



Transitions

A transition is any change from one state to another, either between the different gaits or lengthening and shortening of stride length within a gait itself. Transitions have many uses in training horses and riders quite apart from the obvious need to have a means of asking your horse to go faster, then slower and eventually stop when required. They also allow a rider to test their horse's balance, train the flexibility and power of his haunches and develop the degree of collection necessary for more demanding movements like half-pass, piaffe and canter pirouettes.

As we mentioned in our last article, the father of dressage training, Francois Robichon de la Guérinière stated very clearly in his writings that "*the hand is the primary aid and must act first*" and nowhere is this more important than in transitions. Now there are many people who, having been taught that hands are 'bad' and that aids should come from 'the seat', might regard that statement as something like blasphemy. So, let's begin exploring transitions by understanding how both of these points of view are actually equally 'true'.

The key lies in understanding that your 'hand' is really an extension of your spine, your lumbar spine in particular. Here's an easy way to understand this idea: Try sitting on a stool or straight-backed chair with your hands held in the normal riding position. If you stretch your spine up towards the ceiling, you should notice that your hands move upwards too (assuming you have them 'connected' to the rest of your body). This is exactly how a skilled rider performs the 'half-halt' to achieve a shortening of the gait or a downwards transition.

Assuming that you are relaxed and well-balanced in the saddle, able to stay on your horse without gripping with any arm or leg muscles and that your horse is supple, well-balanced and paying attention, it's quite likely that he will notice the subtle changes in your pelvis that occur just before he starts to feel the upwards effect of the hand movement transmitted to his mouth through the action of your reins. The more attentive he is, the earlier he will respond and you, naturally, can then spare him the actual upward movement of your hand because it has become redundant. If he ignores or is unable to 'hear' the subtle action of your spine, however, your hand will have to 'amplify' the message. The aim, as with all the aids, is to do as little as possible but as much as necessary – allowing your horse to progressively train you to stop amplifying, so to speak, by his lighter and more immediate responses.

There is another vitally important use of the hand that is also trained through transitions – the impulsive effect. In the mid 20th Century, the French "wonder rider", Etienne Beudant wrote a book entitled "Hand without legs" because, as he put it, if the hand is used correctly, the legs become superfluous.



(Transitions cont.)

As an impulsive aid, the action of your hand (which again really means the action of your spine) is exactly the opposite of the half-halt. Just as you need to breathe in before breathing out, you will need to stretch up a little in the manner of a half-halt before subtly reversing that movement and slightly opening the fingers of one or both hands. In fact, the action of the spine is so similar to breathing in and out that some people describe using the impulsive effect of the hand in exactly those terms.

Now, while your hand can easily amplify a weak signal from your spine (or 'seat') in the case where a half-halt is ignored, there is nothing further you can usefully do with your hand or seat if your impulsive action doesn't produce the desired result. So, in this case you would resort to the impulsive leg aids developed right back at the beginning of training to reinforce and amplify the impulsive actions of your spine and hand. A horse that responds with impulsion to the simple invitation of your seat or hand without requiring a reminder from your legs is said to be 'forward', a definition that has nothing to do with the speed of the movement.

Transitions are a great way to test and develop these aids and gradually replace the relatively crude signals of the hand or legs with much more subtle indications from your spine (riding only from the 'seat', in other words). Upwards and downwards transitions go together in pairs out of obvious necessity.

Assuming that your horse is 'forward' as described above, all that is necessary to achieve a very refined transition from walk to trot is a slight half-halt immediately followed by the impulsive action including simultaneously releasing the fingers on both hands. If your horse doesn't take the invitation (if he is not 'forward', in other words) then give a reminder (which is, of course, also a correction) by simultaneously touching and opening the calves of both legs. For simple canter transitions, the only difference is that the impulsive action includes opening the fingers on one hand only, the hand on the same side as the desired lead-leg, which can be backed up by the touch and opening of the rider's leg on the same side if necessary.

Especially in downwards transitions, the quality of the movement is directly related to the horse's balance immediately before the request is made. In the beginning, therefore, it can be useful to practice asking for the downwards transition after only two or three steps of trot or canter. In this way your horse will learn to anticipate a possible downwards transition and keep himself in a better balance even when moving forward with more energy. As his balance develops, you can gradually increase the number of strides.