

Module 7 – Transitions



Transitions are, most simply, the change from one gait to another. But they're so much more than that too!

Smooth transitions will give you an edge in the show ring, where every look from the judge matters. In the dressage ring, having prompt transitions can make or break your test.

But that's only the beginning.

Transitions are an amazing tool for improving your driving horse. Used correctly, transitions can help build hind end strength, improve overall balance and teach responsiveness.

A Good Transition

A well driven transition means that the horse moves promptly and smoothly into the new gait with no loss of balance. Indeed, a good transition can even improve their balance.

One of the key ingredients of a good transition is something we've already covered – good use of voice and rein cues. We want to give our horse ample warning that the transition is coming and support them into the new gait. Remember, we're asking our horse move or slow a load that routinely equals their own weight – we need to do all we can to help them be successful.

In an advanced horse, the timing of your cues will depend on the moment you want that transition. Need them to walk when their nose gets to A in a dressage test? You'll practice and experiment to work out exactly when you need to start your series of cues to get that result.

But at first, we don't care about promptness at all, instead we care about balance. We want our horse to have the time they need to organize themselves into the new gait, and the promptness will come as their strength improves.

So, what does a good transition look like? In a good transition, the horse stays balanced, without falling on the forehand or losing rhythm as they move into the new gait. Every transition should be "forward" even those that are going to a slower gait. Their hind feet should step into the new gait actively – think "hind legs trot first" or "high legs halt first". Even the halt is an "active" gait; they should be standing squarely on all four legs, ready to move forward or backward at your cue.

This is why we can't chase a horse into an upward transition, or pull them into a downward transition: we'll wreck their balance, and therefore the new gait we're moving into. That means we'll be taking time to rebuild the gait, not to mention we won't be having all the physical benefits from a well driven transition.

Physical Benefits

Well driven transitions strengthen the hind end, which is always a primary goal of building an athletic horse. If they're taking the weight on their hindquarter into the transition, they're getting stronger every time. And as their hind end gets stronger, so will their topline, and through that the entire horse.

And a stronger hindquarter means that you've improved the overall balance of your horse as well, correcting their natural imbalance and allowing them to lift their front end, enabling that light, balanced movement we all covet in our driving horses.

Mental Benefits

Driving transitions can be a great way to improve the contact and impulsion of a "lazy" horse – if they're going to be changing gaits frequently, they're going to have to be paying attention, staying balanced, and they're going to be much more engaged. And as they get stronger, they won't need to be lazy anymore, as they'll be perfectly capable of the job we're asking them to do.

Try It:

Begin with simple transitions: halt-walk-halt, then walk-trot-walk.

Be aware of your cues: from halt to walk you're going to pick up some contact, breathe, "and, Walk!", follow up with a cluck if you need to, and be sure to give with your hands into the transition, so you have the contact but you aren't restricting their ability to move forward.

Once their walk is good, with all the markers of a good walk we talked about in Module 5, then plan for your next transition. Breathe, "aaaaaanndd, whoooooa" and squeeze with your reins if needed into the halt.

Try not to get impatient and escalate your cues – if it doesn't work, start again and plan to add on another cue at the end (cluck or whip on an upward, more rein assistance on a downward) but only if you need it, and you'll want to try and phase it out as soon as possible. Remember, the less you physically need to do to make the transition happen, the more balanced your horse will be into the new gait.

Improving a Gait Using a Transition

If your horse is very good at the walk, but struggles with their rhythm and relaxation at the trot, we can use the transition to help pull all the good from the walk into the new gait with us.

Try it:

Wait until the walk is as good as your horse can do – rhythmic, balanced, marching, good contact – and then ask for as good a transition as you can. Usually, if you get a good transition, you'll find that for the first few strides, you'll have a beautiful trot as well – as rhythmic and balances as your walk! It will fall apart, as they won't have the strength to maintain it at first. Make note of how many strides they can usually maintain the "good" trot for, and then aim to ask for the walk transition again before it falls apart, or failing that, right after.

Go back to the walk, rebuild the balance and rhythm in a gait they're comfortable with (or vice versa, could be trot to walk instead) and then ask again for the trot.

Gradually, your horse will be able to sustain the relaxed posture for longer and longer without having to "reset" and pull it from the more established gait through the transition.

Frequent transitions will help build strength, as every one asks them to carry more weight on their hind end. Every time you have them weight their hind legs they get stronger.

How frequent they're able to do the transitions will depend on their level of fitness, but remember, this is weightlifting work, so we need to do it gradually – the last thing we want is for them to get sore. A few good repetitions are going to be so much more beneficial than drilling until they're tired, the transitions aren't balanced anymore, and they're going to be sore and cranky about driving the next time we try to drive them.

Try It:

First, try timing your transitions based on how good the gait is, but no more often than half the length of the arena (or similar if you're like me and drive in the wilds instead of an arena 😊) When the current gait is as good as your horse is currently capable, that's the moment to ask for the transition, as that's when you'll get the best transition, the best gait following the transition, and the most benefit.

When that's going really well (might be later the same drive, or after two weeks of driving – listen to your horse!) then you can start shortening the time between transitions. Try a ¼ of the arena, then gradually move to 10 strides, then 5, then, eventually, when your horse has the strength and conditioning from previous work, to 3 strides. Walk three strides – transition – trot three strides – transition – walk three strides.

Remember, this is weight lifting! Three good repetitions are better than 10 mediocre ones, and the level of difficulty MUST be increased gradually over many weeks to avoid soreness. Intersperse transition work with lots of free walk and other exercises to stretch their muscles after weightlifting work.

NOTE: All transition exercises can also be done to great benefit on the long lines! If your horse is struggling with smooth transitions with the weight of the cart, then some time on the long lines will benefit him greatly to increase his strength and balance before trying to ask him to work in draft again.

Once your horse is adept at simple transitions, and is beginning to up the level of difficulty (more frequent transitions) you can begin to introduce non-sequential transitions.

It's a higher level of difficulty to skip a gait: halt-trot-halt, walk-canter-walk. The halt-trot-halt especially is a very useful exercise when you're ready to start asking for more collection. But if you're just trying to make your horse comfortable in their body and strong for general driving, it might not be a necessary advance. However, if you're looking to move up the levels in combined driving and need to master a more advanced dressage test, or if you're wanting to drive your horse in country or even single pleasure in the breed ring, this is going to be a great exercise to really get their hindquarter underneath them and elevate the front end.

Try It:

Begin from the trot, a nice, balanced working or collected trot (depending your horse's fitness) on good contact. Be very clear with your transition cues. Breathe, "aaaaaandd, Whoa", squeeze with your hands. If you get a few steps of walk at first, that's better than pulling him abruptly to the halt. Remember the quality of the transition is the important part – we want him to step actively under himself with his hind legs and stop

squarely and softly. When he's standing nicely, ask for the trot, again with very clear sequence: contact, breathe, "and, TROT!", and follow up with a cluck or whip touch on his ribs to help. Again, initially you might get a few steps of walk, just praise the trot when you get it and repeat. With repetition they'll be better able to organize themselves into the new, more difficult, transition and it will improve.

Repetition will help them understand, BUT this exercise will also make them hot, so if you have an already reactive and high energy horse, and always when you're first introducing this exercise due to lack of strength, I suggest no more than three repetitions, no more than twice in the whole session, and build gradually from there.

And advanced horse will be able to multiple, quick (as few as 3-5 strides) halt – trot – halt transitions, building great hind end strength and responsiveness, but please take your time to get there to preserve your relaxation, and prevent stiffness.