

Training for Courage

By Paul Dufresne

GAIT DEVELOPMENT: TROT, PART 5

Training performance movement begins at the walk, and when a horse begins to have more confidence in forward movement and balancing a rider it is good to encourage the horse to understand energy in a positive way by going to the TROT.



Two angles of 15-year-old Lyla asking for a walking roll-over or part of a serpentine phase; you can see the rein aid and simultaneous leg aid



Ian is a green horse going from walk to trot out of a serpentine; there is a bit of tail action as he is a bit anxious about being asked to move out



Ian has settled down and is being asked to move out from walk to trot after initial anxiousness (horses settle quickly)

In some cases, this causes anxiousness in both the rider and the horse, not knowing if he will explode with excitement or fear, while trying to balance you. If you prepared the horse in-hand to handle the changes in energy from walk-trot-canter in a good bend with a relaxed poll, the chances are that your horse will be far less inclined to panic when asked to trot under saddle. Good preparation in-hand applies to all horses, whether you are schooling a green horse or re-training an older horse, to ensure there are no holes in the foundation.

You should work to accomplish a reasonably good serpentine (or the roll-over phase) at the walk with some control of the reach of the forehand before moving the horse to the trot. The reason for this is that one can control the hindquarters to add impulsion, or to take that impulsion away should the horse be inclined to get excited. If the horse is unsure of the situation, you can turn the horse to a safer place, stop him and regain emotional composure.

The best way I have found to get a horse to go into the trot is to do a step or two in the bend of the serpentine and ask

for forward energy as the horse crosses underneath himself. Adding the energy when the horse is engaged will make the transition into the trot smoother. Because you are performing a flexion in this move that causes the horse to relax, you can bump the horse with both legs to encourage him to go faster and the horse will almost surely go to the trot. The key is that once the horse goes into a trot, do not go very far before bending to prepare for another serpentine and transition to a walk. So the sequence would be to cross under with bend and a flexion, then push forward to a trot for five to ten strides, then prepare for another partial serpentine to a walk; then repeat the whole sequence again.

The serpentine to a trot works well to facilitate engagement and calm. The trot to serpentine also works well because a serpentine at the trot at first is tricky for the horse to negotiate. This causes him to readily slow down to the walking roll-over. The horse can coordinate it at a walk much more easily and this tends to diffuse the energy of the trot. The accompanying flexion causes the horse to gain softness and calm. When your horse can do this

sequence consistently with good energy control you are ready to add a bit more complexity.

The next progression is to start with a walking roll-over to a trot, but in the next roll-over ask your horse to continue at a trot rather than dropping down to the walk. At first your horse may wish to drop to a walk, so you may need to keep bumping with your legs to keep the energy of the trot. If the horse switches to a walk, stay calm, don't worry and try again. When you come out of the roll-over in a trot, use a half halt to transition to a calm walk for several strides to reward the horse for maintaining the trot. This technique will always work and with an experienced rider the horse will begin to understand in one to five tries. If you are less experienced, it may take five to fifty tries, but you will still get it. The only time this will fail is if you didn't prepare correctly on the ground or at the walk under saddle. Just keep trying calmly.

Continue practicing the transitions from walk to trot (and trot to walk) until your horse can maintain a trot while doing a series of roll-overs on one bend as well as from one rein/bend to another.

Training, cont'd



Half of a serpentine/roll-over on one rein at a trot



Softening after a serpentine at the trot; well engaged and elevated (horses will also settle with even more float in the rein with more repetition)

You can then add a transition from a trot to a single rein stop, and a stop on two reins with a slight bend.

The trotting serpentine is the best exercise/technique I have ever used to soften a horse at the trot while creating a positive energetic state. I continue using this technique until a horse can give me a very soft jog that I can easily ride on a loose rein. When the horse can support me in the correct posture with a soft poll I can move on to other progressions. Any time my horse gets anxious or tight on one side, I immediately go into serpentine until he finds that calm place again, becoming soft in the reins and steady in his energy and emotional state.

The trotting serpentine is one of the best ways to calm a very energetic horse. It is also one of the best ways to soften a stiff horse. When applying this technique to a less energetic horse, I do not persist at the trot for long periods. I keep the trot phase short with lots of walking transitions so the horse understands how to energize positively. Staying at the trot too long tends to suck the life out of a low-energy horse. The serpentine is the most useful exercise in improving the walk and trot especially when combined with the next part, the “roll-over and reach at the trot.” As the horse becomes fitter, I will do serpentine from rein to rein for 5-10 minutes until the horse is TOTALLY SOFT! The horse should not lean on the rein and the trot should become very comfortable to ride or you have it wrong. Enjoy your soft horse.

Paul Dufresne is a writer, performer, trainer and clinician in Pritchard, BC, who educates in Natural Horsemanship, Classical Arts, Liberty and Circensic Dressage. He teaches people to understand horses and, more importantly, how to tap into their relaxation reflexes in ways seldom seen in North America. In doing so, he is able to guide people in creative experiences where the human learns to be an effective, safe leader. The horse learns to be more emotionally secure and will respectfully follow while developing athleticism in a mutually courageous manner by having a deeper understanding of how they affect each other. Visit his website at www.trainingforcourage.com.