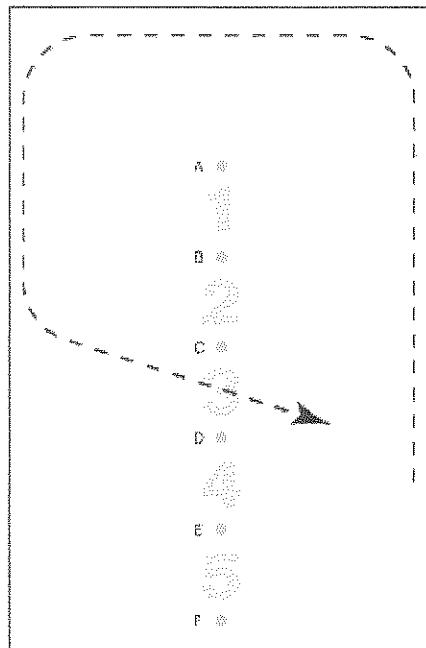


# Eliminate Western Riding Lead-Change Anticipation

By Dave Moore with Jennifer Corkery

**Cure your horse's lead-change anticipation and take back control by teaching him to wait and focus on your signals instead of on the markers with this at-home exercise from top trainer and judge Dave Moore.**



Practice this pattern to rid your horse of lead-change anticipation.

Does your veteran Western riding horse anticipate his lead changes and turns? Does he execute them when he thinks best, triggered by the pattern's markers? Does he wait for your cues or has he tuned you out? Cure his anticipation and take back control of exactly where and when he executes lead changes and turns by teaching him to wait and focus on your signals, instead of on the markers.

## The problem

Experienced horses commonly begin to anticipate lead changes and to decide on their own when and where to perform them through the line of markers in Western riding classes. Good form and fluid rhythm are important in this class, but when a horse anticipates his form and rhythm suffer — he raises his head, stiffens his back, shortens his stride and often gets crooked. Furthermore, pinpoint timing is essential, and if he misplaces a lead change by even one stride, he can lower your score.

## The goal

Eliminate your experienced Western riding horse's lead change and turn anticipation and take control of exactly when and where he changes leads or makes a turn.

## The pattern

Set out six markers on a straight line in an arena or any area with safe, level footing. Space them about 45 feet apart from each other, a little wider than at a horse show. (Later, you can tune your horse on a tighter line, with markers 35 feet apart or even closer.) Think of the first marker as Marker A, the second as Marker B, and so forth through Marker F. The space between Markers A and B will be called Slot 1, between B and C will be Slot 2, and so forth through Slot 5. *See diagram.*

## The warm-up

First, walk, jog and lope your horse each direction to loosen him up, and get his blood flowing. Second, execute a few lead changes away from the markers until you get one in good form to each direction. (Note: If your horse isn't performing basic lead changes in good form, don't move on to the exercise below. Instead, focus on keeping his

topline level, his head quiet and steady, and his body straight from head to tail during his changes. Don't overwork him so that his composure crumbles.)

Third, practice steering. Randomly guide him right, left and straight to tune him into your cues. (Note: Many Western riding competitors ride a nearly straight line through the line change markers, shifting only slightly right and left around the markers. However, a mild serpentine is prettier, with shallow, linked turns. Teaching your horse to heed your most subtle steering at every stride can achieve this and improve your score dramatically.)

#### **The exercise**

1. At the left lead lope, ride counterclockwise up the right rail, and around the top of the arena, well above Marker A. As you turn down along the left side of the markers, sight and ride a long diagonal line through Slot 3 (see *diagram*). Don't ask your horse for a lead change as he passes between the markers! Simply keep him centered and relaxed, and continue a straight line out of the working zone of the line of markers.

Still on the left lead and moving counterclockwise, lope back around the top of the arena for another long diagonal pass through Slot 3, but again, don't ask for a lead change. Lope around for a third pass through Slot 3 without a lead change, but this time, shorten the diagonal line so that you have about four strides before hitting the slot's midpoint (equidistant from Marker C and Marker D) and four strides after it.

Then lope around the top a couple more times and choose different slots to ride through on the shorter diagonal line (four strides on approach to the line of markers, four strides away) without changing leads or turning. If your horse stays relaxed on a loose rein and shows no anticipation of a lead change or turn, he's ready for the next step.

2. Circle around the top again, still counterclockwise on the left lead. Guide your horse through Slot 3 again, but this time ask him to switch to the right lead precisely as he passes between the markers. If he got four strides approaching the markers and before your lead change, ride at least four strides straight away from the line of markers after the lead change, without turning.

Then turn right and cross the arena to the left rail and turn toward the top of the arena. On the right lead, traveling clockwise, lope around the top of the arena and turn down the right side of the markers. Turn in on a diagonal line and ride through Slot 4 without changing leads. Still on the right lead, lope back around and cut diagonally through Slot 4 a couple more times without changing leads or turning. When your horse shows no anticipation ride through Slot 4 again, but change leads at the midpoint.

Continue to alternate several no-lead-change trips through the slots with occasional trips in which you do ask for the change. This will teach your horse to ignore the markers and focus on you. His job is to go through those slots straight and simply wait for word from you about whether or not to change leads or turn.

The above steps, practiced every couple of days, should take at least two weeks to eliminate a horse's anticipation. By then, he shouldn't view the markers as a signal to do anything as you ride on either lead from either direction. To advance the concept further try these steps in later practice sessions:

3. Ride through Slot 1 at a diagonal on the left lead a couple of times without changing leads to be sure there's no anticipation from the start. Then ride through Slot 1 again and change to the right lead as you cross the slot's midpoint. Stay straight as you leave the slot, then slowly make a right turn and ride a straight diagonal line to Slot 2. Change back to the left lead as you pass through it. Continue to change directions and leads as you progress down the line, just as you would in a horse show. (Practice starting from both directions, no matter which Western riding show pattern you're specifically working toward.)

4. As you continue toward the bottom of the line, riding it as you would in a show, your experienced horse will probably display a trace of anticipation, perhaps by lifting his head to prepare for a lead change or by leaning toward a turn. The instant you feel the slightest inclination in him to outguess you and anticipate a lead change or turn, ride him straight out of the pattern and back to the top of the arena. Start the process all over, riding through individual slots several times without changing leads. Then try to work progressively down the line again, changing leads through each slot as you would in a show. It may take several times attempting the full line and needing to go back to riding individual slots without changing leads before your horse can make it through without giving any hint of anticipation.

5. Finally, the ultimate stage of this exercise is to ride randomly through the line of markers, making all decisions on the go. As you ride with no preplanned pattern, arbitrarily choose your directions, which slot to start with, which one to follow with, how many times to ride through and whether you'll change leads as you pass through or not. By now your horse should have completely given up control to you and be waiting for his instructions.

Some important notes for this exercise:

- Always change leads while the horse is straight from head to tail. He must be straight, even if it's for only one stride, to achieve an above-average lead change.
- Always steer, whether with your reins or legs or both. Practice turning left, then going straight, and turning right, then going straight. Introduce random turns so your horse can never guess where you'll take him next. He'll become finely tuned to the slightest rein cues.
- Always fix any lead change problems well away from the markers to avoid confusion. In your horse's mind, this separates problems that are specifically linked to lead changes from those that are related to the pattern.
- Never ride through the line of markers making all the lead changes twice in a row as you would in a show. If you ride repeatedly through making all the changes, you'll put back into your horse all the anticipation this exercise strives to take out. Alternate trips with and without lead changes to keep him guessing.
- Never let the markers be the lead change trigger to your horse. If markers always signify a lead change to him, he'll incorrectly learn to change leads when he wants to or, at the least, he'll anticipate the changes and lose his form.

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