two Cavalletti on a Straight Line



Ride the line five times in one direction, take a break and repeat in the other direction. Start with comfortable striding for your horse and then add or subtract strides in subsequent passes. See “Beginner Plan” and “Advanced Plan” below for suggested striding per pass.

## TIP

Start the exercise on your horse's better lead to make more progress.

put lots of wear and tear on your horse's legs by jumping over and over again. In this article, I'll describe a very simple exercise I practice frequently at home with all of my horses—even my top Nations Cup mounts. Although it requires only two cavalletti or two sets of poles and plastic blocks, it mentally and physically engages both horse and rider by continually challenging you to adjust the canter in different ways.

Riders and horses of all levels can do this exercise—and everyone can benefit from it. The obstacles are small enough that there will be no harm done if you miss a distance now and then. As you practice shortening and lengthening your horse's stride, he will grow more alert and attuned to your aids. He'll learn to respond to lighter leg aids and your half-halts will become

you might need to approach a spooky fence or a large oxer with a much more forward canter than you'd want for a pair of verticals.

Knowing what type of canter you need for each situation comes with experience, but that doesn't mean you have to

smoother and easier to achieve. The constant variety will keep things interesting for you, too.

Practicing this exercise frequently is a great way to improve your horse's fitness. Additionally, it will reveal both his and your weaknesses. Knowing these will not only give you specific things to work on in future training sessions but will also provide valuable information to keep in mind while you're walking courses for a competition.

## Two Cavalletti on a Straight Line

Yes, it's that simple! Set two cavalletti or two poles on plastic blocks—adjusted to their middle height—on a straight line five to eight strides apart, depending on what is most comfortable for the size of your arena. (If your arena is small, for example, a five- or six-stride line is fine.) Don't worry about getting this distance exactly right. The idea behind the exercise is to adjust the canter to suit each circumstance, whatever it may be. Use striped poles if you can, as they will help you aim for the center of each “jump.”

### Step 1: Make a Plan

Before starting the exercise, make a mental plan for how you want to execute it. Plan to ride the line five times in one direction without stopping, then plan to take a quick break and do the same in the other direction. For each of those five times, decide exactly how many strides you will ride the line in. Start with the striding that is most comfortable for you and your horse and then increase the difficulty by adding or subtracting strides in subsequent passes.

If you or your horse are relatively inexperienced, make the progression smooth and gradual. Begin in his comfort zone by riding the line two or three times in a nice regular canter. Next,

## Beginner Plan

PASS	STRIDES
#1	7
#2	7
#3	6
#4	7
#5	8

## Advanced Plan

PASS	STRIDES
#1	7
#2	6
#3	8
#4	7
#5	9



## Exercise: Two Cavalletti on a Straight Line



I start the exercise by cantering Chance straight to the middle of the first cavalletti. Because we arrive in a nice comfortable balance, he simply steps over the cavalletti. In the air, we're both focusing on the second cavalletti. I've gotten a little ahead of the motion here—I'd like to see my seat closer to the saddle and my upper body not quite so forward.

After we land, I keep the nice connection between my hands and the bit so we maintain the same rhythm and balance on a straight track all the way to the center of the second cavalletti. →

plan to ride the line in a more forward canter, aiming to subtract a stride. Then plan to ride it in the comfortable striding once more before collecting the canter to add a stride.

For example, if you set the cavalletti up on a regular 72-foot five-stride line, depending on your horse's natural stride, it will probably ride comfortably in six or seven strides (since the cavalletti are so small). So ride it in that comfortable number of strides two times. The third time, go more forward to leave a stride out. Then ease back to the comfortable striding for your fourth pass. Finally, collect the canter to add a stride.

If you and your horse are more advanced and your horse is extremely adjustable, make your plan more challenging by going to extremes. Ride through the line in the comfortable striding just once. If that comfortable striding was seven strides, for example, then ride it next in six strides, then eight, then back to seven, then nine. There are obviously many variations you can play with. Just be sure you know exactly what you intend to do before you begin.

As you're making your plan, also think about your position. Initially, it's best to do the exercise in whatever position is most comfortable for you, whether that's two-point or sitting more deeply in the saddle. When that's going well, you can challenge yourself by changing your position. So, for example, you might plan to ride the line in two-point for the first three passes, then ride the last two in a deeper seat. If it's too confusing to change your striding and your position at the same time, adjust one or

the other for each pass. As you get the hang of the exercise, you'll be able to challenge yourself by adjusting both.

Also plan to start the exercise on your horse's better lead. Although we all try to train our horses to be more ambidextrous, most of them naturally prefer one lead over the other. You'll make more progress if you ride the first five passes on his favorite lead, then repeat the exercise in the opposite direction.

If your horse is very fit, you can add a second—or even third—set of five repetitions in each direction, playing with the striding however you think will best benefit both of you.

### Step 2: Ride the Line

Once you have a good plan in mind, execute it! Pick up a nice balanced canter and head to the center of the first raised pole. Whether you're riding in two-point or a deeper seat, use your core strength—your stomach and inner-thigh muscles—to stay as close to your horse as possible without clamping your legs on or collapsing your upper body. Don't worry about whether he jumps the pole or simply steps over it. Either way, follow his motion with your hands before, during and after it,

### TIP

Think about how the canter felt and what your body was doing when you maintained a lovely canter all the way down the line while getting the correct counts.

## Exercise: Two Cavalletti on a Straight Line (continued from page 5)



Next, we approach the first cavalletti in a more forward canter, aiming to leave out a stride in the line. When Chance takes a slightly bigger canter step over it, he twists his shoulders subtly. This is his naturally weaker lead and he's finding it a little more difficult to maintain his straightness in the more forward canter. I correct him by keeping my body straight on my desired line and using my inner (right) thigh and calf to push him back on track.

### TIP

Horses often revert to what is more comfortable for them, especially in the show ring. So the better you know your horse, the better plan you can make for him in competition.

then head straight down the line toward the center of the second pole.

To subtract strides, close your calves on your horse's sides and lighten your seat to encourage him to open his stride and cover more ground. Follow his motion with your hands and body without tipping your shoulders too far forward.

To add strides, collect the canter by asking your horse

to half-halt. Do this by putting more pressure on the reins while sinking into your thigh and lightening your calf pressure. Make sure you don't take your leg completely off so your horse doesn't break into the trot. I like to use what I call a "flutter leg": a leg that is there to nudge the horse, asking him to shorten and quicken his step.

Each time you ride through the line, ask yourself how it went: "Did my horse stay on the correct lead? Did he stay straight and maintain a good rhythm? How was my position? Did I sit up tall and stay in the center of my horse? Or was I



My correction works and he lands straight on the track. I lighten my seat, using my body to encourage him to continue in the forward canter to the second cavalletti, and leave out a stride. I haven't abandoned him, though—I still have a nice connection to his mouth and my legs are gently wrapped around his sides to provide support.

leaning too far forward and twisting my body?" Try to identify the weaknesses of both you and your horse so you know what you need to practice and improve.

If your horse isn't meeting the poles on a comfortable stride, adjust your canter. Try adding a little more impulsion or steady-ing him a bit more. Ask yourself, "Is his balance too long and low?" or "Is it inverted?" Sometimes it's helpful to have a trainer get on your horse to produce the right canter so you can learn to recognize it. But this exercise can often help riders learn how to fix the canter themselves, which is a valuable tool to have both in training and in the competition ring.

Take a moment to try to memorize what it felt like when you got it right. Think about how the canter felt and what your body was doing when you maintained a lovely canter all the way down the line while getting the correct counts.

Listen to your horse throughout the exercise. If he feels sluggish, take a break and think about what might be affecting him. He could be fatigued—it's a lot of work for a horse to adjust

### TIP

At a competition, do most of your thinking when walking the course beforehand. Don't overthink once you enter the show ring.



## Exercise: Two Cavalletti on a Straight Line (continued from page 6)

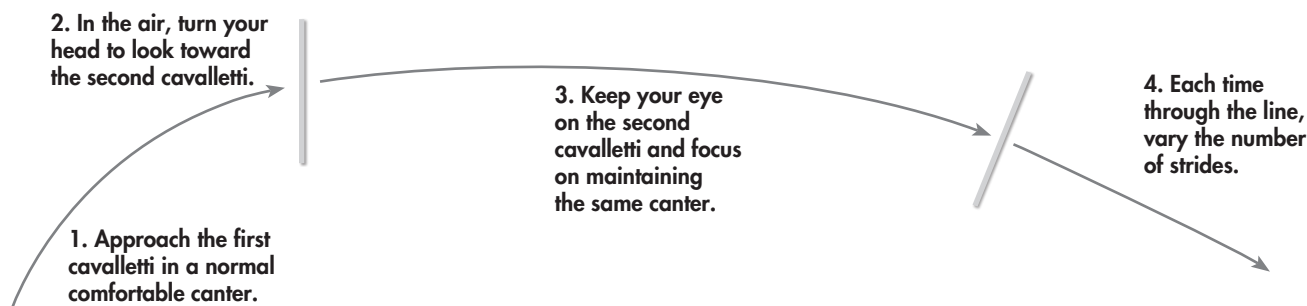


5  
Finally, we approach the line in a more collected canter. I sink my weight closer to the saddle and bring my upper body back slightly, asking Chance to shorten his stride. Because he is very experienced and adjustable, I aim to add two strides this time.



6  
After jumping the first cavalletti, I sit up a little more in the saddle and ask him to maintain this collected canter all the way to the second cavalletti. Compare his shorter stride and more compressed frame here to the canter we had in Photo 4. Although this is harder work for him, he's still responding obediently to my rein contact and staying straight through his body, so we'll arrive at the second cavalletti in a nice balance.

## Variation: Two Cavalletti on a Bending Line



Ride the line about five times in each direction. Ride to the center of each pole on the same track every time, making adjustments in your canter to produce the desired number of strides. Turn the page to see photos of the exercise. →

his body so much. Or you might need to encourage him to give you a better-quality canter.

### Variation: Two Cavalletti On a Bending Line

Once the exercise is going well, try a small variation: Set the raised poles up on a bending line, still five to eight strides apart. Just as you did before, make a plan to ride the line about five

times in each direction, varying the number of strides in whatever way you think would benefit your horse the most. Ride to the center of each pole on the same track every time, making adjustments in your canter—rather than to the track—to produce the desired number of strides.

This, too, will give you lots of valuable information about your horse's tendencies. For example, he may be harder to turn in one direction than the other. In practice at home, we all try to



## Variation: Two Cavalletti on a Bending Line



To begin this exercise on a bending line, I approach the first cavalletti in a normal canter. In the air, I turn to look at the second cavalletti. Chance has lost his straightness, shifting his body slightly to the right and swapping leads in the air. (Notice his left front leg is higher than his right, which means he's changing to his stronger left lead.) This is a great example of how this exercise reveals your horse's strengths and weaknesses so you know how to plan for what he might do in the show ring. The next time I ride this line, I'll use my core strength and inside leg to straighten his body.



As soon as he lands, I use my inside leg to push him back out to the track and then ask for a flying change. Rather than letting that disrupt our rhythm and balance, I keep my eye on the second cavalletti and focus on maintaining the same canter we had in the approach. As a result, Chance continues smoothly along the bending line.



Over the second cavalletti, I keep slightly firmer pressure on my inside leg to remind Chance to stay straight in his body in the air and land on the right lead. I'll use this knowledge in the show ring, remembering to be careful to keep him from diving to the right when riding bending lines on his right lead.

correct these weaknesses, but horses often revert to what is more comfortable for them, especially in the show ring. So the better you know your horse, the better plan you can make for him in the competition arena.

### Ride by Feel

Keep all of this information in mind when you walk your course at a show. Remember the feeling of the canter you had when practicing at home and the difference between adding and leaving out strides.

Also note where turns and bending lines might be more challenging—or easier—for your horse's particular tendencies. If he's hard to turn left, for example, left turns on course might come up more quickly for you than for other riders.

It's important not to overthink once you enter the show ring, so do most of your thinking when walking the course beforehand. Study it thoroughly and make a good plan suitable for you and your horse. Once you are mounted, take a moment to clear your mind and then enjoy the ride! 🐾



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# Hands-On HealthCheck



A top veterinarian explains how to assess your horse's physical state with an eye to keeping him sound.

**By Timothy R. Ober, DVM,  
with Elaine Pascoe**

**Y**ou have plans for your horse this year—a summer of shows or a new level of training, perhaps. But will he be able to do what you want? You expect him to be an athlete. While you're reaching for your goal, you also need to keep your eye on his condition.

This article will help you develop a system of observation, so you can monitor your horse's physical state and recognize when it changes as a result of training and competing. The steps I'll outline focus on areas where I commonly see problems in sporthorses—the neck and back, forelimbs and hind limbs, and the feet. Some of these steps should be followed each time you ride your horse. From time to time, you'll do a more thorough evaluation, assessing your horse standing and in motion, in hand and under tack.

What will you look for? You should find the same range of motion and the same degree of reaction to firm but gentle hand pressure, on the right and left

sides of his body. If he moves asymmetrically or reacts more sharply to pressure in one area, suspect a problem. This isn't always as clear as you might wish—partly because most horses (like most people) have a strong side and a weak side. By regularly and systematically observing your horse, though, you'll learn what's normal for him, and you'll be able to quickly recognize when something isn't right. Monitoring subtle changes, recognizing patterns of soreness and taking action at the appropriate time are the keys to keeping your horse sound.

## **BEFORE YOU RIDE**

Grooming and tacking up give you an opportunity to check your horse's condition every time you ride. Get into the habit of looking him over for obvious problems—bites, scrapes, loose shoes or an unusual stance (consistently pointing a toe or resting one leg, for example)—before you mount.

Assess each leg from knee or hock to hoof. Visually, look for swelling or other signs of asymmetry between left and right legs. Then, run your hands down one leg, comparing it to its opposite leg, to spot differences that could mean trouble. While



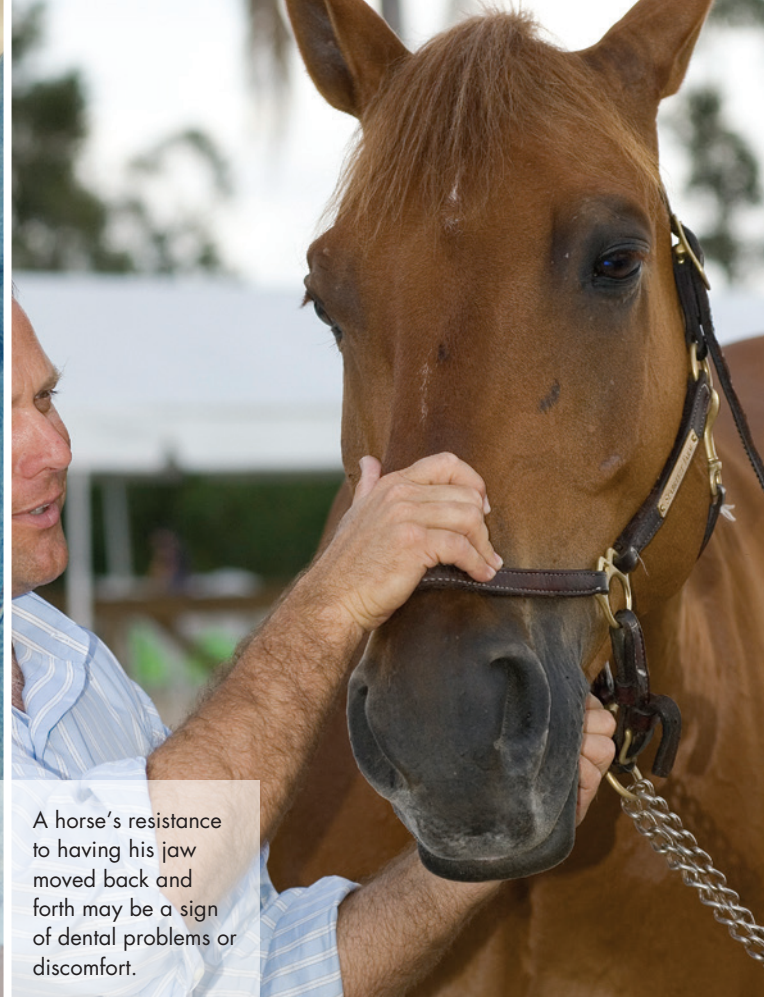
**TIP:** Get into the habit of carefully looking over your horse daily to know what's normal—or not—for

him. This will allow you to address small problems before they become big ones.





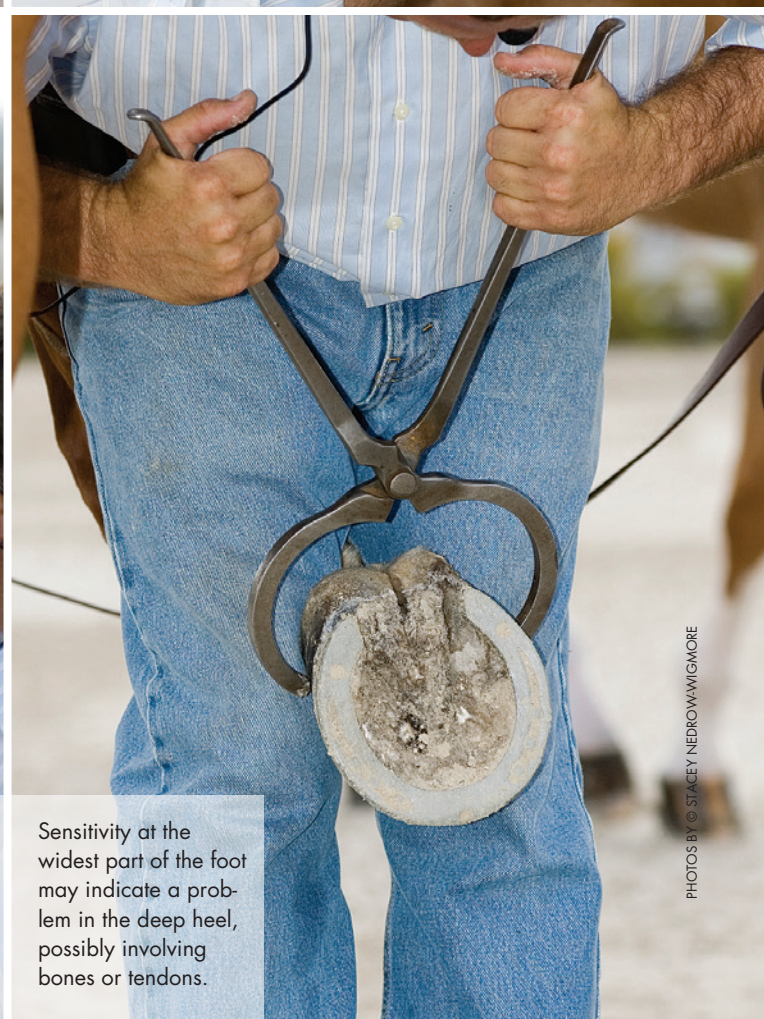
Become familiar with the size, shape and reactivity of your horse's suspensory ligament to monitor any changes.



A horse's resistance to having his jaw moved back and forth may be a sign of dental problems or discomfort.



Check for asymmetry and signs of soreness by lightly pressing the flaps of your fingers along his back muscles.



Sensitivity at the widest part of the foot may indicate a problem in the deep heel, possibly involving bones or tendons.





I palpate the horse's superficial digital flexor tendon starting high behind the knee, looking for heat, swelling and sensitivity.



The arrow above shows the location of a splint. The hard lump was caused by a stress injury to the splint bone.

Anatomy of a horse's lower leg.

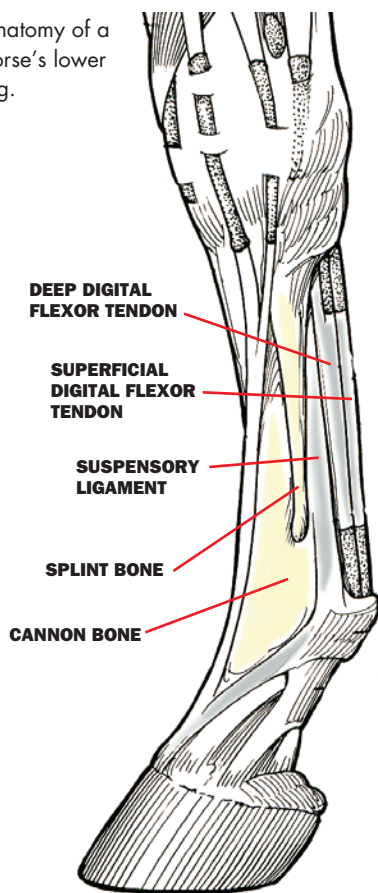


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heat and swelling are classic signs of injury. I find sensitivity to pressure the most useful gauge in this daily check. Note your horse's reactions as you apply consistent and firm but gentle pressure to key structures, including common trouble sites:

- The digital flexor tendons, which flex your horse's leg and help support his fetlock when he puts weight on his foot, are easy to see and feel. Find them running down the back of his lower leg—the flat, ribbonlike superficial digital flexor closest to the surface and the cordlike deep digital flexor beneath it deeper into the leg.
- The suspensory ligament, which helps support his fetlock, runs down the back of his cannon bone from just below the knee (or hock). About two thirds of the way down, it splits into two branches that continue down around his fetlock to the long pastern bone. The body and branches of this ligament are fairly easy to feel. High up, it's hidden by the tendons and splint bones. Becoming familiar with the size, shape and reactivity of these structures during routine palpation—consistent and firm but gentle pressure—is useful in monitoring changes.

- Lumps—called splints—arise from stress injuries to the splint bones, which run

down each side of his cannon from the knee or hock and end about two-thirds of the way to the fetlock. Old splints are cold, hard and smooth to the touch, and your horse won't flinch when you press gently on the area. Fresh or active splints are typically sensitive to pressure and may be warm.

- Joints—fetlock, knee, hock, stifle—are all easily palpable. Monitor for swelling or heat originating within the joint.

Compare your horse's responses as you check one leg to his responses in the opposing leg. Reactions can be subtle—tensing a bit or moving away from pressure—and don't always mean he's sore. If you're not sure, go on with your check and then return to the suspect area. If you still get a reaction, there may be a problem.

## UNDER TACK

When you ride, be alert for subtle signs of physical problems that may appear well before obvious lameness develops. Ask yourself these questions—and if you're not sure about the answers, ask a knowledgeable ground person to watch.

- Does my horse tense when I mount?
- Does he start out with short, mincing steps and move forward freely only after a canter?
- Does he travel in a long, disconnected frame? That is, is he unwilling to bring his hind end up under himself or really use his hindquarters as he moves?
- Is connection more difficult to the right or to the left?
- Does he resist bending or yielding to one side?
- Does he resist taking a lead or voluntarily swap off in the canter?
- Over fences, does he push off weakly? Jump flat? Jump to one side?

Many of these clues suggest soreness in the back. A horse who shows tension when mounted or resists bending to one side or the other may be feeling discomfort in his back or lower neck. Swapping off or resisting a lead can hint at a stifle problem, back problem or a subtle soreness in a lower leg. Poor coupling—that long, disconnected frame—can be sign of



stiffness in the lower back (the lumbar/sacral region) or a hock or other hind-leg lameness. Back pain can also arise secondarily to a hock or other hind-leg lameness.

Sometimes these signs are dismissed as training problems. Sometimes they *are* training problems—and it can be difficult even for veterinarians to sort out what's really going on. But when a good rider or trainer can't work through problems like these, or when they suddenly appear in a horse who never showed the problem before, it's worth investigating further to find out if there's a physical basis.

## A CLOSER LOOK: IN HAND

Make a more complete assessment every week or two, the day after a big school or a show, or anytime you suspect a problem. Start with your horse standing square, on level ground, and go over his body from head to toe. Besides close scrutiny, use palpation and manipulation to gauge his reactions to pressure, his muscle tone and symmetry, and the range of motion in different areas of his body. I'll briefly describe what to do, but ask your veterinarian to show you these techniques. The demonstration will take only a few minutes, and you'll get reliable results if you learn to use these tools correctly.

### At the head:

■ Look for right-left symmetry. For example, the masseter muscles—the flat muscles at the cheeks—should be equally developed, right and left. If one bulges

more, your horse may have a dental problem that's causing him to chew more on one side.

■ Check the grinding motion of your horse's jaw. Put one hand on his nose, lightly grasp his lower jaw with the other hand and gently move his lower jaw a little to one side and then to the other. It should slide easily for a half inch or so before your horse needs to open his mouth. If he isn't used to this, he may be surprised, so be sure to stand where you won't get clipped if he flips his head. Once he understands what you're doing, resistance may be a sign of discomfort from a dental problem or a problem in the temporomandibular joint (TMJ), which connects his lower jaw to his skull.

### Neck and back:

Pressing lightly with the flats of your fingers, feel along his neck, withers and the large muscles that run down his back, a couple of inches on each side of his spine. Start on one side and work back to his hindquarters, then do the other side.

■ Look for asymmetrical muscle development and signs of soreness—areas where his muscle feels tight and hard or where he flinches or drops his back in response to the light pressure. Keep in mind that many horses react to pressure in the back muscles even if they're not in pain. You'll get a sense of what's normal for your horse after you've done the exam a few times.

■ Test the range of motion through his neck by asking him to bring his head down and to each side.

One way to do this is with carrot stretches. Hold a carrot below his nose and slowly lower it to his front feet, getting him to stretch down as he reaches for it; then to the center of his chest, to get him to flex at the poll. Difficulty following the carrot to the ground could indicate stiffness in the neck; to his chest, stiffness in the poll. Compare his bend on each side by bringing the carrot back toward his elbow and then his hip, getting him to follow it with his nose first to one side and then the other. Most horses can reach around at least to the girth area, and some can reach farther.

If your horse can't stretch as far to one side as to the other, a back or neck problem may be restricting his range of motion. But many horses will endure some discomfort to get that carrot, so the stretches may not tell you all you want to know. To get a better picture, manipulate his neck, guiding it through its range of motion manually. Put one hand on his neck just in front of his shoulder blade to act as a pivot point, and gently bring his head around. The idea is not to force the movement but to note the degree of resistance you feel to each side.

### Legs and feet:

■ Check your horse's legs as described in the "Before Your Ride" section (page 10). Pick up each in turn and gently move the joints of the lower limb through their normal range of motion, looking for greater-than-normal resistance or restricted range. To check his knee joint, for example, lift

Standing at the front of your horse, compare the muscles on both sides of his neck, looking for symmetrical muscle development.

Using your hand as a pivot point just in front of his shoulder blade, gently bring your horse's head around to check his range of motion.



his foreleg as if you were going to clean his hoof, then flex his knee by bringing his foot up toward his elbow.

■ Stand back for a good look at your horse's feet. They should be symmetrical and balanced. Ideally, the coronary band should be parallel to the ground when viewed from the front. (Hoof balance is linked to conformation, and every horse doesn't meet that ideal.) When he steps forward, his hoof should land flat, not toe first or one side before the other. Keep an eye on how his shoes wear—uneven wear suggests that his hoof isn't meeting the ground flat.

■ Look for cracks in his wall and sole. Feel around his coronary band and heels for sensitivity or swelling.

■ Check the hoof itself with hoof testers. This is a skill that every horseman should have. Learn it by watching your veterinarian and asking questions.

Reactions to the hoof testers at certain areas may point to different types of problems. Sensitivity at the front of his foot or at the superficial heel (the part of the foot farthest to the back) suggests bruising, an abscess or a similar problem involving the hoof capsule. Sensitivity at the widest part of the foot may suggest a problem in the deep heel, involving bones, tendons or other structures inside the foot.



Sensitivity to hoof testers in the front part of a horse's foot may signal bruising or an abscess in the hoof capsule.



Watching how your horse uses his body on a small circle on level ground will allow you to look for asymmetrical motion, which may point to lameness.

## IN MOTION

Watching your horse move on level ground and firm footing will give you a picture of how he uses his body. With a helper to lead him, watch him trot straight away and then back toward you. I also find it helpful to longe the horse on small circles (8 to 10 meters) at both the trot and canter.

Again, you're looking for symmetry. At the trot, the legs work in diagonal pairs. Compare the actions of each pair and of each limb individually, in relation to the motion of his body. At all gaits you want to see your horse use both sides of his body equally and bend equally in both directions. Soreness in one leg will cause him to compensate by throwing weight onto the opposing (sound) limb, and that makes his movement asymmetrical.

### For a sore forelimb:

■ Look for asymmetrical motion through his head and neck. Remember that a lame horse will load the more comfortable limb with more weight, so you're looking for extra load on the good limb. A horse who looks "heavy to the left front" is usually lame in the right front.

■ On a circle, lameness often will be more apparent in one direction or the other. Your horse may appear more lame or not bend so well when the sore limb is on the inside. But this isn't always the case—some problems are more pronounced when the sore limb is on the outside.

### For a sore hind limb:

■ Look for asymmetrical motion through the pelvis. You'll almost always see more motion through the gluteal muscle region—the large muscles of the hindquarters—of the lame limb. There could be more action in the muscles of the lame side as your horse tenses those muscles, presumably trying to spare the leg.

■ Your horse may draw the sore limb farther under his body (toward his midline)—often a sign of a hock problem.

■ The sore leg may move forward more slowly, so it doesn't complete the forward phase of the stride.

■ Toe-dragging is another telltale sign, particularly when it's more pronounced in one leg.

By regularly assessing your horse while he's standing and in motion, you'll be able to quickly spot changes in his physical condition. Your observations won't tell you what's wrong. For that, you'll need your vet. But they will alert you to problems early on—with luck, before those problems blossom and sideline your horse for the season. 🐾

*As a veterinarian for the U.S. Equestrian Team in show jumping, **Timothy Ober, DVM**, has worked with top equine athletes at the Olympic Games and other international competitions. Dr. Ober is a member of the respected John R. Steele & Associates Inc. veterinary practice based in West Palm Beach, Florida. He has spoken about his system of observation at many events.*



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