

Unwanted Lead Changes

By Marie Hoffman

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Talent is a 9yr old Appendix Quarter Horse mare that is owned by Steve. I worked with Talent and Steve a few months back to teach her how to focus and not be "hot" and/or spooky.

In our weekly lessons she was progressing nicely. We were working on teaching her to go forward and on the bit. Once she stopped scaring herself while ridden, we found Talent to be a bit lazy.

We regularly included cantering in our lessons. We worked on getting the correct lead from the trot in the corners. Talent usually took the correct lead if Steve cued correctly. Once cantering, she continued on the correct lead until she reached the next end of the arena, where she would loose her rear lead and cross canter. Down the next long side of the arena she would switch her front lead to the incorrect lead. Now she was counter cantering. I will add that she could counter canter very balanced.

In working on this, I had Steve continue to keep his outside leg on her around the corners. Using his outside leg while cantering in the end of the arena worked well in keeping Talent in the correct lead in the corner. Then Steve just rode her down the long sides and used his outside leg during the next end. This method worked well to keep Talent in the correct lead all the way around the arena.

After several weeks of being successful in keeping Talent on the same lead I started Steve circling her at the canter in about 20 meter circles. As long as Steve kept his outside leg on her he was able to keep her lead.

About this time we had also started putting Talent on the bit at the trot. She did very well. Up to now we had been working on speed adjustments with half halts and flexing at the poll to the right, straight and to the left. About the third week after Steve had started circling at the canter. Talent started switching her rear lead during the long wall of the arena. Especially whenever Steve half-halted to rebalance her, she kept her lead during the corners now though.

During our next weekly lesson Steve told me about Talent's switching leads. I asked him to canter. Starting in the trot and going around a corner, Talent struck off in a nice canter on the correct lead. As soon as she cantered down the long wall she did a flying change of lead to the outside lead. Her hind lead changed first and then her front changed several strides latter.

I asked Steve to canter several more times straight and in a circle with the same results. It did not matter if Talent was going in a circle or straight she would swap leads, it seemed at will. She would sometimes only switch behind and then break to a trot and sometimes she completed the flying change. When ever she did loose her lead behind and cross canter, Steve would stop her to regain his control and balance. He did not always make her go right out and canter again maintaining the correct lead.

Talent being talented "thought" she figured out that what Steve really wanted was a lead change instead of a rebalancing of the canter. Every time Steve half halted or guided Talent in a direction opposite of the lead she was on, she switched behind or did a flying change. This is very frustrating for the rider because the rider is not sure if the horse is misbehaving and it is difficult to ride a horse who is swapping leads at will.

I at first had Steve use "soft eyes" where his eyes used an all encompassing vision. Then I had him keep his outside leg on her whenever he felt her shift over her weight to the outside to be able to take the opposite lead. This worked to a limited amount of success.

Steve had been taking her out of the arena to ride around the stable and trailered her several times for trail rides. I was pretty sure she had not invented a game of swapping leads out of boredom.

The next week Talent was even worse. She was doing a flying change from the correct lead to the incorrect lead. Often she would cross canter. At no time would she hold the same lead more than 10 strides. I asked Steve if her back was sore. He said it was not.

Nothing had changed in regards to her saddle or bridle. During our next canter, I asked Steve to sit on the inside of the saddle, weighting the inside stirrup as he held her in line with her body with his outside leg. This helped a little.

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I then asked Steve to check his positioning of his seat bones was one ahead of the other. Was his leading seat bone or inside seat bone slightly ahead of his outside seat bone? He wasn't sure so I explained.

For the right lead, Steve would position his right seat bone slightly ahead of his left seat bone, weighting the right seat a little more along with his right foot in the stirrup. The left seat would stay back along with the left leg ready to encourage Talent to keep her rump in line with her shoulders if needed.

Steve did not use his reins at all to influence Talents leads. He used the reins only to guide her. As long as Steve held his position Talent would hold her lead. If Steve changed his seat position or weight distribution at all, she would immediately loose her hind lead. She would then trot or continue the flying change in the front so she was on the opposite lead as the one Steve wanted.

When Talent changed her leads I had Steve check in with his seat bones and where his weight was centered. When she did change behind, Steve only had to half-halt and make sure his seat position and weight distribution was correct for the lead he wanted to maintain. Steve then circled Talent until she would switch her rear lead back or do a flying change to the correct lead if she had switched completely. She did her flying lead changes effortlessly. He did about a 20 meter circle.

Now we had a reason for Talent's unwanted "at this time" talent of changing leads. It was Steve's seat position and where his weight was centered on the horse causing the changes. She had become much better balanced through our trot work, as well as learning to listen more attentively to the riders aids. She had advanced to another level before Steve wanted it or intentionally asked for it. Her lead changes did force Steve to focus on his body position and weight distribution thus improving his balance as a rider. Talent let him know the second he was off the least little bit.

For those who read the first article. Talent is now trail riding well, able to go with the crowd and even lag behind a little without going into her old habitual flight pattern. She no longer becomes "hot" and unfocused. Steve is able to maintain her attention when ever he wants. He has commented many times what a joy she is to ride. Also now that he doesn't have to continually worry about what she is going to jump at next, his riding skills are improving at a fantastic rate. Talent is so much calmer and happier with Steve leading the dance.