



Arizona Reining Horse  
Association Trainers  
Discussion

“Tricks of the  
Trade”

*Flying Lead Changes*

By: Stephenie Bjorkman

Did you know that flying lead changes are one of the few things that horses do naturally? Wild horses don't spin, slide, or back up...but they do effortless flying lead changes all day long! If this is true, then why do so many people struggle with changing from one lead to the other? It should be easy right? If you are one of the many who need help with delivering a perfect flying lead change, then this article is for you!

Wikipedia defines a **lead change** as moving in a canter or gallop, changing from one lead to the other. There are two basic forms of lead change: simple and flying. It is very easy to define the correct lead from the incorrect lead. When a horse is executing the correct lead, his inside leg will reach farther forwards than his outside and vice-versa to define incorrect.

The **flying change** is a lead change performed by a horse in which he changes leads at the canter/lope while in the air between two strides

In reining, flying lead changes are performed as part of a pattern intended to illustrate a high degree of training. It illustrates how fine-tuned the horse is. A good flying lead change will appear effortless both in the horse's actions and in the rider's cues. The horse will not speed up or slow down or display resentment (i.e. by switching its tail excessively) or hesitation.

To answer our lead change dilemma, Top NRHA reining professionals Matt Mills, Brent Naylor, Ashley Wilson & Patrick Flaherty will teach us of few of their “tricks of the trade”.

**What is the biggest mistake you see people make when trying to change leads?**

Brent: “One of the biggest mistakes I see is that people let the horse speed up and duck off. Riders tend to fail to take the time to prepare and put there horse in proper position.”

Patrick: “I find that riders ask the horse to change leads when they are not prepared and they don't have control of the horse's body.”

## **What is the most important thing someone can do to prepare their horse for a flying lead change?**

Ashley: "I think that there are two very important things. The two most important things to me is to be able to pick up the horses shoulders and to be able to move their rib cage."

Matt: "Whether I'm practicing or showing the most important thing for me is to keep my horses body straight. The alignment for the lead change is crucial because you might occasionally get away with not having a horse straight and dropping a shoulder. It might work a time or two. But at some point your flaw will get exposed right when you need the lead change the most. To me, the straightness is more important than the lead change. If you practice staying straight on a regular basis your lead change will come."

## **What "tip" could you recommend for someone who rides a horse that is difficult to change leads on?**

Brent: "My advice would be to get someone to help you who are standing on the ground. Someone on the ground can look at what you are doing from a different position/point of view. The funny thing is that sometimes it might feel terrible, but it may look really good or vice versa."

Matt: "The first thing I would say is to perfect the art of the simple lead change. A simple lead change is where you go thru the middle of a circle, break down from one stride to a trot and then pick up the opposite lead. Another drill you can do on a tough horse is to change leads over a pole (trail type) on the ground. What this will do is make your horse elevate its shoulder and it will naturally force the horse to lift there entire body up. If they don't get it with a poll laying flat on the ground, I will raise one side of the poll. Do that for 2 or 3 days and you should have it. "

## **What is the best way you can practice a flying lead change without making your horse anticipate changing leads?**

Patrick: "If you are going to practice at home to change leads, make sure you can lope thru the center of your circle straight. Never ask for a change unless you are in the correct position. In practice you should only ask for the change when it is easiest for the horse to change. This is very important because if you only ask when you are in the correct position your horse won't anticipate. "

Matt: "The best way to practice a lead change on a horse that anticipates is to do a little exercise that doesn't involve the actual change. The most important part of a lead change is staying straight and body control. Pick your horse up when you are going thru the middle of the circle and move the entire horses body over (1 horse length). If your horse is broke and not afraid of the change when you release he will be fine. If your horse reacts when you go to pick up by either slowing down or elevating their head you have a problem. You should practice this drill many times; this drill should become "old hat" to the horse. Your horse needs to be able to be picked up and manipulated in the middle without any fuss."

## **How often should you practice flying lead changes and when?**

Brent: "If you work on lead changes all the time and they don't need it then the horse will anticipate and be upset. In my program I usually don't touch on it more than a few times a week. If you have a horse that has an issue with changing leads, you may need to do it more. What I suggest is to get the horse to do it a couple of times in a row correct and then leave it alone and go back later."

Matt: "I recommend changing leads often. Maybe 3 to 4 days a week. The only time I wouldn't change leads is if you are an inexperienced rider and you don't have the skill level to execute the lead change properly. If you cannot change leads properly you can really do damage on your horse. If this is the case I would only do it when you are with a trainer."

### **Do you recommend practicing flying lead changes at a show?**

Brent: "It is not a bad thing to change leads at the show, but I do not recommend changing leads in the center of your circle (where you would in the show pen). You should counter canter instead. I recommend countering cantering in a large circle and making your lead change in a location other than in the middle or near the middle. By changing leads in different spots it will make your horse think and listen to you."

Ashley: "This entirely depends on the skill level of the non pro, youth or horse. If you have a super broke horse that has been shown a ton, you don't necessarily need to change him at the show. But I would make sure that you can move all of the parts of his body that you are going to need to change. The horses shoulders should be loose, hips loose, move off your leg easily, side pass, etc. If the rider is nervous about a lead change and they are on a broke horse, then it would be a good idea to practice at the show."

### **What do you do if you have a horse that "kicks out" when changing leads?**

Patrick: "Kicking out is anticipation. If you always make it easy for them to change leads by only asking in the correct position kicking out is something that shouldn't happen."

Ashley: "Stop him, make the horse move there hip over get and get off your leg. Pick up a counter lead and ask for the change again. If this continues seek professional help."

### **What do you do if you have a horse that changes leads before you ask?**

Patrick: "If you practice waiting to change leads, then they should never change before you ask. Being in the proper position and setting them up to change leads is very important in all aspects of the lead change."

Ashley: "If I have a horse who is quick to change leads I lope thru the middle, set up for change, don't let them change if they do change break them back down and pick up original lead."

### **Some NRHA reining patterns have you change leads from a fast circle into a slow, what is the best way to perform this type of a flying lead change?**

Patrick: "I love these patterns, when your horse is sucking back to slow down then it should be easy for them to change leads. Make sure your horse is straight and in position before you change."

Matt: "This depends on horse and rider skill level. The highest degree of difficulty is to slow down and change leads. It is very risky and I don't encourage amateur riders to do it. Slow down 50% before the lead change and then slow down the other 50% after the lead change on a straight line before you go into the small slow circle."

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