

Pole Power!

Part 3: Fun with Pole Lope-Overs

Build on your balance, feel, and control—plus improve your horse's movement (and his outlook)—by riding a series of four lope-over poles.

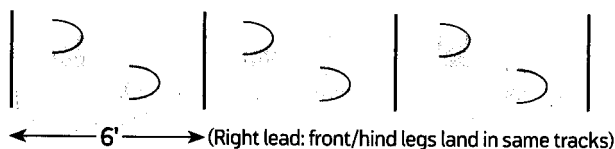
Event appeal: Trail or Western riding, but any horse-and-rider combo will benefit.

Goal: To take the rhythm, control, and balance you've gained at the walk and jog in Parts 1 and 2 and apply it to loping over a series of four ground poles.

Benefit: If you show, you'll gain plus points with fluid, touch-free lope-overs. If you don't show, you'll still ratchet up your horse's responsiveness, improve his cadence and movement, and fine-tune your feel and in-saddle security. Plus, you'll cement your partnership with him—and have fun!

You mastered walk- and jog-overs in Parts 1 and 2. Now it's time to get to the *real* fun part, and discover the partnership (and feel) you'll develop by teaching your horse to lope over a series of poles. To get an idea of where his feet will land between each pole, you'll begin on foot.

Set up four ground poles, 6 feet apart from inside edge to inside edge. (See, "Poles By The Numbers," page 52.) Walk over the poles using two 3-foot steps between them. This will show you where your horse's feet will land:



If you'd like, place cones to the side of the ground poles, to mark these "step points." (We did it for photography purposes here.) Next, warm up your horse. When you're both relaxed and focused, set up one or two single ground poles around your work area. Establish a cadenced 6-foot-stride lope on either lead (don't worry if it's not the exact length—the pole series below

LOOKING BACK

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will help you fine-tune it), and lope on a straight line to the center of a single pole.

Stay soft and centered with your upper body, keep your horse straight between your reins and legs, maintain the rhythm, and let the pole come up naturally. (See Step 1 for more tips on how to approach the pole.) Repeat in both directions until you both get a feel for loping a single pole, then move to Step 1.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

- **4 to 6 ground poles.** 12-foot poles are typically used at shows, but 8-foot landscape timbers (used here) from your local hardware or garden center work great.
- **Tape measure or yardstick.**
- **4 to 6 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 the poles thereafter (see photos).
- **A flat riding area with good footing.**
- **A horse that's broke enough...** ...that he knows stop and go, and is easily guided. If he's young and/or green, and you lack experience, seek out the help of a reputable trainer before attempting poles on your own.
- **A thorough understanding of Parts 1 and 2.** I recommend that you not tackle lope-overs until you've mastered the walk- and jog-overs we covered in Parts 1 and 2. (See, "Looking Back," above.) →



POLES BY THE NUMBERS

Measure the distance from inside edge to inside edge of each pole.

Walk stride: 2 feet.

Jog stride: 3 feet.

Lope stride: 6 feet.

1. When you're comfortable loping a single pole, add a second one 6 feet beyond it; place a single cone about 18 inches in front of, and to the side of, the first pole (as shown) to mark the ideal take-off point. Establish a 6-foot stride on a right-lead circle about 30 feet from the first pole. Use your reins and legs as necessary, until your horse is moving in a cadenced, three-beat rhythm. (Count 1-2-3, 1-2-3, to yourself to help maintain the rhythm.)

Exit the circle on a straight line to the center of the first pole. Sit up with your body centered and your weight in your heels. Look straight ahead to help subliminally guide your horse. Avoid anticipating the approach, which will cause you to tense up, in turn causing your horse to tense and ruin his rhythm. Instead, relax, keep up your 1-2-3 count, and let the poles come to you.

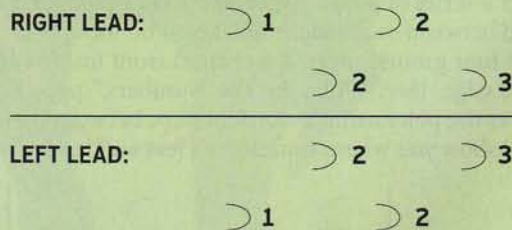
About two to three steps from the first one, push lightly with your seat if needed, to encourage your horse to stay forward, and release any rein contact so he can look down and determine the best take-off spot. Follow the motion of his back with your seat (balancing on the saddle horn if needed, to avoid jabbing him in the mouth) as he steps over the first pole...

2. ...then into the "gap," as this horse is doing, before stepping over the second pole. Keep him on a straight line for several steps beyond that pole, then assess your lope-over. Did your horse meet the first pole perfectly, stepping in 1-2-3 rhythm over it and beyond, as this horse did?

A LOOK AT THE LOPE

The lope is a three-beat gait defined by the leading foreleg, which generally indicates the direction in which you're traveling. For instance, a right-lead lope means your horse's right foreleg is the "leading" leg; when loping to the right on his own, he'll opt for his right lead in order to balance.

When he steps into a right-lead lope, however, he'll actually lead off with his *left hind* leg, which pushes his body up and forward; his right hind and left fore then land simultaneously for the second beat, followed by the right fore for the third and final beat (for a diagram of this and the left-lead lope, see below).



As you can see, your horse's power originates in his hind legs, which provide the lift in his body, enabling full extension from his hips through his shoulders for the long, sweeping gait that judges love, and you'll love to ride. And, as you'll see in the photos in this article, pole work *really* helps your horse get the strength needed to power this lift and reach.

Or, did he take off too far away from the first pole, forcing him to leap over it (a points-off error if you show), probably banging timber with his front feet? If so, he needs to shorten his step so he can fit in one more before the first pole, then rock back and lift his front end so he clears the pole with his feet.



Here's how to do it: Lift your reins about 10 inches above your saddle horn, sit slightly back in the saddle, and press lightly with your legs as you approach the first pole and ride to and over the second one. This will compress your horse into the bit so he'll sit back over his hocks, shorten his step, and pick up his feet. Repeat several times until your horse (and you) get a feel for the step he needs to negotiate the poles smoothly, then release the contact and try again.

If your horse is adding a stutter-y half-step in front of the first pole (called a "chip," a points-off error in trail), or is hitting the poles with his hind feet, he's probably going too slow or has too short a stride. Several steps before the first pole, lift your reins and press with your seat and legs to encourage him to lengthen his step. Repeat several times until you both get a feel for it, then release your contact and try again. (If your horse is rushing through the poles, skip to Step 6.)

Continue lope over the two poles in both directions until you can do so smoothly and touch-free, then move to Step 3.

3. Add the third and fourth lope poles, then use the rhythm and feel you developed in Steps 1 and 2 to negotiate these two additional lope-overs. Here, a great approach to the first pole set up our models, Stephanie Armellini (one of my team trainers) and Zippos Broker, to step in perfect cadence over the second pole...

4. ...landing with the mare's two front feet perfectly positioned between the second and third poles as she...

5. ...finishes the series in fine form. Look at the lift in this mare's back as she propels herself forward with her hind legs, reaching deep beneath her body with her right hind as she pushes up with her abdomen and elevates her shoulders so she can lift and reach with her front legs. And what does all this add up to? Improved movement and cadence (not to mention suppleness and control) in whatever you do.

6. Problem solving: If your horse rushes through the poles, resulting in bad foot placement (compare this photo to Photo 5) and an uncoordinated, lurching feel, slow him down mentally by...

Mark Stevens has been training and showing successfully since 1970. His clients and team of trainers from his Springwater Farm, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, have earned multiple AQHA, PHBA, and ApHC world championships.

Mark has trained everything from pleasure driving to Western pleasure horses. 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.

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

7A. ...quietly pulling him to a stop between the first and second poles. The goal is *not* to punish or scare him, but rather to show him poles don't mean "speed up." (If he doesn't stop quickly enough to avoid stepping over the second pole, don't sweat it.)

7B. Allow him to stand with a loose rein until he relaxes and drops his head...

7C. ...then walk him out over the remaining poles. Lope him into the series again and stop him at a different point, allowing him to settle before walking out once more. Repeat, until he's stopping easily and staying totally relaxed, then try lope through on a loose rein.

You should find that he's approaching the poles with more relaxation and confidence, taking care to almost pause between each pole as he carefully steps through and over them. (If he actually slows down, encourage him forward with a light seat push.)

With continued practice in both directions, your horse will learn to adjust his stride several steps out, slightly compressing it or lengthening it in order to approach the first pole in perfect step, setting you up for smooth, flowing lope-overs every time. And you can congratulate yourself—you made learning fun! ■