



You Need More Canter

Alexander Grayton

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A thought experiment to consider as we get into the show season. Watching the warmup ring at any given horse show, or standing near the hitching ring where trainers debrief their students about their latest round, you might hear the words, “You needed more canter.”

What does this mean? Faster rhythm? More speed? More power? Quicker moving feet? Different horse?

In this article we will theorize about the differences between each way to make a “bigger canter”, which will hopefully help to clarify which route to take in order to make said canter bigger.

First let’s briefly touch on the requirements for a good jump – that is, after all, why we would like to have a canter of any particular variety anyway. The easiest answer is a good distance, but of course it doesn’t do anything useful to dwell on a good distance unless you have an inside track to the distance gods themselves, or an aptitude to overwhelm the powers of probability.

A distance is not a thing with meaning unto itself. It means a lot when put in context – how big is the jump you want to jump? The perfect distance changes a lot from a cavaletti to a 1.60m oxer to a water jump. How big of a stride are you on? The perfect distance changes if you’re taking your last warmup jump at 1.40m on an organized gymnastic stride versus the last jump in the jumpoff of a class you are trying to win that might find you galloping full tilt. The perfect distance changes if you are jumping a vertical or an oxer; it changes depending on your horse’s balance at the time of takeoff.

In short, relying on seeing a distance isn’t a complete thought. Connecting with the canter and all of its qualities is a worthwhile endeavor, as it will be the tool you have to use when you see the distance (and also in case you don’t see anything at all).

A canter stride can be broken down into two simple but important qualities: size and power. The rhythm of the canter is a supremely important variable for successful jumping, but for the purposes of this article we will focus more on the contents of the canter strides themselves.

(A note on rhythm: The rhythm of the canter refers to the regularity of the canter strides – beats per minute, if you will. Rhythm is the combination of several strides in a row, but doesn’t have anything to do with the inner contents of a given stride.)

How does one determine the correct size of stride? What variables exist that can affect our ability to have a certain size of stride? Alternatively if we control for size of stride, what variables are affected as we canter around a course? These questions have brought us all back to high school where we learned about the scientific process. These questions are worth exploring in order to be better prepared for the situations we will see on course.



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Take a curved line for example. We are riding our horse through a curved track (i.e. corner) towards a jump. Physics tells us that if we insist on maintaining a specific stride length (also speed in this case, as we are assuming our rhythm stays the same), our horse will be pushed towards the outside of the track we imagined. We can counteract this outward pushing force with outside aids. Or, we can shorten our stride to reduce the outward push. Or both, really.

The tighter the curved line, the more the outward pushing force acts, so if we are being specific about staying on the track then we must use more counteracting aids or we must shorten the stride more. This is not a novel concept, we all do it when driving our cars. We slow down and turn the wheel harder into a tight parking spot, but can comfortably cruise at 100km/h around a wide curve on the highway.

Now that this obvious piece of information is settled, on to the more important part: what about the power in the stride? Power in a canter stride is loosely connected to size of stride, but they are not bound tight and are in no way always directly related. This is how we come to collection. Collection is the epitome of the maximum power in the minimum stride.

What factors would determine the power requirement we have? In simple terms it is the exercise we are performing. This could be a jump (caveletti up to gigantic oxer), or a half-pass, or a transition, and so on. So it seems that we must practice collection in our flatwork in order to be able to separate power from stride length. When we turn through a tight corner on our way to a large jump, we see the contradiction between stride length and power requirements at its peak.

The best option with a well-schooled horse is to maintain maximum power in a collected and short stride through the tight turn, in order to step out of the corner and expand the stride back to normal, without needing to do so simply in order to have enough power – think back now to the distance quandary, what if you see a short distance out of this tight corner to the big jump? Do we just flail and run then because we *need* to in order to survive? No of course not! We should have the power component already in order so that we see whatever we see, and don't have any loose ends that make us feel stuck into a bad decision.

This thought experiment could go on and on, and it will do so in the near future with a new topic to address. But for the canter conundrum, it can be whittled down to the following brief statement:

The size of your canter stride should be regulated by the track you are riding, while the power of your canter stride must be regulated by the exercise at hand.

When you hear a trainer refer to the need for a bigger canter, look deeper into the context. Was the horse on the way to the first jump on a long straightaway? Then there's no limit being applied



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by the track, so power can come along with a larger stride. If the jump in question is out of a tight or awkward turn, then the track is limiting the size of the stride, and power must be added alone. This highlights the need for practicing collection, as that is the epitome of maximum power with minimum stride.

Further on the topic, if the place on course the trainer recommended more canter was out of a tight turn and into a long line or a scopey segment of the course, then we are now entering the territory of transitions within the gait. To meet the requirement of the tight turn, we need a short stride. The big jump makes us need power in the short stride. And the long line after the big jump means we need to step away from the big jump on an increasing stride that our turn to this jump didn't allow.

This is what riding is, of course! The balance between contradictory conditions, the seamless transition from one segment to another, clear communication between horse and rider to execute these changes flawlessly.

And if that seems difficult or impossible, don't jump more – practice your flatwork!