

Pole Power!

Part 2: Let's Jog Some Poles!

Use jog poles to freshen your horse mentally, improve his movement, and to ratchet up your balance and control. Champion trainer Mark Stevens shows you how.

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

Goal: To jog over a series of poles in perfect cadence without touching them (a points-off penalty if you show).

Benefits:

- If you *do* show, you'll gain plus-points instead of points off by making pole crossovers fluid and touch-free.
- If you don't show, you'll still vastly improve your control and your horse's responsiveness.
- You'll improve your seat and balance by learning to sit your horse's "bounce" over the poles.
- You'll improve your horse's cadence, stride, and movement, as he learns to lift his back and reach rhythmically over the poles with his front and hind legs.
- The work will freshen you both. It's fun!

Last month, you taught your horse to maintain rhythm and cadence by walking over a series of four poles. You—and he—figured out that the only way you can correctly negotiate them is to maintain the proper stride length. If you let your horse's stride get too long, he had to stutter-step through them. If you let it get too short, he had to launch over them.

You also learned that the beauty of pole work is that the poles focus your horse's attention without you having to nag him. They help back him off, or encourage him forward, as necessary. He figured out, along with you, that maintaining the correct stride length made his job much easier.

This month, we're going to raise the degree of difficulty slightly by tackling a series of poles at the jog. The basics remain the same: cadence is key. The difference here is that you'll need to elasticize your body so you can absorb

LOOKING BACK
December '08 Part 1: Introduce pole power at the walk.

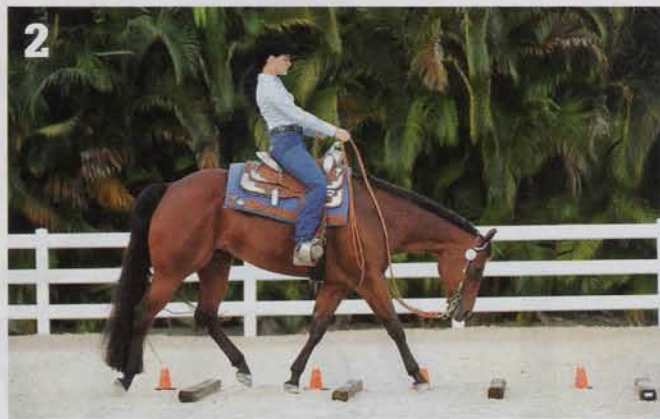
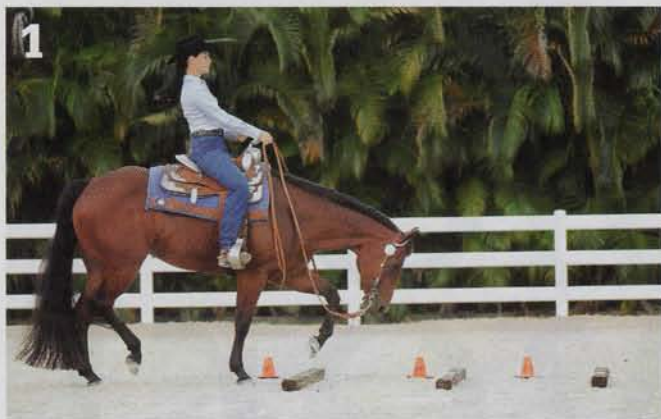
COMING NEXT
February '09 Part 3: Fun with pole lope-overs.

the added bounce from this gait. Doing so will improve your balance, which ultimately improves control. Don't worry if you feel awkward at first—you'll feel a whole lot worse than you look, and practice will soon have you feeling and looking secure and in control.

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 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.
- **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 the help of a reputable trainer before attempting poles on your own.

- 1.** Set up your four poles, spaced 3 feet apart (see, "Know Thy Numbers," page 50). If you opt to use cones to mark your take-off points, place one about 18 inches in front



KNOW THY NUMBERS

To space the poles, 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, 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 between each pole. Be creative!

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 3-foot stride at the jog on a 30-foot circle in front of the ground poles, counting "one-two, one-two," to maintain the rhythm. (*Tip:* The trot you'll need is a little faster than a pleasure jog and slower than a sitting trot in hunt seat. If you're unsure, don't worry. You'll get a feel for it after a few times through the poles.) If you have to alter your count, your horse is surging or stalling. Quietly use your reins and legs as necessary to bring him back to your rhythm.

To help maintain your balance, sit back slightly with your weight over your jean pockets, keeping your seat and upper body flexible to absorb the bounce. (*Tip:* Practice sitting an extended trot away from the poles to improve your seat. If you find yourself balancing on the reins—your horse will likely raise his head or slow down—hold the saddle horn with your free hand, until you can balance on your own.)

Once you can maintain rhythm on the circle, guide your horse straight toward the center of the first pole. Two to three strides in front of it, loosen your reins and leave him alone. That way, he can look down and figure out whether to add or subtract from his stride so he can take the first step about 18 inches from it. And *that way*, he can start and finish the series with each foot landing as close to the center of the 3-foot spread between the poles as possible.

Avoid goosing him forward if he hesitates. Instead, fan your legs at his sides and lightly cluck to encourage him forward, stepping down in your stirrups to encourage him to lift and round his back as he jogs over the pole.

Note: If your horse has never trotted over a pole before, start by jogging a single one, so he and you can learn how to gauge your take-off point. Repeat until he jogs easily over a single

pole without changing his rhythm, then add a second, then a third, and finally a fourth, as demonstrated here.

2. Was your stride length right, and did your horse gauge his take-off correctly? If his front foot lands at the mid-point between the two poles (our cone was accidentally placed slightly forward of that point here; the horse's foot is in the right spot), congrats! He took the first pole literally in stride, meaning you had him on a 3-foot step.

However, if his foot lands just beyond the first pole, he took off too far away from it, and/or your jog stride was too slow/short. If his foot lands too close to the second pole, he may have too much stride. See the problem-solving tips in Photos 5, 6, and 7.

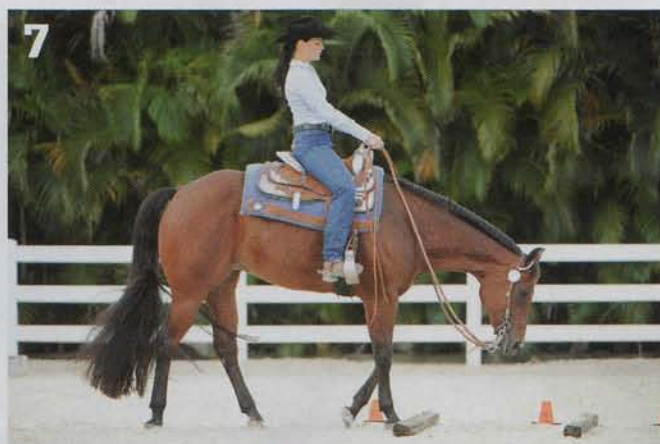
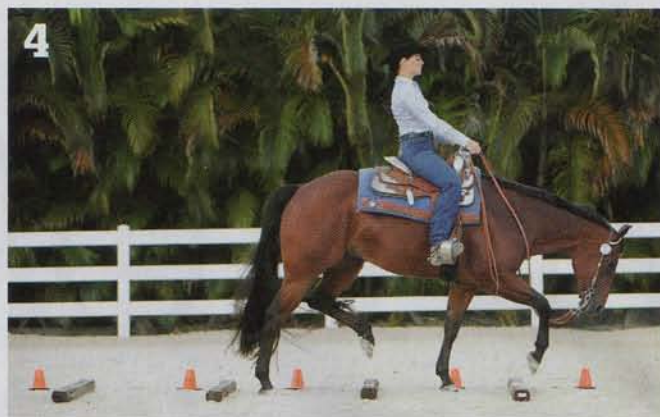
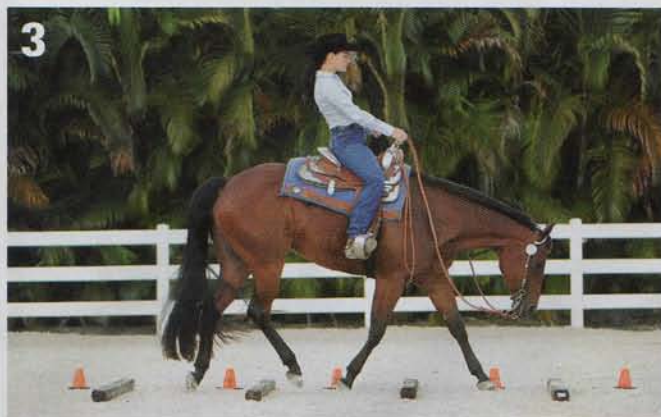
3. Keep your horse straight as you hold your position steady, so he can balance beneath you, adjusting your aids as necessary to help him maintain the one-two rhythm as he jogs...

4. ...through the poles. Once you've crossed the final pole, keep him on a straight line and in that same rhythm for four or five additional strides. Then circle back, and repeat, adjusting his stride as necessary, until he can jog through maintaining perfect cadence.

Note: If your horse taps 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 back and legs.

5. Problem solving: He takes off too early. If your horse tries to step over the first pole from too far away, he'll have to lurch through the rest or add a stutter-step at some point. If this happens...

6. ...hold your reins about 10 inches above your saddle horn about three strides in front of the first pole, and press with



WINNING OVER THE 'WOG' IN TRAIL

The jog is a two-beat gait in which your horse's diagonal feet hit the ground at the same time (left front and right hind for one beat; right front and left hind for the next, creating a one-two beat). Between the two beats, his back raises to lift his legs for the next step. It's this motion that causes you to bounce.

Many trail horses start out in Western pleasure, where "s-l-o-w" is rewarded. Unfortunately, going slow tends to break the one-two rhythm and creates a half-walk, half-jog gait that I call a "wog." When starting a pleasure horse over poles, the wog may cause him to bang the poles with his back feet, or in some cases, add an extra hind step.

To help him, you need slightly more forward motion so he can lift his back and his legs. This lift requires strength in your horse's back, abdomen, and hips—and it's key to great movement on the rail. I've used pole work to improve numerous Western pleasure horses' movements, as well as to freshen their minds. It's a winner.

your legs. The combination of rein and leg will slightly shorten and energize his stride so he takes off closer to the first pole.

Maintain contact and energy over the entire series of poles; repeat for the next two or three passes. After that, release the contact and let him try again on his own. Look what the combination of rein and leg has done for this horse: He's lifting his legs with energy, but hasn't stretched his stride beyond the 3-foot step required to cross the poles with cadence.

7. Problem solving: He adds a short step (known as a "chip"). Use your aids to slightly lengthen your horse's stride so he takes his first crossover step farther away from the first

Mark Stevens has been training and showing successfully since 1970, and is also an 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 1993 Quarter Horse gelding Lopin Leaguer, who became a Congress all-around youth champion and 2007 AQHA Select World all-around champion.

Stephanie Armellini, one of the team trainers at Springwater Farm, demonstrates this month's lesson aboard Zippos Broker owned by Jaqueline Schwartz.

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

pole. (He may have been moving too slow on his original approach. Note that this horse's hind-leg stride is normal, but his front-leg stride is too short, hence the chip.)

If he's surging when he sees the poles, refer to the fix in Part 1 (December '08). Practice your jog poles until you can consistently march through without a change in cadence. You'll then be ready for next month's lesson: loping a series of poles. ■