

Pole Power!

Part 1: Introduce Pole Power at the Walk

Crossing poles isn't just for trail-class competitors. Learning to control your horse's stride will improve your feel and balance, his responsiveness—and your overall safety. Plus, pole work is fun!

Event appeal: Trail or Western riding...but *any* horse-and-rider combo will benefit.

Goal: To improve your horse's rhythm and your control, so you can cross over a series of evenly spaced poles smoothly and in perfect cadence at the walk. *And*, to do so without touching them (a points-off penalty if you choose to show).

Benefits:

- If you *do* show over poles, you'll gain plus-points instead of points off when negotiating crossovers, by making them fluid and touch-free.
- If you don't show, you'll still win by vastly improving your horse's responsiveness to your cues.
- You'll improve your balance by learning to stay with your horse over the poles.
- You'll improve your feel, by learning exactly how much hand, seat, and leg you'll need to adjust and/or maintain your horse's stride so he can smoothly walk over the poles.
- You'll improve your horse's cadence, by teaching him to maintain a specific stride length until *you* tell him otherwise.
- The poles will encourage your horse to lift and round his back, and reach with his shoulders and hocks, thus suppling him and helping his movement and coordination.
- You'll help your horse relax, by giving him something to focus on (where to put his feet!).
- The work will mentally freshen you both. Poles break the monotony of whatever you do, be it ride the rail, or mosey down the trail. And—working with them is fun!

Are you tired of your horse making the decisions when you ride? He may arbitrarily surge forward or tap the brakes, making for an erratic feel. You can say goodbye to that if you'll stick with me for Parts 1, 2, and 3 of this series.

The only way you can correctly negotiate a series of poles is by learning to establish and maintain the proper stride length needed to negotiate them smoothly. If you let your horse's stride get too long, he'll have to stutter-step through them. If you let it get too short, he'll have to launch over them.

With practice, you'll develop the level of feel needed to make minute adjustments the *instant* your horse even thinks about changing his cadence. And that, my friends, is *riding*.

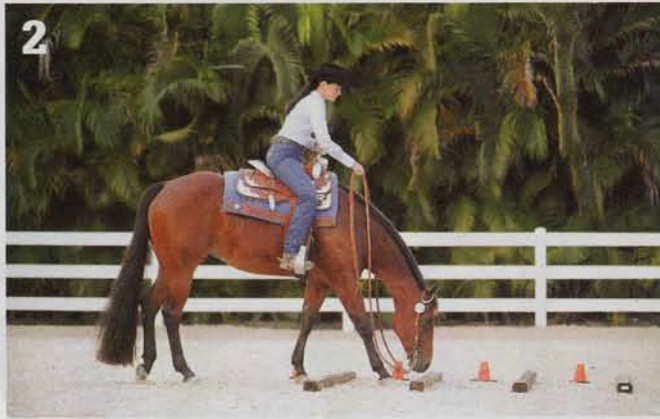
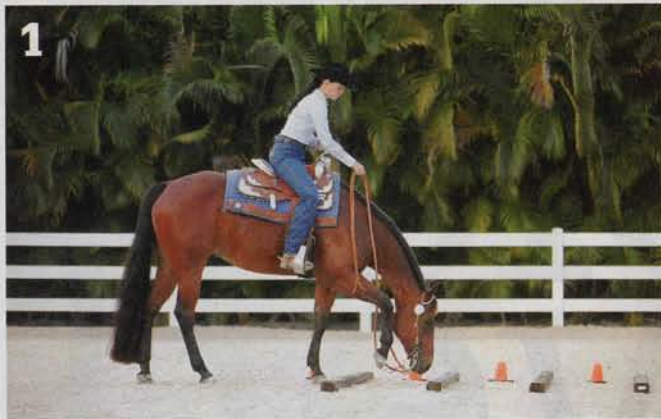
The beauty of using poles to achieve this is that you won't have to fight to get your horse to listen to you. The

poles will help back him off, or encourage him forward, as necessary. He'll figure out along with you that maintaining the correct stride length makes his job much easier. It will become a game in which you two operate as a team. And you'll both end up winners. Ready? Let's ride.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

- **4 ground poles.** 12-foot poles are typically used at shows, but 8-foot landscape timbers (used here) from your local hardware store or garden center work great.
- **Tape measure or yardstick.**
- **4 small traffic cones.** Optional; you can use these to mark the ideal spot at which you want your horse to step over the first pole, then step between each pole thereafter. →

COMING SOON
January '09 Part 2: Let's jog some poles!
February '09 Part 3: Fun with pole-lope-overs.



IT'S AS EASY AS 2, 3, 6!

Spacing poles for your horse's gaits is easy. Simply measure the distance from inside edge to inside edge of each pole, using a measuring tape or yardstick.

- **Walk stride:** 2 feet.
- **Jog stride:** 3 feet.
- **Lope stride:** 6 feet.

Note: These are the measurements you'll typically find in trail classes at horse shows. If you want to add a stride between poles, simply multiply the number above by the number of strides you desire. For instance, you can set up your poles for lope strides (which will be Part 3 of our series), and get two jog strides or three walk strides between each pole. Be creative!

If you don't plan to show, and your horse's stride is a bit longer or shorter than average (he continually has to compress his stride, or reach excessively), you can adjust these measurements accordingly. However, once he gets comfortable with pole work, challenge yourself and him by adjusting the strides to be a few inches shorter or longer. That will ratchet up your feel and your horse's responsiveness even more, which will pay off in anything you do.

your eyes on the center of the pole will help subliminally guide him), and to keep the same walk rhythm.

When you reach the pole, allow him to drop his head to look at it, so he can gauge where to lift his front foot. Avoid goosing him forward if he hesitates. Instead, fan your legs and lightly cluck to encourage him forward, stepping down in your stirrups while lightening your seat to encourage him to lift and round his back as he steps over the pole.

Note: If your horse has never seen a pole on the ground before, start by walking over a single one. Don't worry if he's looky—cautious horses are least likely to touch the poles! Firmly guide him, using your reins and legs as necessary to keep him straight until he steps over. Repeat until he walks easily over a single pole, then add a second, then a third, and finally a fourth as demonstrated here.

• A flat riding area with good footing.

- **A horse that's broke enough.** He must know stop and go, and he should guide easily. If he's young and/or green, and you lack experience, seek help from a reputable trainer before attempting poles on your own.

1. Set up your four poles, spaced 2 feet apart (see, "It's as Easy as 2, 3, 6!" above). If you opt to use cones to mark your take-off points, place one about 9 inches in front and to the side of the first pole, then centered between the edges of each subsequent pole (as shown).

Warm up your horse. Once he's settled, establish a cadenced, 2-foot-stride walk on a 20-foot circle in front of the ground poles. (If you're unsure what a 2-foot stride feels like, don't worry—you'll develop a feel for it after several times through the poles.) Since the walk is a four-beat gait, count "one-two-three-four" to yourself, to help maintain the rhythm. If you have to speed up or slow down your count, your horse is surging or stalling. Quietly use your reins and legs as necessary to bring him back to the rhythm you choose.

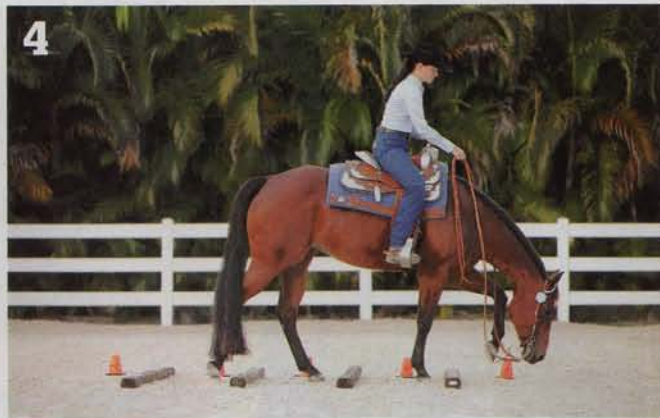
Once you can maintain that rhythm on the circle, guide your horse on a straight line toward the center of the first pole. Use your aids to keep him perfectly straight (keeping

2. Here's where you'll know whether you had your horse on a 2-foot stride, and/or whether he took off at the right spot in front of the first pole. If his front foot lands at the mid-point between the two poles, congrats! He took the first pole literally in stride as this horse is doing here, meaning you had him on a 2-foot step.

However, if his foot lands just beyond the first pole, he took off too far away from it, and/or your walk stride was too short. Fan your legs to encourage him to lengthen his step. If his foot lands too close to the second pole, he may have too much stride. Gently increase your rein contact, to compress it.

3. Hold your position steady, so your horse can balance beneath you, adjusting your aids as necessary to help him maintain the one-two-three-four rhythm as he steps...

4. ...through the poles. (If you were to sit back, you'd slow



him down. If you allow yourself to tip forward, you'll inadvertently encourage him to speed up.) Once you've crossed the final pole, keep him on a straight line, and in that same rhythm for several additional strides. Then circle back, and repeat, adjusting his stride as necessary until he can walk through without hesitation, maintaining perfect cadence.

Note: If your horse hits a pole or poles, he may be taking too lazy a step. Use your legs to create more energy in his stride, and try again, clucking at the pole to encourage more lift in his legs. (If you use a cluck cue to ask him to jog, use leg alone here, so you don't confuse him.)

5. Problem solving: If your horse sees the poles and thinks, "Charge!", stop him before he reaches the first pole. Back him up a step or two, to reinforce the message.

6A. Then, teach him patience. Allow him to take a small step over the first pole, stopping him the moment you feel that foot touch the ground, so he's straddling the pole with his front legs. (See—I told you you'd develop feel with ground-pole work!)

6B. Release your reins and pat him to let it sink in that poles don't always mean "go." (If he tries to step forward, stop him, allow him to relax, then start again.) When he relaxes and will stand quietly straddling the pole, allow him to walk through all four. But stop him any time he tries to surge on his own. He needs to know that's one surge that isn't going to work.

Incorporate pole work several days a week, increasing the distances between the poles by increments of 2 feet, to change things up and test your ability to maintain the walk rhythm for longer distances. You'll then be ready for next month's lesson: jogging a series of poles. ■

Mark Stevens has been training and showing successfully since 1970, and is also a national and international clinician. His clients and team of trainers from his Springwater Farm, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, have earned multiple AQHA, PHBA, and ApHC World Championships.

While Mark has trained everything from pleasure driving to Western pleasure horses, he says his favorite events are the all-around ones, especially trail. In fact, it was after doing pole work to improve the rhythm and cadence of the former pleasure horse, What A Fancy Zippo, that Mark got into trail. He credits pole work with helping the 1992 Quarter Horse gelding earn multiple AQHA World and Congress trail championships, while finishing his superior in Western pleasure. "Peanut" is still winning at age 16.

Another former pleasure horse that's winning proof of the power of pole work is the '93 Quarter Horse gelding Lopin Leaguer, who became a Congress all-around youth champion and 2007 AQHA Select World all-around champion. Mark also cites the 1988 Quarter Horse gelding, The Due Gooder, who, after an 11-year career in the pleasure pen, benefited so much from pole work that he went on to earn Superiors in Western riding and trail. He's still winning in trail at 20 with owner Christine Jones; Mark credits pole work for his show-pen longevity.

Learn more about Mark and his program at markstevenshorses.com.

