

**US Eventing**  
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**Teaching Your Horse to Gallop in Balance and Rhythm**  
Olympic Rider Torrance Watkins Explains the Art of the Balanced Gallop –  
Improving Your Horse's Stride and Learning Gallop Secrets

**Torrance Watkins – (Fifi Coles)**

When I gallop my horses I concentrate on making every stride count, making each stride better - not quicker, not faster – but rounder, bigger, shorter, balanced and organized. Sometimes when I watch first-time preliminary three-day riders, it's frightening because their horses are running, not galloping. The rider is almost disoriented and not in sync with the horse. Conversely, when you observe the better riders, no matter what the level, it looks effortless. It's a beautiful picture – almost emotional – of pure partnership.

**IT ALL STARTS WITH FLATWORK**

Few people realize the hours and months or even years it takes to create this partnership and teach a horse a balanced gallop stride. It all starts with flatwork, which means going back to basics. This is what I do when I want to start teaching my own horses and lower level riders to gallop, because a horse must be able to canter well, in order to gallop well.

It is the combination of horse and rider on the flat that must be successful if eventually it is to be successful galloping into fences. The canter stride must be colorful, but organized and balanced. Every muscle must be developed in order to put performance into every stride.

This must start at the lower levels. I see horses and riders out of control on cross-country at lower levels, with riders going as fast as they can, and not understanding the concept of speed. That's what they think they are supposed to do – run and jump at speed!

To me the idea of learning is not only to enjoy the sport, but also to develop a partnership between horse and rider that can go anywhere – not just eventing, but fox-hunting, showing, steeplechasing, endurance riding, whatever makes it work for you. However, I feel there is nothing like the sport of eventing to develop a horseman – a person who becomes totally aware of all aspect of his horse.

If we care so deeply for our horses, then we care on their backs and then galloping becomes a project.

As soon as the horse can canter well, he will start to feel better balanced at the gallop with the power coming from behind, instead of the horse running flat and low. As you ask for more speed, you will always be asking for balance and a coordinated stride.

I love to teach lower level riders as they are so susceptible to learning. Flatwork is challenging if you treat it as part of the process to get to the jumps. Jumping in ignorance can result in horses breaking down and serious accidents,

and our sport losing its possibilities. There is a lot of help out there – young riders can find Pony Clubs. A coach who has some understanding of the sport will take riders from flatwork to the next step, gymnastics, and on to show jumping. When a horse has learned to shorten and lengthen his stride, and the horse and rider are in balance together, then they are ready to go out on cross-country.

### **GALLOPING POSITION**

With riders just learning to gallop, I use an open field. We do our flatwork with short irons – 3-6 holes shorter. This makes the rider lighter out of the saddle, and allows more flexibility in the knees and ankles. Stiffness, or “contracted” as Jack LeGoff used to say, makes the horse’s job more difficult. The rider’s weight should be in his feet (in an open position) with the upper body open and the hips over the feet so that when the seat is needed it can make contact with the horse.

When the lower back is soft, it will also soften the spine and shoulders. If you need to lighten your horse, your balance will be in your feet, and in the horse’s stride. It’s a feeling of suppleness and moving with the horse. If you are going to ask the horse to come up into your hand, it will be a motion from your seat to your hand – almost a swinging motion. If the horse falls on his forehand, I use what I call “half-halts forward”, which helps to balance the horse up and forward. When you can do this you have taken your horse one step further. It’s very exciting when riders suddenly figure this out, and they say “Wow!” All of a sudden they have a new horse without having to have spent great sums of money.

It is also important for the galloping position of the horse to be correct. He must gallop with his shoulders properly aligned – in front of the haunches, moving straight, instead of the shoulder to the outside or inside of the track as one often sees. By making it easier for the horse to be balanced, less stress is put on his fragile ankles and the hundreds of bones that are in the front of the horse.

### **GALLOPING ON THE RACETRACK**

I’ve spent time galloping horses on the track as have many event riders – particularly top level competitors. All Eventers can benefit from this experience. Ninety percent of galloping racehorses is not speed, but getting the horse fit to do the job the trainer has scheduled. Many racehorse people who gallop these horses just gallop, which is admirable because they are allowing the horse to get his job done. But with a little education in flatwork, a rider can get the horse off his forehand and make his job a bit less strenuous. This in turn may give the horse the added edge of competition life, so he can last longer doing our sport.

### **GALLOPING ALONGSIDE MY STUDENTS**

I’ve found it most successful when teaching students how to gallop that I do so galloping alongside their horses. I’m very good at mimicking which is effective in showing them what they are doing. Then I can give them a picture of what I do to keep my horse in balance. They see the horse coming up from behind with the weight off the front end, moving in an effortless, almost slow motion.

## **HALF AND FULL BRIDGES**

Some riders have a problem with their hands opening and separating one from the other. To keep that classic line from the horse's mouth to your elbow, the hands need only be as far apart as the top of the horse's neck. I find the half-bridge invaluable when galloping almost all horses, and a must when riding young, green horses. The bridge should be fairly short so that the hands are fairly close together. In a full-bridge, each rein crosses over the withers into the opposite hand. In a half-bridge, just one rein goes into the opposite hand.

I was taught a full-bridge when galloping race horses so that horses could pull against themselves. I've since learned to modify that idea, but for some people who have no leverage, it is most useful. I want a horse that will take my hand, not a puller that will take me down as they gallop with their head toward their knees.

## **DEVELOPING A STRIDE**

It is most important to learn how to develop the stride from one speed to another. Galloping is cantering, not running. Galloping is going from the canter at, say, 300 meters per minute, to a bolder, rounder stride with the same amount of rhythm, just more pace. The balance will change a bit because of increased pace, but the classic balance and rhythm must be maintained with pace coming from behind. The way to make the speed on cross-country is to maintain the same rhythm throughout the entire course. That's the idea, and what we strive for.

A rider can improve a horse's stride with the seat which includes a rhythm in the lower back. Some horses need a kick to gallop, but those are the rare ones. With others, simply putting the leg on, while maintaining the rhythm, will get the job done. You want to be able to close the leg and say "Can you hear me?" and he says, "Yeah, I hear you fine." With other horses, you can hardly lower your seat onto their back, or get too forward unless you want a ride of a lifetime.

I find 400-450 mpm a useful pace for working my horses. There are hills in Virginia to train on, to help develop stamina, lung and muscle power. Whether galloping up or down hills, the burden is on the rider to see that the horse performs well, without losing the mechanics of the gallop stride. As event riders, we must remember to ride every stride, not just be out there for a joy ride.

## **UP AND DOWN HILLS**

The natural inclination of a horse is to lengthen going uphill, to run up the hill a bit. It depends upon the steepness. If it's very steep, he will shorten, just as a person would. In a competition, use a nice long slopey hill as an opportunity to improve the stride and keep up the pace after, perhaps, having had to shorten the balance at the previous fences. A hill will keep the horse connected as long as you ride a little against it. Avoid riding against the horse as you will not only tire him but also yourself.

When galloping downhill, gravity will take its toll. The rider should lock his shoulders back and lower his seat somewhat, keeping the horse in a light

popping stride and elevated in front, all adjusted to the steepness of the hill, the horse will usually shorten and rock back on his haunches to save himself: the rider should also rock back, lower his seat and move with the horse and keep him coming on.

### **LEARNING TO GALLOP AT SPEEDS**

First, find a nice big field with good footing. Then with a meter-wheel, measure the distance of the particular speeds you need for competition, and put a marker at the end of each one. If space is limited, this can be done in a big circle in a field.

I would suggest starting with a 220 meters to see how easy it is to judge a 220 mpm trot. For the lower levels, measure 350 meters, then canter it until you get it right on the mark using your watch. Then proceed to 400 and 450 meters, and gallop those distances in 400 and 450 mpm, until you feel comfortable with the speeds you need. Once you understand your speeds, you will arrive at competitions with a new sense of confidence. Compare this with the sight of so many lower level horses “running” around cross-country course with the partnership between horse and rider distorted and distraught. Knowing how to gallop properly and learning your speeds puts quality into your riding and into your work with your horse, no matter what the level of competition, and gives you a winning edge.

If you are competing at novice and the speed is 350 mpm, it will be necessary to gallop at 400 mpm to compensate for slowing down on approaches to certain fences or for trappy going. This will apply proportionately to all levels of competition.

### **WHEN YOU LEAVE THE START BOX**

When you leave the start box, organize your horse, focus on the first fence, and pick up your balanced gallop as soon as appropriate. The speed at which you leave the box must be tailored to the individual horse. A sluggish horse might need a kick to get him out in front of you – be sure not to jump up his neck. A quiet trot out of the box for the horse off the track might be the best use of judgment, while a more seasoned horse might move right out into the canter. Then pick up your speed as soon as it is suitable.

The lower levels are the foundation of the sport. With every stride your horse takes, apply everything you have learned to give your horse the best ride and experience possible. Use your events as building blocks in your horse’s event schedule.