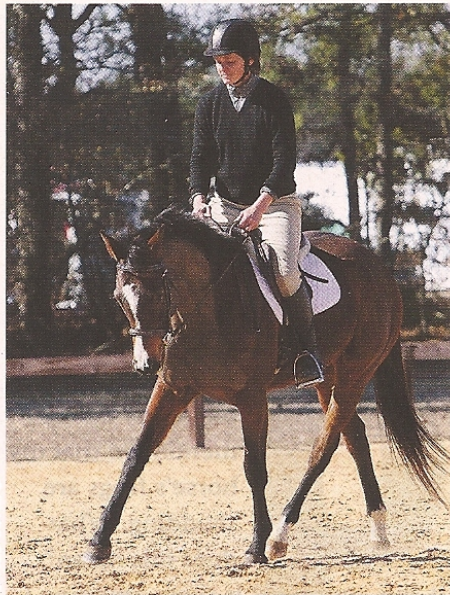


How do I stop my horse from swapping leads behind?

Q I've been working with my young Thoroughbred for three months now after a six-month letdown from the racetrack. His training is coming along great except that he often swaps/skips behind when doing a downward transition from the canter—and sometimes when I'm just cantering. It typically happens when tracking left. The vet has ruled out soundness and shoeing problems and thinks it might be a strength issue. Can you suggest any exercises that would help?

GERHARD POLITZ

A I applaud you for resting your horse after his racing career and for consulting your veterinarian. It's very important to rule out physical problems whenever issues like this arise in training. Your vet may be correct about your horse lacking strength, but that may be just one of several interconnected problems that ex-racehorses must overcome in order to become successful riding horses.



To be a successful riding horse, the young ex-racehorse must develop a "carrying balance" through longitudinal and lateral suppling exercises.

anced, relaxed, smooth transitions on the track—because they don't matter! And many suffer from a combination of thin bits (which are more severe) and riders with forceful hands, which causes "blocking" in the hindquarters and tight back muscles. All of these factors

can interfere with a horse's way of going under saddle, causing problems like your horse's cross-cantering (cantering on one lead in the front end and the other lead in the hind end).

Unfortunately, because race training starts at such a young age, these early lessons become ingrained in horses' memories. You must go back to the very beginning of the training scale to replace these old memories with new, stronger ones. Even though your horse's training seems to be progressing, he may need more basic "gymnasticizing"—working on relaxation, suppleness, a swinging back, balance and connection. Here's how:

Longeing

It's easiest for horses to learn to balance their bodies without a rider. Start with about three weeks of longeing 20 to 30 minutes a day and not riding at all. Use sliding side reins or the Pessoa Training System, adjusted so that your horse feels contact on both sides of the bit but not so tightly that he feels forced into a frame. This will encourage a forward, downward stretching into the bridle, which will loosen up and supple his tight, neglected back muscles.

Attach the longe line to a longeing cavesson, rather than to the bit. Even the weight of the longe line on the bit can discourage acceptance at this stage. Longe your horse in an enclosed area, never asking him to make circles smaller than 15 or 20 meters in diameter. Ask for frequent transitions between the gaits, always giving him plenty of time to sort out his legs and find his balance.

Riding

After several weeks, you should notice a significant improvement in your horse's balance on the longe line. This will carry over into his under-saddle work. Begin riding again in short sessions, always preceded by a longeing warm-up. Start with

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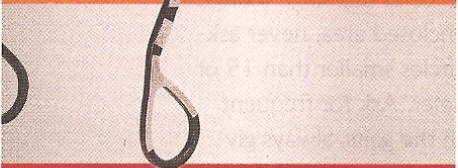
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TIP: If you are not familiar with the training scale and the concepts of longitudinal and lateral suppleness, consult a reputable trainer.

encourage acceptance of the bit, use a mild snaffle—nothing too thin. If your horse resists the bit by putting his tongue over it, crossing his jaws, etc., use a regular or dropped noseband, adjusted just snugly enough to keep his mouth closed. Many racehorses need this help to learn how to keep the bit quiet in their mouths.

If your horse feels quick at first, do not try to slow him down right away. Racehorses are more comfortable traveling at speed and sometimes feel out of balance when going slower. Forcing them to slow down too much leads to tension and nervousness, whereas allowing some speed can actually help your horse relax. As his balance improves over time, you can focus on slowing him down to a working tempo.

Once longitudinal suppleness is established, you can begin to work on lateral suppleness. Gently ask your horse to flex at the poll to the left and right, encouraging him to accept the contact in an easy, natural way. Teach him the turn on the forehand, first from the ground, using a whip to cue him to move his haunches sideways, then repeating the cue with your legs from the saddle. By crossing his hind legs, he will loosen up his loin muscles.

Introduce leg-yielding next, along the rail at first with a very slight angle, so initially your horse does not have to cross his legs much. Gradually increase the angle over time, never exceeding 45 degrees. If your horse demonstrates

about 25 minutes of longeing and five minutes of riding. Gradually adjust the ratio until you're longeing for about 15 minutes and riding for 15–30 minutes.

In the saddle, continue to encourage forward, downward stretching, being patient in the transitions and gentle with your hands. To en-

any signs of resistance, start over with an easier angle. The goal is to supple his body—and this is never possible in the presence of tension.

Be patient with your horse. Eradicating the memory of his previous training may take time. By building a new, solid foundation, you can fill in training gaps that would manifest with problems such as this canter “skipping” in the future.

Before moving to the United States in 1987, Gerhard Politz earned the professional Reitlehrer FN degree and the Gold Medal for FEI wins in his native Germany, as well as certification in England as a British Horse Society Instructor. Since moving his program to Flintridge Riding Club in Southern California, he has helped shape both the US Dressage Federation Instructor Certification Program and the design of the USDF dressage tests. His dedication to classical dressage principles and the training scale has benefited countless riders across the country, including many North American Junior and Young Rider Championship individual and team medalists.



Have a dressage horse who grinds his teeth? Gerhard Politz offers several ways to address the problem at

www.PracticalHorsemanMag.com.

Are shedding frogs OK?

Q At my last appointment, my farrier mentioned that my horse's frogs are shedding. What does this mean? Is this common? Is there anything I should be concerned about?

R. VANCE GLENN, CJF

A All horses' frogs shed from time to time. I see it happen most frequently in the spring and fall. Sometimes the dead