



# 3 COMMON MISTAKES IN THE FLYING CHANGES

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## MISTAKE #1 – LATE BEHIND

Perhaps the most common mistake that happens in the flying changes is that the front legs change leads, but the hind legs either don't change at all, or they change a stride or two later.

The reason for this is usually crookedness and loss of balance.

What happens very often is that the horse rotates a little under the rider in the flying change so that his shoulders move into the new direction. You can observe this especially in the change from the horse's hollow side to his stiff side, and more often on curved lines than on straight lines. This slight lateral rotation of the horse's body causes the weight to fall onto the new inside shoulder. The horse becomes unbalanced and has to switch leads in front in order not to fall down. As his shoulders go down and towards the new inside, his croup moves up and towards the new outside, which makes it almost biomechanically impossible to change at all behind. At the very least, there is a delay of one or more canter strides before the horse changes behind.

Sometimes the mistake is due to the rider not supporting the old outside/new inside shoulder enough with her knee and rein.

Sometimes it is caused by the rider turning her entire body too much in the new direction, which means that her new outside hip and shoulder move forward. Many riders lean forward or stand up in the stirrups on top of that, both of which push the horse's shoulders toward the new inside and his haunches toward the new outside. Tipping forward or standing up takes the rider's weight off the horse's hind legs and throws it onto the horse's shoulders. As a result, the horse is unable to execute a clean flying change.

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If the rider's pelvis is stiff and does not rotate easily, it will most definitely affect the flying changes. Most riders can turn their pelvis more easily in one direction than the other. As a result, the flying change will always be better in the direction where the rider is able to move her new outside hip back and her new outside hip forward more freely and smoothly. The flying change in the opposite direction will often be late behind or fail altogether.

Sometimes the horse's own crookedness causes the lateral rotation. You can prevent it by framing the old outside shoulder better before and during the change. You can also choose a different exercise pattern.

Since the problem here is that the horse moves his shoulders too quickly or too soon into the new direction, select an exercise in which the shoulders are moved toward the old inside, and the haunches alone are moved toward the new inside, such as those that follow the pattern shoulder-in to renvers, half pass to renvers, zigzag, or (quarter) pirouette to flying change.

In some cases, the stiffness of the horse's hips prevents him from changing smoothly and cleanly. The cure lies in suppling them through turns on the forehand in motion, pirouettes renversées, and lateral movements in general.

There is another case in which the horse appears to change late behind. This is a problem that appears in horses with a very high canter stride. They lift their front end so high off the ground, that both front legs are in the air, while both hind legs are on the ground. This is the 4 beat footfall sequence of the school canter. The inside hind leg touches down before the outside front leg. This is a very nice, light, soft uphill canter to ride, but the downside is that the front legs change while they are in the air because that is mechanically the easiest option for the horse. Since the hind legs are still on the ground, they are unable to change in that moment. They have to wait for the suspension phase and this creates the impression that the horse is changing late behind, although it's still the same canter stride.

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This becomes a problem in competition because you will get a lower score for your flying change. It can also cause problems in tempo changes, because the horse may not be able to do two tempo changes or one tempo changes. The solution is to lower the front end again, so the horse canters in a more horizontal balance - a campaign school canter rather than a traditional school canter. You can achieve a more horizontal balance by stepping into the inside front leg: applying a little pressure to the inside stirrup at the lowest point of the canter stride when the inside front leg is on the ground.

If you find yourself in a situation where the horse has changed only in front, you can try to get the hind legs to change as well by asking for a haunches-in in the new direction for a couple of strides. If the horse does not respond to this aid, it is better to bring him quietly back to a halt, ask for a 90 degree turn on the forehand from the new outside leg, since moving the pelvis in the new direction is most likely what the horse didn't do. You can add a few steps of full pass from the new outside leg to explain to the horse that he should have yielded to this leg. Then you reduce the angle of the horse's body to the line of travel and ask for the true lead canter. Then ride some exercises that increase the mobility of the horse's hips.

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## MISTAKE #2 - LATE IN FRONT

Changing late in front occurs less often than changing late behind.

This is an interesting error and is caused by the horse falling onto the forehand. Some horses develop a really clever technique for this. They may be cantering along nicely, but as soon as the rider asks for the flying change they quickly put both front legs down and support the entire body weight with them for a split second so the hind legs can change leads. When the front legs lift off again, they change in front. These changes are quite smooth, but not clean and not in good balance. Horses do this because putting the entire body weight onto the front legs for a split second makes it easier to move the pelvis laterally.

To be on the safe side, it may be a good idea to have the hind legs checked by a veterinarian, in order to rule out that the horse is protecting them because they hurt when they have to support the weight.

Since the root cause of the problem is excess weight on the front legs, even if it is only for one canter stride, the correction is to shift the body mass onto the hind legs before the flying change. You can do this by asking for the change right after a pirouette or passade, or after a steep half pass. Any arena pattern or movement that induces this weight transfer to the hindquarters may work.

In addition, you will have to work on accentuating the first beat of the canter stride, when the withers are at the highest point and the outside hind leg is on the ground by lifting the withers more. This can be done by applying a small stirrup pressure into the outside stirrup together with a small half halt at the highest point of the canter stride.

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In addition, you can diminish the forward movement that you feel in your pelvis during the second phase of the canter stride and redirect it upward so that you increase the upward movement in the first phase of the stride while reducing the forward movement in the second phase of the stride with your pelvis. Lifting your belly button in the first phase helps as well. During the suspension phase you may have to drive with your legs to maintain impulsion. Try to make the up and down motion of the horse's back bigger than the forward and back motion. Think of the canter stride as "UP -two - three" instead of "one - two - DOWN".

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## MISTAKE #3 - NOT THROUGH BEHIND

Sometimes horses will change leads, but with little or no separation of the hind legs. In other words, the new inside hind leg will touch down only a hoof's width in front of the outside one. In some cases, both hind legs touch down next to each other. The inside hind leg does not touch down close enough to the center of gravity and barely reaches the vertical line from the hip joint. This means that the leg does not flex its joints sufficiently, but touches down and opens its joints right away. Another way of putting it is to say that it does not support the body mass; instead, it touches down and immediately pushes forward, which puts the horse onto the forehand and makes him lean onto the bit.

The inside hind leg is the carrying one in the canter; the outside hind leg is the pushing one. If the inside hind leg does not touch down far enough in front of the vertical, the canter becomes flat, scratchy, and downhill. The closer it touches down to the center of gravity, the more uphill, collected, and expressive the canter will be. After a flying change in which there is not enough separation of the hind legs because the inside hind leg does not reach forward enough, the canter quality will have deteriorated to the point where it may be impossible to ride another flying change right away. That is a problem when you want to ride tempo changes or a zigzag half pass.

These short-strided flying changes are usually the result of the rider trying to over collect the canter before the hind legs are strong enough.

When the rider makes the canter strides slower or shorter than the hindquarters are able to support, they get cramped, overburdened, stiff, and braced against the body mass. The canter stride loses its bounce. This is most often done by holding the horse back with the reins.

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The problem goes away in most cases if you ride a little more forward and make the canter strides round, uphill, and fluid again so that the hind legs can jump underneath the body. In German, the canter stride is called a canter jump. When it loses this “jumping” quality and develops more of a walking or hobbling quality behind the canter loses suppleness and impulsion, which are some of its most essential qualities. They need to be restored before attempting another flying change or any other canter movement.

There are some horses who tend to overburden their hind legs themselves. They actually scare themselves because their hind legs are crushed by the load. They become increasingly tense and heavy in the bridle. The more the rider tries to lighten the horse with half halts, the worse it gets. If you ride a little more forward and shift the weight a little more onto the forehand, for example by stepping into a front leg, the horse will generally relax again.

This is an example where improving the overall quality of the canter will generally resolve the problem with the flying change.