

Competitive Edge

JOG AID

BY KAREN QUALLS, WITH JULI S. THORSON PHOTOS BY CAPPY JACKSON



The jog-slowing exercise I'll teach you in this article is the same one I use daily on this 2008 Western pleasure world champion.

Does your horse have a too-fast, strung-out jog? Ride to your own rescue with an exercise that will help you deepen and slow his stride.

There's a reason why Western pleasure horses are judged, in part, on their ability to deliver a slow, steady, cadenced jog that allows their riders to pilot them on a loose rein: A jog like this makes a horse pleasurable to ride, whether he's in competition or not.

If you're struggling to get this kind of jog from your horse, you know what I'm talking about. It's just not fun to ride a horse whose too-fast, strung-out jog makes you feel like you have to pull on him, *all the time*. And, if you do compete in Western pleasure, it's also no fun to be on a horse that laps past every other horse in the pen. You might as well be throwing your entry-fee money away, because judges aren't going to reward you.

I'm going to teach you an exercise you can use to improve your horse's jog. It's helpful for any horse, but because it makes the rear end stronger, it's especially effective for horses that are long-bodied, and subsequently weaker in the rear end than shorter-coupled horses tend to be.

As proof of its value, it's an exercise I do regularly with My Sensational Cookie, the horse shown in the accompanying photos. A week before the photos were taken, he won the masters amateur junior Western pleasure title at the 2008 American Paint Horse Association World Championship Show, with owner Meredith Landy.

WHAT YOU WON'T DO, AND WHY

Typically, riders whose horses are too fast at the jog try to deal with the situation by pulling or tying their horses' heads down as they travel along the rail. If this is what you've been doing, you already know it doesn't work; as soon as you let your horse have his head, he speeds right back up again.

Here's why: Slowing the jog isn't about pulling a horse down in front. That forces him to balance over dropped shoulders (another way of saying it forces him onto his forehead), and makes him surge forward to rebalance himself once you turn him loose.

Slowing the jog is about driving a horse up into a deeper stride from behind, which elevates his shoulders, compresses his body, and slows him down as a result. And that, with its added strengthening factor, is what my exercise is all about.

WHAT YOU WILL DO, AND WHY

To begin the exercise, you'll jog your horse on a circle, off your arena's rail or wall. This will give you the opportunity to move his hindquarters to the outside, for strength-building crossover steps.

You'll make rein contact with his mouth, and simultaneously bump him forward with both legs, in rhythm with his stride. The purpose of bit contact won't be to pull his head

down, but to act as a barrier to keep him from speeding up as your bumping leg action drives his hind legs farther up under him to deepen and compress his stride.

Once you feel your horse get deeper behind, you'll use pressure from your inside leg to push his hindquarters to the outside of the circle, and to keep him going forward with his front legs still on the circle's arc.

In order to continue jogging, he'll have to take crossover steps behind, and that will help strengthen his whole rear-leg area—the same way that doing lower-body lateral work would make your legs stronger at the gym.

With regular repetition of this work, your horse will learn to deepen his rear-leg steps when he feels you bounce your legs against his sides. You'll gradually need less and less rein contact to keep him from speeding up, until you'll be able to jog him comfortably on a loose rein.

TIPS FOR GETTING THE MOST EXERCISE VALUE

As you study the how-to photos on the following pages, keep these tips in mind:

- The exercise requires you to ride with a rein in each hand. If your horse is used to being ridden in a leverage bit, go ahead and use it, as I'm doing in the photos. Otherwise, ride him in a snaffle bit.
- If your horse hasn't learned to move his hindquarters away from your leg pressure, you'll need to teach him that skill before you can be successful with my exercise.
- Because you'll be asking for lateral hindquarter movement during the circling exercise, you'll probably want to ride with spurs. This will give you a way to reinforce your leg pressure if your horse fails to respond.
- For best results and least risk of injury to your horse's legs, work on level ground with good footing.
- Plan to make your circle about 60 feet in diameter. That's a good size for keeping your horse's forward momentum going, while also getting him to take those strengthening crossover steps behind.
- In your first day's attempts at doing the exercise, it's likely that your horse will only be able to take a few crossover steps behind before tiring and losing his cadence. That's OK—he'll improve with practice and as his strength improves. Allow him to bring his hindquarters back onto the track of the circle as you continue driving him forward into your hands. When he's resumed a good jogging cadence, push his hindquarters to the outside again for as many steps as he can do, then repeat the sequence.
- Work your horse in both directions, spending more time on his weaker side, if he has one (and most horses do.) →



TO DEEPEN YOUR HORSE'S STEPS BEHIND...

Jog on a circle, off the rail. As you make two-handed, lifting contact with your horse's mouth, bump both legs against his sides in rhythm with his strides. Use whatever degree of rein pressure it takes to prevent him from going faster as you're driving him up with your legs. As his rear-leg strides get deeper, you'll feel an extra moment of suspension that slows his speed.



TO ASK FOR REAR-LEG CROSSOVER STEPS...

Bring your inside leg 8 to 10 inches back behind the front cinch, then use your inside heel and/or spur to push the horse's hindquarters to the outside of the circle. Use outside-rein pressure to hold his front end on the circle's track, and inside-rein pressure to steer. Note how my horse has taken a deep, reaching, crossing-over step with his right hind leg.



KAREN QUALLS owns and operates Premier Performance Horses in Chino Hills, California. There, she specializes in training Paint Horses and their owners for competition in various events. Her program has produced numerous world champions and all-around title holders. "Consistency and repetition are the keys to success in any discipline," she says. "The exercise I've shared here isn't an overnight gimmick, but something I incorporate into every ride."



FOR BEST RESULTS AS YOU RIDE...

Don't worry about getting your horse's head down. Instead, concentrate on producing steady, cadenced, same-speed strides while keeping your horse's poll and shoulders up and "in your hands." You'll have to experiment to find the right mixture of leg/rein pressure to get this done. If you use too little leg and too much rein, your horse will drop to a walk. If you use too much leg and too little rein, he'll speed up out of a jog.



WHEN YOUR HORSE LOSES CROSSOVER RHYTHM...

It means his weak rear-end muscles are getting tired from the new and extra work you're asking them to do. Stop pushing his hind-quarters over with your inside leg, allow him to travel normally along the circle, and resume bumping with both legs to re-establish an even jogging cadence. Then try for a few more crossover steps. By making this exercise part of your regular routine, your horse will get stronger behind and become a better, slower jogger.



To see Karen demonstrate the exercise covered here, go to HorseandRider.com, and look for "Click 'n' Learn: Jog Aid, from Karen Qualls."