

## Counter Canter Why Would You Want To?

BY CRAIG SCHMERSAL AS TOLD TO WENDY BAGLEY LIND

In any reining pattern, being on the outside lead in a circle is cause for nothing but penalty points. In fact, incorrect leads are probably one of the most common mistakes you see in the show pen and as far as penalty points are concerned, the most costly. So it's no wonder that some people don't see much sense in integrating the counter canter into their everyday routine. After all, why would you want to refine something that you want to avoid in the show pen?

Well, at first glance it may seem like the counter canter is a pointless endeavor. But in reality, it can be a valuable tool in creating and maintaining a top notch reining horse. In my own program, there isn't a day that goes by where I don't use the counter canter as a vehicle to solve a variety of issues. Whether it is teaching a colt to change leads, or getting a show ring veteran to relax through the middle, the counter canter is a cornerstone of my everyday routine. When you really understand the logic behind the counter canter, it becomes a great asset in establishing that all-important body control necessary for a broke and competitive reining horse.

### The Basics

When it comes to counter cantering, the goal is not to simply lope around on the wrong lead. Instead, you want to use it to set up exercises that refine skills such as leg yielding, shoulder control, hip control and lead changes. So, before I ever start working on counter canter drills with a horse, I make sure there are some basic fundamentals established at a lower level.

For example, before I do much of anything on my colts, I work on body control. When I put a leg on them, I want them to move away from the pressure. So I do a lot of that preliminary work at a walk or a trot, teaching them to side pass and yield off of my leg cues. Only when they have a full understanding of those basics do I graduate to the counter canter and start working on lead changes.

### Teaching the Lead Change

One of the main reasons that I counter canter my colts is because I

have found that it helps teach them the lead change in a non-stressful way. When it is time to start working on lead changes, I will take off loping on the correct lead. Then, after a couple circles, when I come through the center of the pen, I will get my horse really straight through the middle and change direction without changing leads.

One thing that I make sure of is that my horses continue to look in the direction they are going, even in the counter canter. For example, if I am on my left lead and I am going to counter canter to the right, I want them to have



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**Counter cantering "can be a valuable tool in creating and maintaining a top notch reining horse," says Craig Schmersal, shown here on Commanders Nic who, as a four-year-old, has almost \$115,000 in NRHA Lifetime Earnings.**

their nose a hair to the right. Some colts will be a little bit nervous about going the other direction in the off lead; but if they are able to see where they are going that often eases some of that tension. Just think about it in your own experiences - you don't walk down the street and turn left while you are looking to the right.

I continue to lope a circle in the counter canter, letting them look where they are going and keeping my inside leg in their belly. I just kind of let them bend around my leg a little bit, and do some figure eights to get them comfortable with the whole thing. Then I might counter canter all the way around the perimeter of the arena.

When I feel like my horse is relaxed and responsive to my leg cues, then I ask for the lead change from the counter canter to the inside lead. I do this by straightening them up with my inside leg, and pushing them over a little bit harder to the outside of the circle towards the off lead that they are on. Using the inside leg, I yield them over. Then, keeping their head, neck and body as straight as I can, I change leg cues and push with the outside leg to ask for the change. I will just wait for them to lift and change. If they don't change leads when I ask, I don't panic. Instead, I quietly push them back on the lead they are on and get them moving forward a little bit more. Then I ask again with cues that are a little more exaggerated. I will kind of lift my inside hand in the direction I want to go, and stand up my shoulders. Then I push them over again, cluck and wait for the change.

I make a point to never force the lead change. If a colt has a little trouble changing, I will just push them around and keep working on it. If they are locked on my legs, and not getting off my leg cues, the first thing I will do is break them back down to a walk or trot and start pushing those hips around. I go back to basics and make sure they get off my leg when I apply a leg cue before trying to change leads from the counter canter.



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**Counter cantering can “dissolve tension through the middle of the pen on horses that have been shown a lot,” says Craig, shown here on the 1994 Saddlesmith Open Champion, Side Smoke, owned by Craig’s wife Ginger.**

What is accomplished by teaching a colt to change from the counter canter instead of just trying to change directions and change leads at the same time? Several things. First off, by changing from the counter canter to the inside lead, you are setting up a scenario whereby changing leads is a positive thing. It is easier for a horse to lope around on the inside lead rather than the outside lead. Secondly, by pushing a colt's body around at the lope and getting him to yield to leg cues, you are developing body control skills that will carry over in the development of the other maneuvers as well. And lastly, establishing a habit of changing leads without changing direction will help prevent your colt from dropping his shoulders and diving into the lead change. You will be teaching him to change leads with his shoulders picked up and in a correct position.

### The Square Drill

On more advanced horses or horses that need a little lead change help, I have

a drill I use that has proven to be very effective. It basically involves counter cantering a square on one half of the arena. Instead of making a circle, lope straight lines and make square turns. But the key is in the turns. When you come to where you want to make a 90-degree turn, make the turn with the back end and not the front end. At each turn, I will lift up with my hands, push that hip around to the outside of the square like a rudder, while letting the front end stay in one spot. The goal is for the hind end to turn around the front end, without the front end leaking. Lope straight, push the back end around, go straight, push the back end around, and so on until you put together the sides and corners of a square. All the while, concentrate on getting your horse's hindquarters off your leg and knocked free of the front end. Then when you feel like the horse is really getting off your leg, change on the straight and keep loping on the same line.

On those older horses that I want to get the lead change really sharp on, this

square drill works great. It gets a horse to become more responsive in moving his hindquarters away from leg cues, while at the same time encouraging him to keep his shoulders standing up. And these are two crucial elements in a successful and attractive lead change.

### Remedies for the Middle

Another great use for the counter canter is for dissolving tension through the middle of the pen on horses that have been shown a lot. Looking back, I couldn't have won half the stuff I've won if I hadn't integrated the counter canter into my program. Early in my career, most of the horses that I got to show were nervous through the center because they had already made their fair share of hard runs in the show pen. If I didn't counter canter, I don't know how in the world I could have eased those horses' minds through the middle of the arena.

When I do come across a horse that is anticipating lead changes or is nervous through the center of the pen, I will quietly lope figure eights without changing leads. I might lope a million figure eights like that until the horse just gets bored to death of going through the center of the pen. By doing that, I can take a horse that might have been really up tight about going through the middle, and get him to relax through there again. They learn that it is just not a big deal.

Another thing I do at home on those horses that are a little bit nervous in the middle of the pen is to break them down after lead changes. After I do lots of figure eights and finally change leads, I will lope a stride or two and then let them break down to the walk or trot. After a while, they get to hunting that downward transition. On most of my older horses, if you don't keep kicking, they just stop after a change. And that is a really fun thing to have on a horse, whether you are in the Futurity Finals or showing an old warhorse. I am sure I can kick hard enough to keep a horse going. But those horses that change leads and then are nervous aren't very much fun to show - especially in a pattern like number 9 where you have to run two large fast circles, change leads, and drop right back into a small slow

circle in the other direction. On my horses, when I get to that change, I just drop my hand and they slow right back down, which puts me in a great position to mark my circles.

### A Final Note

As far as I am concerned, as long as you have your horse's body straight and keep him looking in the direction he is going, I don't think there is a lot you can mess up on the counter canter.

And while it seems like a minor thing, keeping your horse looking in the direction he is going is actually very important, especially when you are showing a horse full throttle.

For example, when I am showing a horse and come through center for a lead change I want to set my horse up to change, straighten his body, change leads, and then have him look in the direction I changed to without dropping his shoulders.

## Meet Craig Schmersal

Craig Schmersal started reining at the young age of eight, with the help of some big time professionals. "We went to Mike Florida's when I was young, and Mike got us started. He let me spend every summer there until I was probably 15 or 16," says Schmersal.

From there, Craig started showing reiners on the East Coast and working his way up the ladder. From 1988 to 1991, he had several Top Ten finishes in both the Youth 14-18 and Limited Open divisions. But when Craig signed on to work for NRHA trainer Dutch Chapman, his career really started taking off. Showing NRHA Hall of Fame stallion Cee Blair Sailor, Craig won the NRHA Open world championship, the Limited Open world championship and the Open Saddlesmith Series in 1994. That same year he also won the Novice Horse Open reserve world championship on My Way Nicki, and was the Futurity Championship Show Open Perpetual Trophy winner. "Dutch Chapman was instrumental in my success today because he let me show those horses and get the recognition," noted Schmersal.

After becoming proficient in NRHA Category 1 events, Craig went to work for Arizona trainer Randy Paul to learn more about a futurity program for young horses. Craig then went out on his own and has never looked back.

Showing his wife Ginger's gelding, Side Smoke, Craig won the NRHA Open reserve world championship and the Open Saddlesmith Series



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championship in 1994. The duo captured the 1996 AQHA Senior Reining world championship as well. Then in 2001, Craig earned the Open Saddlesmith Series reserve championship on Pooque, owned by Cassie Simpson. In 2002, Craig paired up with Tidal Wave Jack, owned by the B S Syndicate, to win a Bronze Medal at the USET Championship in Gladstone, and a Team Gold Medal at the World Equestrian Games as members of Team USA.

In 2002, Craig made the NRHA Futurity Open Finals on all three of these entries: Commanders Nic, Boomboomvoodaddy and Spark Master. In 2003 he won the \$10,000 Open class at the NRBC on Sanditch Whiz, and brought two horses back to the finals in the NRBC Open. At the 2003 NRHA Derby, Craig rode Commanders Nic to the NRHA Open Derby reserve championship for a \$40,000 paycheck. Craig and Ginger own Nic. Craig has over \$567,000 NRHA Lifetime Earnings.

On the other hand, if you consistently let your horse look in a direction other than the direction he is going, like in your counter canter exercises, there are going to be problems. To illustrate this problem, say I am showing my horse at full speed, and changing from my left to right lead. I have my horse looking to the left in the original circle, and then I come through center and straighten out for the lead change. But the horse is locked into that left circle, and even through I am steering straight, I can't get his head lined out and looking the direction of

the new circle to the right after the lead change. Although I am steering for the right circle, the horse is still looking and steering left. Then, before you know it, you are in the judge's lap, and you definitely don't want that. When you are counter cantering in your every day training routine, be conscious of where your horse is looking in relation to his line of travel.

By using these exercises to refine body control, lead changes and good habits through the middle of the pen, you will go a long way in setting yourself up to mark big in the show pen. □