



HorseSense Learning Levels



HORSEMANSHIP LESSON PLANS

GREEN LEVEL

SET #1: Canter With Confidence

Written by Nikki and Dana Surrusco, HorseSense Learning Levels, LLC.
Illustrations by Rhonda Hagy


www.HorseSenseLearningLevels.com

Visit our website to learn more about the Learning Levels program.



HorseSense Learning Levels materials are intended for general informational purposes only; they do not constitute legal advice and are presented without any representation or warranty whatsoever, including as to the accuracy or completeness of the information. HorseSense Learning Levels, LLC is not responsible for any errors or omissions or for the results obtained from the use of such information.

Limitation of Liability and Indemnity. You agree and acknowledge that you are fully responsible for your own acts, and that if you, or other individuals are injured in conjunction with any information or services provided by HorseSense Learning Levels, it was your choice alone to rely on that information or service and you do so at your own risk. Use of any HorseSense materials, whether for personal or professional means, constitutes your agreement to indemnify HorseSense Learning Levels from all liability.

Legal Use of the Learning Levels Instructional Materials. Our resources are for your personal use. Instructors, trainers, and other equine professionals may photocopy the materials for use with their students, but may not sell or otherwise distribute any information contained therein for financial gain. All images, text, and materials provided through our website are copyrighted and may not be reproduced without written permission from HorseSense Learning Levels.

Special thanks to all of the HorseSense students who are featured here.

Illustrations by Rhonda Hagy

Photographs by our amazing
barn family volunteer
photographers.

©2007 HorseSense Learning Levels, LLC –
rev. 2020
All Rights Reserved.

LESSON # 1

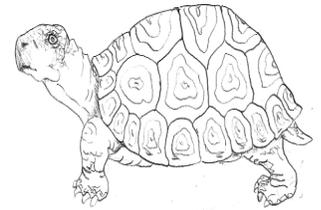
HorseSense Learning Levels

FLATWORK SKILLS

GREEN LEVEL

TORTOISE AND HARE

OBJECTIVE: *Students will learn how to rate the horse's speed at walk and trot, practicing transitions within each gait.*



EQUIPMENT NEEDED:

- 4 CONES

PREP

Ensure that rail of arena is clear and free from obstacles such as jumps or barrels. Set a cone at the end of each long side, allowing generous room for students to ride through corners.

INTRO

"By now, you've spent a lot of time practicing transitions between each gait. **Who can give me an example of an upward transition? A downward transition?** Today we'll be learning to ride a different kind of transition, changing speed instead of gait."

5
MIN

LESSON AND EXERCISES

 **Discuss:** Define **rhythm** and **tempo**. Invite each student to count out their horse's footfall rhythm at the walk, first individually, then all together. Note how everyone counts at a slightly different tempo. **ASK: Where would your horse's natural walk fall on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is barely moving and 10 is as powerful as a trot?**

5
MIN

 **Discuss:** Aids used to slow and increase the walk tempo. Make sure students apply pressure intermittently, especially restraining aids. If you haven't already, use the term **half-halt**, describing the mechanics with a level of detail appropriate to your audience.

5
MIN

 **PRACTICE:** Slowing walk to its absolute limit. Ask students to find the "**almost halt**" without letting horses come to a full stop. This is the **Tortoise walk**. Then ask students to find the upper limit or "**almost trot**". Now they are moving like **Hares**, or **Racecars**. Once students can smoothly move between the two walks, try at the trot. **ASK: How can you use your seat to influence the horse while you are posting?**

10
MIN

Emphasize: It's okay if horses occasionally break gait - it is a normal part of the learning process as students work to refine communication.

 **PRACTICE:** One at a time, send students around arena on rail. Ask them to show a Tortoise trot on the short sides and a Hare/Racecar trot on the long sides, using the cones to mark transitions. For added difficulty, switch the trots and ask for Tortoise on long side.

10
MIN

 **PRACTICE:** Line students up at one end of the arena, between the two corner cones. Challenge students to a **walking race** - who can pass through the other cones first without breaking gait? Now try a **Tortoise race** - who can get there last? Repeat at trot.

15
MIN

REVIEW

- ? Does your horse's tempo naturally change as you ride around the arena? Where?
- ? What happens if you try to slow your horse down using only your reins? Why do you think this is?

5
MIN

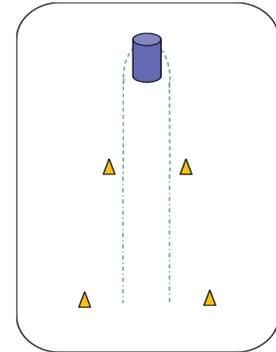
LESSON # 1

TORTOISE AND HARE

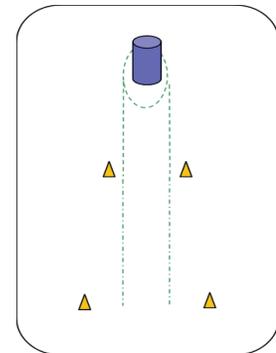
GREEN LEVEL

FUN AND GAMES

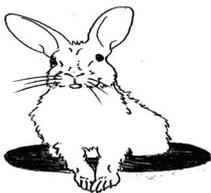
-  **Award a prize** to winners of your races. If you are teaching a group of horses and ponies with very different gaits, come up with a suitable handicap for naturally faster horses, or strategically pair students off in match races you think will be fair.
-  Students of all ages tend to love the arena races so much, you can easily double the amount of time you spend on them. Add a twist, such as challenging students to a timed **Walk/Trot Arena Race**. Students are only allowed to trot in the upper half of the arena, requiring them to balance their need for a speedy walk with their horse's competitive nature in the final stretch.
-  Another variation on the arena race that works well for rating speed is the **Full Circle Arena Race**. Encourage students to trot the whole pattern, using their slow, compact trot to negotiate the circle around the barrel and their big trot for the straightaways.
-  Combine a game of **Tortoise and Racecar** with **Red Light, Green Light**. Call out each gait, including variations in the walk and trot. Any student that fails to make a transition within the time allowed is issued a ticket or is out of the game. Students will quickly realize that to walk from a Racecar trot, they'll need to put their rating skills to use.
-  Use rating skills to practice safe passing. See **Sample Lesson #1 Leapfrog**.



Walk/Trot Arena Race



Full Circle Arena Race



Hare? Racecar? Know your audience and use terms that work for them. We have found that older students are familiar with the story of the Tortoise and the Hare, and get the analogy immediately. Younger students often have no idea that "hare" means "rabbit," and may not think of a rabbit as a metaphor for speed. We find that "Turtle" and "Racecar" work better with children, especially if they can imagine a racecar revving the engine!

FINAL NOTES

-  Keep in mind that **rating speed is not quite the same as lengthening and shortening stride**. Ideally, your students will get some actual lengthened or shortened strides, but if a change in tempo is all you get, no big deal! Their ability to influence stride length will improve with time and experience.
-  **Accidental canters happen**, and you may create one as students learn how to find the upper edge to their horse's trot. If your students are ready to canter - and they should be by this point! - this can actually be a good way to sneak in a brief experience, making the first official canter lesson less intimidating. **Emphasize that a few canter strides are no reason to panic.** At the same time, **reviewing emergency stops at the trot is always a good idea**, especially when challenging students to a head-to-head race.

LESSON #2

FLATWORK SKILLS

GREEN LEVEL

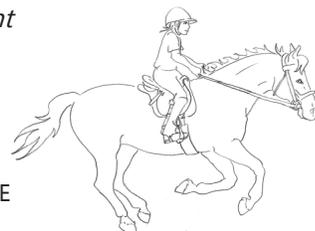
FIRST CANTER

OBJECTIVE: To safely introduce students to riding the canter by helping each student achieve a short canter on both the left and right leads.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED:

☐ LONGEING EQUIPMENT, IF NEEDED

☐ OPTIONAL CONES TO DIVIDE ARENA WORKSPACE



PREP

Clear arena as much as possible - an empty arena marked by only a few cones is ideal. If introducing canter on the longe line, consider longeing all school horses prior to lesson to ensure that canter transitions are smooth and quiet.

INTRO

As riders warm up at the walk, deliver the good news: Now that your students have developed a secure seat, and can communicate well enough to rate their horse's speed, they are ready to try riding the canter. **ASK: Who has been looking forward to this? The canter can be a little tricky at first, but once they get hang of it most riders decide it is their favorite gait!**

5
MIN

LESSON AND EXERCISES

 **Review:** Rating speed at the walk and trot. Practice until students can ride prompt transitions between "almost canter" and "almost walk" without losing posting rhythm.

10
MIN

 **Review:** Sitting trot and posting trot without stirrups, along rail of arena. Try **dropping stirrups in sitting trot and retrieving without breaking gait**. Assure students that there is no need to panic if they accidentally lose a stirrup during their short canter - they'll be just fine!

5
MIN

 **Discuss:** Mechanics of canter: three beats, non-equilateral gait with left and right lead. Explain that the walk swings the rider from side to side, the trot moves them up and down, and the canter rocks from front to back. Discuss your preferred seat for the day: light or full.

10
MIN

 **Discuss:** Aids for upward transition to canter and downward to trot. Keep it simple - you'll be helping!

 **PRACTICE:** Gather students at one end the arena. Send one student at a time out to rail OR attach longe line. If horse lacks impulsion or attentiveness, ride several **Tortoise and Hare** transitions to prepare. When ready, count down from three before assisting student with voice or whip in upward transition to canter. Canter one long side of the arena, or one circle, before returning to trot and walk. Repeat with remaining students.

15
MIN

 **PRACTICE:** If time allows and horses remain quiet, repeat the short canter on the other rein. **ASK: Does this lead feel different than the other side to you? In what way?**

10
MIN

REVIEW

- ? Did you enjoy your canter?! How would you describe the movement of the horse's back?
- ? What did you find most challenging about the canter? Was it easier to go left or right?

5
MIN

LESSON #2

FIRST CANTER

GREEN LEVEL

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

The most important goals for your initial lesson in canter? Keep it safe and help your students fall in love!

How you do this is going to depend on a lot of factors: the size of your group, the size of your arena, your equine partners, and your students' individual strengths and weaknesses. At the very least, you'll have to make **two choices**:

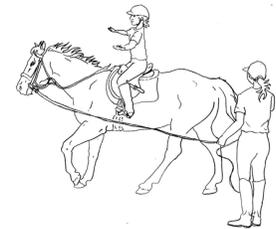
1) Will you ask your students to canter independently or on the longe line?

In other words, do you want students to be in control of the situation, or do you want to take the reins? **Pros to longeing include:**

- 🐾 Puts student at ease, since they can trust you to keep the horse's canter in control.
- 🐾 Allows student to hold onto pommel, mane or grab strap as necessary.
- 🐾 Allows them to focus entirely on the movement of the canter, without worrying about steering.
- 🐾 Can prevent accidents due to loss of control. Many falls at the canter occur when the horse goes off course and the rider overcorrects.

There are some **downsides to cantering on the longe line**, however:

- 🐾 It requires horse to be extremely balanced and obedient. Most horses need extensive training to become reliable longe partners in the canter.
- 🐾 It creates centripetal force, which may cause the student to become off-balance.
- 🐾 It requires your full attention, which leaves remaining riders in a group lesson unsupervised unless you have an assistant instructor.



For more on safe longeing criteria, see the **Introduction** to these lesson plans, as well as the Introduction to **Red Horsemanship** and **Yellow Horsemanship** lesson plans.

2) Will your students ride the canter in a light seat or full seat?

The discipline you teach and the tack you use will have a large influence on this decision. We find that **typically, cantering a light seat comes more naturally to most of our English students**, especially if they have developed a strong jumping position. We let most of our students ride the canter "like a hovercraft" for the first experience or two, introducing the sitting canter once they have a better sense of the movement and rhythm.

However, **we don't recommend the light seat for students with a tendency to perch or grab with the knees**. We feel it's safer for these students to get used to the canter while riding very slightly behind the motion, and introduce the light seat once we're satisfied with their base of support. Always be ready to **adjust your preferred style to suit the situation and individual student!**

FINAL NOTES

- 🐾 If it's been a while since you reviewed **survival skills**, include a brief refresher on **safety seat**, the **one-rein stop** and the **pulley rein**, just in case!
- 🐾 The **first intentional canter is an exciting milestone in a new rider's career**. Bring lots of enthusiasm to this lesson, and cheer and applaud every successful canter stride. Ask an assistant or volunteer parent to take pictures, and share on social media platforms and your barn's newsletter. At HorseSense, we created a collage of first canter photos on a bulletin board hung in the barn lounge. Joining the board was a rite of passage!

LESSON #3

FLATWORK SKILLS

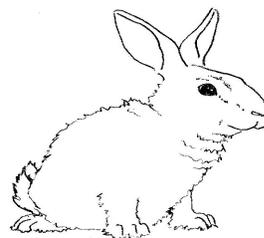
GREEN LEVEL

GIDDY UP

OBJECTIVE: For students to learn how to correctly cue their horses for an upward transition to the canter and a downward transition to the trot.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED:

- POLES OR CONES TO DIVIDE ARENA WORKSPACE
- 2 CONES
- OPTIONAL LONGEING EQUIPMENT



PREP

Use poles to divide a large arena into a "canter zone" and "holding area." Set cones against rail in the canter zone, a minimum of 60' apart. If longeing, assemble all longeing equipment.

INTRO

"Who enjoyed cantering last week? Sometimes the hardest part of cantering is convincing the horse to do it in the first place. Today, we'll be practicing asking our horses to canter and then come back to the trot."

5
MIN

LESSON AND EXERCISES

 **Review:** Use **Tortoise and Hare** exercise to practice rating speed at the walk and trot.

10
MIN

 **Review:** Walk/trot transitions along the rail. If time allows, play a single round of the **Transition Tournament** (see **Yellow Lesson #13 Transition Tournament**).

10
MIN

Emphasize: The goal is to whisper and have the horse respond. Students should use **half-halts** and **clear body language** to ask the horse to "pick up the phone" in preparation for each transition. Otherwise, they can shout and the horse still won't get the message!

 **Discuss:** Aids for upward transition to canter and downward to trot. Talk students through the process much more thoroughly than in previous lesson, explaining that the goal is for them to cue for transitions independently.

5
MIN

 **PRACTICE:** Gather students in holding area. Send one student at a time out to rail of canter zone OR attach longe line. When ready, assist student in achieving **three short canters: 1)** with you performing the transition, so they can focus entirely on balance, **2)** with you and the student asking the horse to canter together, and **3)** with you standing quietly allowing them to cue for the canter on their own. If time allows after all students have had a turn, repeat on the other lead.

15
MIN

 **PRACTICE:** Bring each student back into the canter zone for a final set of transitions. Ask them to walk or trot one full lap of the area first, on or off the longe line, "calling" the horse and asking him to pick up the phone. **ASK: Is your horse ready to talk canter? How can you tell?** When student is prepared, have them try to canter at the first cone and trot at the second. **ASK: Who can get their transition the closest to the cone?**

10
MIN

REVIEW

- ? Do you find it easier to ask your horse to transition upward or downward? Why?
- ? What happens if we continue to post to the trot while asking the horse to canter?

5
MIN

LESSON #3

GIDDY UP

GREEN LEVEL

FUN AND GAMES

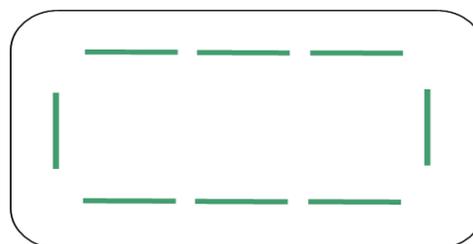
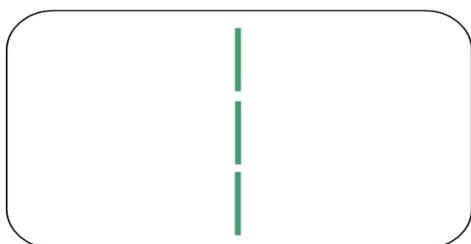
- 🐾 **Award a prize** to the student who can execute their transitions closest to the cones. Count each stride before or after the cone as a point, with the **lowest** score taking the prize.
- 🐾 If all your horses are relatively easy to cue and the transitions seem to be coming easily, you can follow up this lesson with a round of **Transition Tournament at the canter**. Give students a single lap if they are riding on the rail, three or four laps if they are working on a longe line or in a small space, and see who can ride the most transitions in and out of the canter in the time allowed. Emphasize that it's okay if all they can manage is two quality transitions - the canter takes up a lot more space than the trot, and their scores will reflect this!

TRAINING WHEELS

Even though the one-at-a-time format can slow down a group lesson, **we strongly recommend teaching this lesson with the divided arena and one-on-one canters**, whether you keep your students on the longe line or not. Consider that your students may be experiencing the canter for only the second time. They are still learning to balance and follow a strange new movement, and everything may feel a little scary and out of control.

If you aren't longeing, **position yourself where you can still influence the horse and help cue transitions**. It helps if your horses are responsive to voice commands - free longeing can be a valuable exercise to include in your school horses' training!

Working in a small space where you can't safely position waiting students to the outside? **Make the center of the arena the holding area**, and create a track of poles for your cantering horse to follow.



FINAL NOTES

- 🐾 Like the previous lesson, **designate the seat** you want your students to use for the duration of their short canters. **Use the initial canter to coach them to a place of balance**. If students can't control their bodies, they won't be able to control the horse.
- 🐾 Students still wobbly in the canter? **Switch this lesson with #4 Three Seats**. We like to involve students in transitions early on so they can gain additional practice in the lessons to come, but you can even teach this after **#5 Look, No Hands** if necessary.
- 🐾 Keep a watchful eye on each student's security and control. Even if they are on the longe line, **instruct them to come back to the trot if anything goes wrong** - and practice a few emergency stops in case of brake failure!

LESSON #4

FLATWORK SKILLS

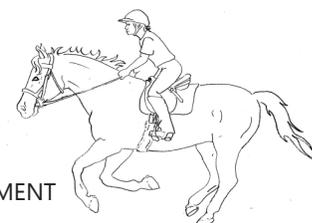
GREEN LEVEL

THREE SEATS

OBJECTIVE: For students to practice riding the canter in a full seat, light seat, and two-point position.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED:

- POLES OR CONES TO DIVIDE ARENA WORKSPACE
- OPTIONAL LONGEING EQUIPMENT



PREP	Use poles to divide a large arena into a "canter zone" and "holding area." If longeing, assemble all longeing equipment.	
INTRO	As riders warm up at the walk, discuss the different positions they have already learned to use in the saddle. ASK: What is the difference between a three-point seat and a two-point position? Which would you use to gallop? Which makes it easier to use your seat to communicate?" Explain the benefits to all three seats used to ride the canter.	5 MIN
LESSON AND EXERCISES	 Review: Changing seats at the walk and trot. Ask students to choose a magic number and count off strides, with students switching seats every time they reach their number.	10 MIN
	 PRACTICE: Ask students to get into two-point position and ride a simple pattern linking walk/trot/halt transitions and a circle or change of direction. ASK: Do you find it easier or more challenging to ride accurate figures and transitions in two-point? Why?	5 MIN
	 Discuss: The rider's lower leg should remain the same at the canter, with only the hip angle changing the position.	
	 PRACTICE: At the halt, ask all riders to imagine an analog clock face , with 12 o'clock directly above their head. Ask them to point their helmets at 12 o'clock (full seat), one o'clock (light seat), two o'clock (two-point position) and 3 o'clock (stretched out flat against horse's neck). Check leg and upper body position - can they maintain both?	5 MIN
	 PRACTICE: Gather students in holding area. Send one student at a time out to rail of canter zone OR attach longe line. When ready, assist student in achieving three short canters : first in the seat they've been practicing in over the past couple of lessons, then the other two seats in the order of your choice. Encourage students to assist you in cueing for transitions.	20 MIN
 PRACTICE: Repeat on the other lead. If students are secure, you may wish to keep the horse cantering this time , asking the student to demonstrate all three seats before returning to the trot and walk.	10 MIN	
REVIEW	? Which seat do you find the easiest in the canter? Why? ? What part of your body needs to swing with the horse to sit the canter?	5 MIN

LESSON #4

HorseSense Learning Levels

THREE SEATS

GREEN LEVEL

FUN AND GAMES

- Once students are comfortable transitioning between seats, practice switching using the **magic number**. You might also **call out "Up!" and "Down!"** at random intervals to prompt students to transition from a light seat to a full seat and vice versa.
- Put sitting canters to the test by playing a round of the **Bandana Game**. Fold a bandana diagonally to create a large triangle and place it across the seat of the rider's saddle. (Use the three points of the triangle as an analogy for the three points of contact in the rider's seat!) Challenge students to transition from walk or sitting trot to canter and see how long the bandana can stay in place.

This is a fairly difficult game for Green Level students, so help as much as necessary to ensure smooth transitions, and praise any distance they are able to canter harmoniously without losing the bandana. See **Orange Sample Lesson #1 Bandana Game** for more on using this technique to improve sitting gaits.



RIDE THE WAVE

Sitting the canter can be a difficult skill to learn. If your students have been cantering in a light seat or two-point position up to this point, you'll be devoting a large chunk of this lesson to teaching students to follow the motion in a full seat. You may even need to **add a lesson or two** focused specifically on this technique - especially if working with a group lesson where one-on-one time is limited.

Our tips for helping students develop a solid sitting canter:

- Use the longe line or a small, enclosed space** whenever possible. It is hard for students to concentrate on their seat if they are worried about controlling the horse.
- Have students ride with their **inside arm stretched overhead**.
- On the longe line, have students ride with their **outside hand on the pommel** of the saddle and their **inside hand on the cantle**.
- Have students **practice the hip motion used to ride the canter on the ground**. Yes, this looks and feels a little silly - your adult students will find it particularly difficult to perform with a straight face! - but it is a great way to practice swinging through the hips without letting legs or shoulders swing with them.
- Have students practice **breathing techniques** at the walk, trot and canter. Bouncing is often caused by tension.
- Student still isn't getting it? **Don't sweat it - this is early days yet**. Encourage them to sit just a few strides at a time and ride the remainder of their canter in a light seat. They'll still be getting a feel for the rhythm and movement, and you can come back later when they're more experienced and practice **cantering without stirrups** to develop a following seat.



This lesson is where your students will really reap the benefits of **Yellow Level work**. We have found that students that complete **Yellow Horsemanship** before learning to canter are quick to find their balance in all three seats. Take the time to build this foundation. **Shortcuts may provide your students with instant gratification but won't help them in the long run!**

LESSON #5

FLATWORK SKILLS

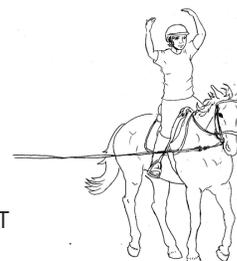
GREEN LEVEL

LOOK, NO HANDS

OBJECTIVE: For students to gain confidence in their seat and balance at the canter, riding with one or both arms outstretched.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED:

- ☐ POLES OR CONES TO DIVIDE ARENA WORKSPACE
- ☐ OPTIONAL LONGEING EQUIPMENT



PREP

Use poles to divide a large arena into a "canter zone" and "holding area." If longeing, assemble all longeing equipment.

INTRO

"Who remembers learning how to trot? Does it seem like a long time ago? In order to take control at the trot, you had to learn how to keep your **hands steady and independent from your balance**. Today we'll be practicing the same skill at the canter, so you can ride the canter effectively without hurting your horse's mouth!"

5
MIN

LESSON AND EXERCISES

 **Review:** Changing seats at the walk and trot with one hand outstretched, behind back, and resting on top of the head. Repeat in the other direction. **ASK: Did your rein hand stay in place the whole time?**

10
MIN

 **Review:** One at a time, send students into your designated canter zone to review previous work, preparing and cueing horse for the canter and riding a short stretch in full seat, light seat and two-point position. If students have been working on the longe line, continue to connect the line before each canter. **ASK: On a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is "not at all" and 10 is "death grip," how much do you feel like you are using your hands to balance?**

10
MIN

 **Discuss:** Mechanics of how horse's head moves in the canter and how this affects the rider's arm and hand position.

Emphasize: Good hands are reliant on a good seat. Students need to be balanced and relaxed before attempting to make contact with the reins and follow the horse's mouth!

5
MIN

 **PRACTICE:** One at a time, ask students to canter along the rail or on the longe line in the seat of your choice. Once they've established rhythm and balance, ask them to canter with their inside arm outstretched or raised overhead. Repeat on the other side.

25
MIN

 **PRACTICE:** If students are performing the exercise with ease, increase the difficulty by asking them to switch the outstretched arm every couple of strides. If you are able to longe or safely maintain control of the horse, finish by encouraging students to ride a few strides with both arms outstretched.

REVIEW

? Does it feel harder or easier to sit the canter with your arm(s) outstretched? Why do you think this is?

5
MIN

LESSON #5

LOOK, NO HANDS

FUN AND GAMES

- 🐾 Arms and hands behaving nicely? Challenge students to a round of the **Ribbon Test**. Tie a length of paper party streamer to the D-rings of the saddle *or* around the horse's neck and chest like a breastcollar, leaving just enough for the rider to hold the streamer loosely along with the reins. Can they ask the horse to canter, ride a short stretch, and return to trot without the ribbon breaking?



See **Red Horsemanship Lesson #16 In Good Hands** for more on the Ribbon Test. For teaching canter, we prefer looping the paper ribbon around the horse's chest, as it encourages a following instead of fixed hand position. **You must desensitize horses thoroughly** to the sound of tearing paper and the flapping ribbon!



- 🐾 Students with a secure seat at the canter may be able to play an introductory-level round of the **Ballerina Game**, gently moving their arms or twisting from side to side as their horse canters on the longe. See **Yellow Horsemanship Lesson #20 Ballerina Game** for more on this exercise.

DAMAGE CONTROL

How short are your student's reins as they canter? At HorseSense, we try to keep our beginners on what we call an **almost contact**: short enough that their rein aids are available to them and their horses take the canter cue seriously, but long enough that a brief loss of balance or bouncing arm isn't going to jab the horse mercilessly in the gums. Students ride at this length into **Blue Level**, and as their seat becomes more secure - and they start working toward influencing the horse's posture and balance as well as their own - we gradually shorten to a true, steady feel of the horse's mouth.

Of course, in an ideal world, we'd keep the reins out of their hands entirely until their seat at the canter is solid. If we have the ability to teach the student on the longe line, we'll try to do just that! But if you're teaching a large group, or can't use the longe line for other reasons, you'll need to find the rein length that is the **best possible compromise between your student's control and safety and protection for your horse's mouths.**

FINAL NOTES

- 🐾 If students are cantering on their own down the rail, or holding the reins on the longe line, **knotting the reins is recommended before practicing any work with one hand.** This prevents a dropped rein from becoming a dangling liability - especially important when riders are transferring reins from hand to hand.
- 🐾 **You need to feel confident in your students' ability to remain balanced, calm and in control before practicing work without hands.** If they are still shaky in one or more seats at the canter, or struggle to multitask, review the previous lessons before attempting this one. A great question to ask yourself: **would this student be okay if they lost a stirrup or their horse tripped in the canter?** If not, prioritize developing their seat. Everyone learns to canter at their own pace!



LESSON #6

FLATWORK SKILLS

GREEN LEVEL

LEARNING LEADS

OBJECTIVE: For students to learn how to recognize a left lead canter and a right lead canter, gaining an understanding of why cantering on the correct lead is important.



EQUIPMENT NEEDED:

- ❑ FOUR POLO WRAPS OR BOOTS IN TWO DIFFERENT COLORS FOR EACH HORSE

- ❑ DUCT TAPE IN TWO DIFFERENT COLORS

PREP

Clear arena as much as possible - an empty arena is ideal. If you have enough bandages, wrap all horses with the two colors on diagonal pairs; otherwise, wrap one demonstration horse ridden by an assistant or volunteer student. Assemble duct tape and longeing equipment, if still required.

INTRO

"When your horse canters to the left, does it feel exactly the same as when it canters to the right? **Who remembers how the horse uses their legs** when they canter in each direction? Today, we'll be learning all about leads, which are a lot like posting diagonals for the canter!"

5
MIN

LESSON AND EXERCISES

 **Discuss:** As students warm up at the walk, discuss the **footfall patterns** of the walk, trot and canter. Encourage students to tune in to the four distinct beats of the horse's walk.

5
MIN

 **Review:** Efficiently **checking and changing posting diagonal** at trot, on the rail and through changes of direction. Have each student trot through a few corners on the wrong diagonal, briefly closing eyes. ASK: How does it feel to post on the wrong diagonal? What do you notice in the horse as he turns? In your body?

10
MIN

 **Demonstrate:** How a horse's canter stride is similar to a human skipping with one foot in front. "Canter" on your own two feet in a straight line in front of students, demonstrating a left and right lead. Then canter a left circle and a right circle without changing lead.

10
MIN

Emphasize: Really play up the awkwardness of cantering the circle on the wrong "lead." Remind students that you only have two feet to tangle - horses have four!

 **PRACTICE:** One at a time, send students out to rail *or* to a longeing circle at the end of the arena. Ask them to cue horse to canter, find a balanced seat, and then ask themselves two questions: **1)** What do I feel happening in the horse's body? **2)** What do I feel happening in my body? Students waiting their turn should watch the horse's legs and try to guess the lead before you announce it and the rider returns to the trot.

10
MIN

 **PRACTICE:** Tear off two short strips of duct tape for each horse, placing one color on the left shoulder, one on the right. Explain how a quick peek at the shoulders can be a further clue to the lead. Repeat individual canters, coaching students through evaluating each canter and encouraging them to guess the lead before you announce it.

15
MIN

REVIEW

- ? What three clues did you use to figure out what lead your horse was cantering on?
- ? Did your horse ever canter on the wrong lead? What would you do if this happened?

5
MIN

LESSON #6

HorseSense Learning Levels

LEARNING LEADS

GREEN LEVEL

LEFT, RIGHT, OTHER LEFT

Like posting diagonals, **canter leads can be confusing for a lot of students.** As an experienced rider, you undoubtedly can feel a left lead or a right lead before it even happens - but for a beginner, the difference between the two is subtle and mysterious. Students who struggle to keep their left and right straight will find this lesson a particular challenge. (Adults as well as children!)

A few tips for introducing canter leads as smoothly as possible:

-  **Set the stage.** Hopefully throughout your previous lessons you've been calling the left lead and right lead by name, talking about the sequence of the three beats in the canter and pointing out the differences between each horse's left and right lead. It will make this lesson seem like a natural progression, and minimize the amount of new information your students have to absorb.
-  **Have them come prepared.** Encourage students to watch videos of horses canter in slow motion prior to the lesson. Rather than relying on internet search engines, you can **capture your own clips** of a left lead, right lead, incorrect lead, and simple change using a smartphone or video camera.
-  **Use visuals.** A demonstration rider can be a huge asset, especially if they are skilled enough to deliberately canter on the wrong lead. The leg bandages and duct tape stripes may seem like a fiddly bit of prep, but they can really help students keep left and right straight and see the leads in real time. If the horses are too hot and sweaty for duct tape to stick, or covered in oily fly spray, a stripe of nontoxic poster paint applied to each shoulder prior to the lesson works just as well.
-  **Teach the feel first.** You'll notice that the lesson progression written here introduces the shoulder peek after students have already practiced identifying lead without looking. This is done to discourage the bad habit of leaning and looking. We fully expect that our Green Level students are going to need all the tools available to them to figure out their lead - but if we eventually want them to identify it without looking, we can teach it that way from the very beginning!
-  **Get your horses involved.** If you are teaching with your own school horses, you should have a pretty clear idea of their quirks and preferences when it comes to canter leads. If a veteran horse only canters on the correct lead, you'll need to emphasis left vs right. If they're a little unpredictable, use that to your advantage and try to manufacture a wrong lead so your student can feel the difference. We find that asking beginners to canter a third of the way down the long side often produces an educational incorrect lead.
-  **Don't worry if they just don't get it.** You'll have many more opportunities for the canter lead lightbulb to come on. In the meantime, just keep drawing attention to details like their hip position and the tilt in the horse's body.



On a rainy day... Teach canter leads in the most fun way possible - by playing horse! Gather students in a large indoor space where they can "canter" on two feet or four feet, experimenting with counter Canter and simple and flying changes. Teach ring figures and lateral positions while you're at it, and conclude with a horseless equitation pattern featuring a canter figure-eight.

LESSON #7

FLATWORK SKILLS

GREEN LEVEL

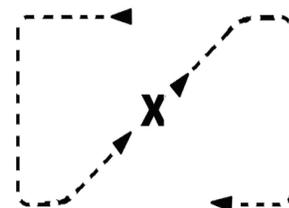
MAKE A CHANGE

OBJECTIVE: For students to learn how to change direction at the canter, riding a simple change of lead through the trot.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED:

❑ DUCT TAPE IN TWO DIFFERENT COLORS

❑ MINIMUM OF 4 CONES



PREP

Place two cones in opposite corners (M and K or H and F) to encourage students to ride deep corners before changing rein across diagonal. Place two cones on the diagonal, one near X and one between X and the rail. Ensure rail and diagonal lines are free of arena equipment.

INTRO

"Last week you learned the difference between the correct and incorrect lead when you are cantering in the arena. **What do we do if the horse canters on the wrong lead?** Or we change direction? Changing lead is slightly different than changing diagonal: instead of simply sitting a beat, we have to persuade their horse to make the change."

5
MIN

LESSON AND EXERCISES

 **Review:** Changing rein across the diagonal at the walk and trot.

10
MIN

Emphasize: Importance of riding fully through corners before and after each diagonal line, and using outside leg and rein to turn away from the rail. **ASK: Is it easier for you to turn across the diagonal coming from the left rein or the right rein? Why?**

 **Review:** Transitions between trot and canter. With students spaced generously far apart, ask them to take a lap of the arena, trotting the short sides and cantering the long sides. After a full circuit, students should return to trot or walk to change rein across the diagonal before repeating on the other side. **ASK: Do you think your horse cantered on the correct lead both times? How could you tell?**

10
MIN

 **Discuss:** As you stripe the horse's shoulders with duct tape - one color on each side - check in with students to review what they've already learned about leads. Explain the difference between **simple** and **flying lead changes** and how to ride a simple change.

5
MIN

 **PRACTICE:** One at a time, ask students to pick up a canter on the rail and identify lead - collaboratively if necessary. Once lead is correct, student should ride around first corner cone before turning across diagonal to change rein, trotting at the first diagonal cone and resuming the canter at the second. **ASK: Did your horse change lead?**

15
MIN

 **PRACTICE:** If students are turning easily across the diagonal, executing reasonably successful simple changes through the trot, add a second change across the diagonal, so each student canters a full **hourglass** before coming back to the walk.

10
MIN

REVIEW

- ? How do you think the placement of the trot transition helps your horse change lead?
- ? If you used a big half-circle reverse to change rein, where would you trot to change lead?

5
MIN

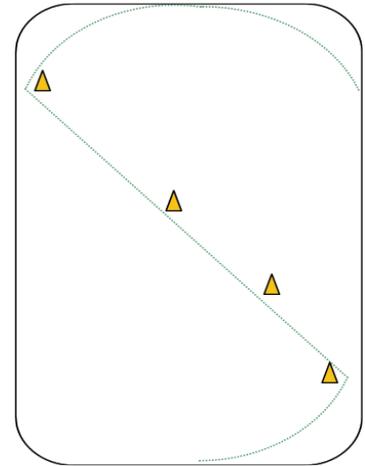
LESSON #7

MAKE A CHANGE

GREEN LEVEL

FUN AND GAMES

- 🐾 Emphasize careful steering by setting **cones in pairs**, creating narrow **gateways** for students to pass through. If they miss a gateway, game over - they must return to the group and wait for their next turn. This can be a hugely beneficial warm-up exercise for students with wobbly steering. Make sure they master riding through the gateways smoothly at the walk and trot before allowing them to attempt at the canter.
- 🐾 Increase the challenge by placing **tennis balls on top of each cone**. Tennis balls must remain undisturbed throughout the exercise.
- 🐾 Teaching young children? Directionally confused adults? **Ask them to "ride" through the exercise on foot first**, demonstrating a change of "canter" lead. You can hold horses while they do this - but make sure the horses are used to the sight of humans careening around the arena on foot!



Simple change with 4 cones

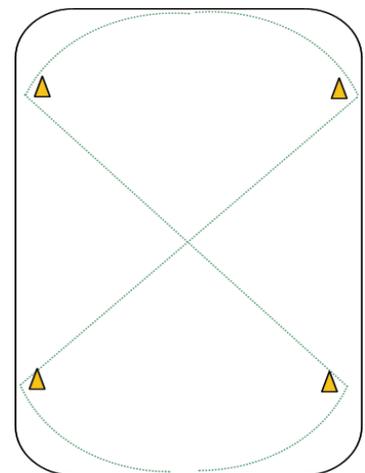
PREREQUISITES

Although the emphasis of this lesson is on executing a simple change of lead, there's a LOT going on here, including an **important milestone**. If you've been teaching these lessons in order, this will be **the first time your students are asked to steer away from the rail at the canter**.

A good school horse can be ridden more or less on autopilot when cantering along the track, but now your students are going to have to multitask and really **ride** the canter. This means they need a few skills solidly in place:

- 🐾 A **secure, balanced seat** at the canter. Light or full is fine, but they should be able to sit for transitions.
- 🐾 **Quiet hands** that can maintain just enough contact for effective rein aids.
- 🐾 Reasonably **prompt transitions** between the trot and the canter.
- 🐾 **Confident, independent steering** with clear intention.

If your students aren't **quite** to this point, repeat previous lessons as necessary!



Full hourglass

FINAL NOTES

- 🐾 **Clear your arena as much as possible** before teaching this lesson - ideally, you will have no equipment set except directional cones. If a student's steering fails, you don't want an accidental jump or collision. We have seen a startled beginner jump a 2' coop after inadvertently pointing her honest horse straight at it!
- 🐾 **Students still can't feel or see canter leads? No problem.** You can coach them through identifying every canter, including the canters on either side of the lead change. Switching from one lead to another can actually help a beginner learn the subtle differences between their horse's left and right canters.

LESSON #8

FLATWORK SKILLS

GREEN LEVEL

Xs AND OS

OBJECTIVE: For students to further develop their ability to steer through simple ring figures at the canter, riding large circles as well as changing rein across the diagonal.



EQUIPMENT NEEDED:

- 8 CONES

PREP

Set four of the cones in arena corners, leaving a generous distance from rail so students can canter comfortably around each cone. Use the other four cones to mark each quarter of a large circle at C, a minimum of 20m in diameter.

INTRO

"Last week we learned how to canter through a change of direction across the diagonal. What other **ring figures** do you know how to ride? Would you have to do anything differently to ride them at the canter?"

5
MIN

LESSON AND EXERCISES

Review: Ring figures learned in Yellow Level, including a **large circle, figure-eight, half-circle, two-loop serpentine** and **three-loop serpentine**. Ride at the walk and trot, with attention to **posting diagonals**, practicing evenly on each rein.

20
MIN

Emphasize: Although there are some benefits to practicing smaller turns and circles, **turns 15m or less will not be accessible at the canter** for quite some time! Students should practice riding large, sweeping turns, placing the horse's feet in the exact same tracks they intend to use at the canter.

Review: Allow each student a warm-up canter along the rail, individually or spaced out generously. **ASK: Are you cantering on the correct lead? If not, what would you do?**

5
MIN

Review: One at a time, send students out to rail to canter through the short side and then change rein across the diagonal, changing lead with a simple lead change.

5
MIN

Discuss: How to guide horse around a large circle at the canter.

5
MIN

Emphasize: Importance of **intention, impulsion**, and **outside aids** to support turn.

PRACTICE: One at a time, ask students to transition to canter at A, canter down long side, and around all four cones at C to create a large circle before returning to the rail and the trot. Repeat on the other rein.

10
MIN

PRACTICE: If students are able to maintain a steady canter on the circle, they may attempt the **Xs and Os pattern**, linking one to two circles with changes of rein on the diagonal.

5
MIN

REVIEW

- ? How does riding a circle at the canter feel different from circling at the trot?
- ? What do you think would happen if you tried to circle on the wrong lead?

5
MIN

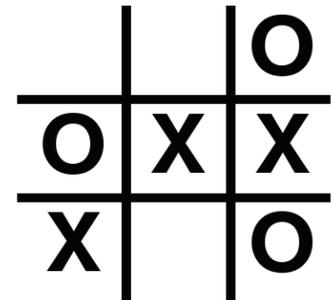
LESSON #8

Xs AND Os

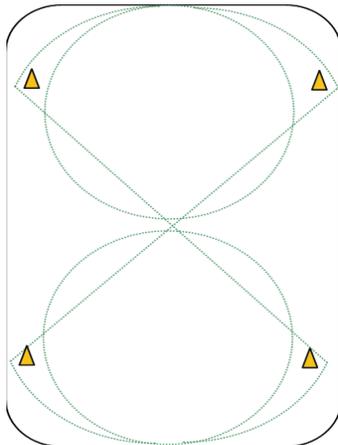
GREEN LEVEL

FUN AND GAMES

- All of the variations in Lesson #7 **Make A Change** can be used here, including **gateway cones, scurry cones** and an unmounted practice run.
- If your students are eager to jump, you can **convert the pattern into an invisible course** by setting pairs of empty standards on each of the diagonal lines and on one to four points on each circle. Start with the standards a full 10' to 12' apart and **gradually tighten the distance** to encourage careful, accurate riding.
- Draw a giant **Tic Tac Toe** board in your arena footing - or, if you're teaching on grass or have limited untouched space, a dry erase board. Challenge students to a game of Tic Tac Toe, but **in order to fill a square, they have to ride an X** (two consecutive diagonals with simple changes) **or an O** (a full circle at the canter).



Private students can play against you; groups with even numbers can be paired off into teams. If you are teaching a class of three riders, choose a "champion" who plays against you to practice while the other two riders battle it out. **This game can easily fill an entire lesson** if you practice at the walk and the trot first. Use it as a review, or omit the canter entirely to make lesson walk/trot friendly. Slower rides can focus instead on riding through all the cone gateways and posting on the correct diagonal.



Students can ride part or all of the Xs and Os pattern, depending on skill level and time allowed.

PLAY WITH PATTERNS

As soon as students have mastered basic circles and turns at the canter - whether that takes one lesson or many - you'll want to provide lots of opportunities for them to get off the rail and practice. One of our favorite ways to do that is by regularly challenging students to ride **equitation patterns**. Patterns can be intensely technical, but they are usually short, making them more approachable and easier to fit into a group lesson than a dressage test.

Patterns can be ridden several times in an hour-long lesson, allowing students to **practice, polish, and work in an additional challenge**, such as picking up speed or dropping stirrups. You might offer in-house equitation contests with ribbons or prizes, or start a Pattern of the Month Club and share new challenges in your barn's newsletter and social media. Make your own or download a set of patterns written specifically for **Green Level**:

<https://horsesenselearninglevels.com/resource-center/about-patterns-and-maps/>

FINAL NOTE

- If you have riders in a group lesson attempting the full Xs and Os pattern, **station riders awaiting their turn at E or B**. This will keep them safely out of the way and give them plenty of time to cross the arena and prepare for their initial canter transition at A.

LESSON #9

FLATWORK SKILLS

GREEN LEVEL

CHOOSING SIDES

OBJECTIVE: For students to improve ability to identify posting diagonal and canter lead, putting skills to the test by practicing on the centerline of arena.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED:

□ 4 CONES

□ OPTIONAL DUCT TAPE IN TWO DIFFERENT COLORS



PREP

Place two cones on either side of centerline, approximately 6 paces from A. Place the other two cones on either side of centerline approximately 10 before C. Ensure centerline and rail are clear.

INTRO

As riders warm up at the walk, explain that posting diagonals and leads are only "correct" and "incorrect" when the horse is turning; when riding a straight line, we refer to "left" and "right."

ASK: Who remembers riding down centerline in their Introductory dressage test? If you trot right at C, which shoulder would you rise with? Which should lead at the canter?

5
MIN

LESSON AND

EXERCISES

 **Review:** Riding down centerline at the walk and trot. Alternate between continuing on the same rein and changing rein before turning at C, with changes of posting diagonal occurring before the turn.

10
MIN

 **Review:** One at a time or in a generously spaced single file, ask students to pick up a warm-up canter along the rail, tracking left. **ASK: Is your horse on the correct lead? What do you feel happening in your horse's body? Your body? What do you see?** Once lead is correct and students are cantering in a steady rhythm, ask for a change of rein across the diagonal, with a simple lead change through trot. **ASK: Did you change successfully? How does the right lead feel different from the left?**

10
MIN

 **Discuss:** How to use diagonals and leads to determine direction of turn off centerline.

5
MIN

 **PRACTICE:** One at a time or single file, ask students to trot from E or B to A and turn down centerline. They should **sit the trot through the turn**, resuming posting only once they are straight on centerline. Ask them to identify the shoulder they are rising with and turn **away** from it at C, so they are on the correct diagonal through the turn.

10
MIN

 **PRACTICE:** One at a time or single file, ask students to trot from E or B to A and turn down centerline, transitioning to canter as soon as they are straight. Once they have identified their canter lead, they should turn **toward** it, around the cones by C, so they canter into the turn on the correct lead before returning to trot. Repeat several times.

15
MIN

 **Emphasize:** It is okay if students guess wrong at first! An incorrect turn allows them to feel the affect of turning on the wrong lead and helps them develop their feel.

REVIEW

? Is it easier for you to identify your horse's left or right lead? Why?

? If you were trotting on a long road with no turn in sight, which diagonal would you post on?

5
MIN

LESSON #9

HorseSense Learning Levels

CHOOSING SIDES

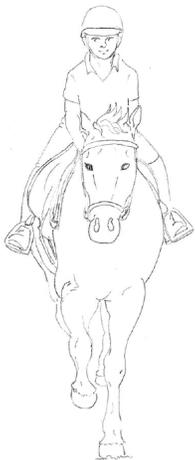
GREEN LEVEL

FUN AND GAMES

- 🐾 Create colorful visuals by using **different colored cones** to mark left and right turns. **Match with stripes of duct tape on the horse's shoulders.** If the blue shoulder is leading at the canter, they turn around the blue cone. Reverse the cones to help the exercise make sense at the trot.
- 🐾 You can also **designate a theme for each side of the arena.** This technique works well to engage young children. At HorseSense, we use stuffed animals to decorate E and B. If the horse canters on the left lead, he is a jungle cat, but if he canters on the right lead, he's a cantering kangaroo or a galloping giraffe! If you want to go all out, use novelty duct tape in animal print to stripe the horse's shoulders.
- 🐾 When teaching group lessons of relatively equal skill, **award a point each time a diagonal or lead is correctly identified** and the student turns the correct way. The winner is the student with the most points.



LEVEL UP



The **Choosing Sides** exercise is a standby that we return to frequently to develop students' feel, straightness and timing. We expect **Green Level** students to be able to choose correctly the majority of the time; it's okay if they have a few confused turns here and there, but we want them to feel confident about leads before moving up, and may review this exercise for several weeks. Set your cones and leave them up for all of your students to play with in the meantime!

At **Orange Level**, the exercise can be used to teach students to identify canter leads after a fence. Place a single vertical on the centerline, far enough past A to allow a balanced approach. Ask students to trot into the vertical and canter away, identifying their lead before they reach C.

Purple Level students can practice the exercise on the flat with eyes closed to improve their feel, and progress to identifying diagonals and leads after a single fence or grid - no peeking! This progresses neatly into riding transitions and lead changes on a straight line away from the rail. **Purple** and **Teal Level** students can practice landing on a designated lead over fences.

FINAL NOTES

- 🐾 Students still a little fuzzy on leads? **Call out the direction of the turn the first couple of times** they ride through the exercise - but encourage them to make an educated guess before they hear your voice.
- 🐾 In the event that a school horse strongly prefers one lead over the other, we like to **try to set up a transition onto the other lead** by asking the rider to canter earlier, while the horse is still negotiating the turn onto centerline. This allows them to compare the left and right lead and practice identifying each side. This can be easier to accomplish in a private lesson with time for multiple attempts.

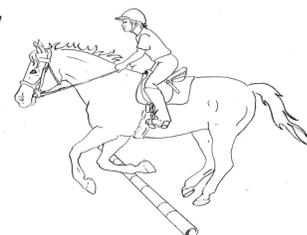
LESSON #10

JUMPING SKILLS

GREEN LEVEL

TAKE IT IN STRIDE

OBJECTIVE: For students to learn to canter over a single ground pole, demonstrating a secure two-point position or light seat.



EQUIPMENT NEEDED:

- ❑ 1-2 GROUND POLES, FIXED WITH CONES OR BLOCKS TO PREVENT ROLLING
- ❑ 2-4 CONES

PREP

Place ground pole(s) on quarterline(s), facing A and C. Secure with cones or blocks to prevent pole from rolling out of place. Set cones at the end of each long side to mark approach and departure, leaving enough room for the horse to canter behind cones. Clear rail and centerline.

INTRO

"You've already learned how to practice important jumping basics over ground poles, such as riding a good **approach**, finding your **target** and folding into **two-point** to stay in balance. Today, we're going to put all those skills to the test by **riding over a pole at the canter**. Not only is cantering over poles a fun and valuable exercise, it will give you a little sneak peek at the jumping you'll be doing in the near future!"

5
MIN

LESSON AND EXERCISES

 **Review:** Riding over a single ground pole at the walk and trot, with **opening and closing circles** and with a **straight-line halt**. At the trot, students should fold into two-point over the pole, posting on the correct diagonal before and after.

15
MIN

Emphasize: Two-point position must be secure and independent of hands over the pole! If time allows, knot reins and add a few passes over the pole with arms outstretched.

 **Review:** One at a time or single file, ask students to canter a warm-up lap of the arena on each lead. Once they have correctly identified lead, correcting as needed, they should practice the **Changing Seats** exercise, switching between full seat, light seat and two-point before turning to trot.

10
MIN

 **Review:** Send students down centerline for the final warm-up canter, **Choosing Sides** based on the lead. Repeat if necessary.

5
MIN

 **Discuss:** How riding over poles at the canter differs from the trot, including the possibility of the horse **taking off early**, **chipping in**, or **breaking gait**.

10
MIN

 **PRACTICE:** One at a time, students use large opening circle to pick up canter and approach ground pole, riding closing circle at end of the arena. Change rein and repeat.

 **PRACTICE:** If students are comfortably and consistently cantering over poles and time remains, create a **mini course**: opening circle at A, pole #1, change across diagonal with simple lead change, pole #2, closing circle at C.

10
MIN

REVIEW

- ? Did the pole feel different from the previous canter stride? In what way?
- ? What would you do if you got the wrong lead on your opening circle?

5
MIN

LESSON #10

TAKE IT IN STRIDE

GREEN LEVEL

FUN AND GAMES

- 🐾 Have a good eye for a distance? **Count down the final three strides you see each horse take, announcing "Jump!" or "Lift off!" as the horse strides over the pole.** Not only does this help the rider prepare for the pole, it plants the seeds for later exercises on judging stride and takeoff distances. Involve group lessons by encouraging the riders on the sideline to help you count. Just warn your rider that takeoff spots are not a sure thing and you might all get it wrong!
- 🐾 Once riders are proficient at the single pole, play a miniature version of **Chase Me Charlie.** A possible progression might include an **invisible jump**, a **ground pole**, a **pole stack**, a **baby crossrail**, and a 9" to 12" **cavaletti** or real **crossrail.**



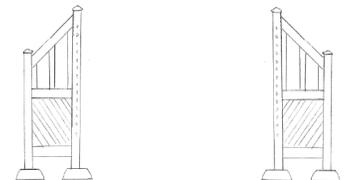
Adding even an extra inch of height or width to a pole can be thrilling to a Green Level rider!

PREREQUISITES

The deceptively simple task of cantering over a single pole on the ground requires a lot of other **Green Level skills** to already be habit:

- 🐾 **The student must have established a secure seat and base of support at the canter**, transitioning smoothly in and out of two-point position. You should feel confident in their ability to keep their balance and their stirrups if the horse unexpectedly leaps the pole, or completely leaves out a stride.
- 🐾 **The student must have some influence over the horse's pace**, producing enough impulsion to negotiate the circles and the pole without rushing or losing control. They should ride with intention, looking where they WANT to go!
- 🐾 It isn't essential for them to have mastered **leads and simple changes**, but it is definitely helpful.

If your students aren't quite there yet, try teaching this lesson with **invisible jumps**, or empty standards. Add the poles in once they can flow through the pattern, changing seats as they go.



FINAL NOTES

- 🐾 When working riders in a group lesson through the pattern one at a time, **station riders awaiting their turn at E or B.** This will keep them safely out of the way of quarterline poles, circles and diagonal lines.
- 🐾 Horses that **leap over ground poles or get quick over poles** are **not a suitable choice** for this lesson! If teaching an unknown horse or rider, ask them to warm up over a simple pole on the long side first. If the horse is unable to take the pole quietly in stride, keep the student at the trot or consider an alternate mount.