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On a good footing

British Eventing's National Under-18 Coach Caroline Moore explains how to improve your cross-country performance ready for the big season ahead

The eventing season has finished, you and your horse have had a holiday and you are now ready to spend the winter preparing for next year's competitions. It is likely that dressage and showjumping practise will form part of your plans, but what about the cross-country phase?

It's the part of eventing that the vast majority of horses and riders enjoy the most after all, if they didn't, there wouldn't be a lot of point in doing the sport. For many, it is the entire reason they go eventing. But, curiously considering its central importance, it is also the phase that riders spend the least time practising.

This winter, it's time to change that. Give yourself the best possible chance of success in the 2012 season, particularly if you are looking to move up a level within the sport.

Hunting

Traditionally, event riders developed and honed their cross-country skills on the hunting field. They came to the sport with an innate sense of how to cross different types of terrain in all sorts of conditions, how to react in unusual circumstances and how to help a green or tired horse.

This is not necessarily the case now, with the advent of a busy programme of competing on artificial surfaces during the winter.

But hunting's importance in educating horses and riders shouldn't be underestimated.

British Eventing's national under-18 coach Caroline Moore says: Some of the best cross-country riders I know started in the hunting field. Hunting develops the horse and rider's eyes for different terrain, improves their balance and increases confidence.²

If you have always ridden on perfect surfaces, it can be very unsettling for a combination to be greeted with deep mud or seriously undulating ground. Hunting, with no competitive pressure and in a group, allows horses and riders to acquire these skills.

Horses are, as we know, herd animals. Once they have become used to the hustle and bustle of the hunting field, they love galloping and jumping with their peers and confidence can improve immeasurably. Young horses, or those who have suffered a crisis of confidence, will particularly benefit from hunting. At this year's Blenheim Palace International Horse Trials, Pippa Funnell said that hunting her fourth-placed Billy Shannon for a whole season with the Surrey Union had been crucial: It was the making of her, she said.

Hacking

Caroline is keen to emphasise the importance of varying your hacking. Take your horse on lots of different hacks, up and down hill, over ground with a bit of camber on it, to experience footing that isn't perfect, she says. Don't just stick to the roads.

You do notice that especially horses bred on the Continent who then start eventing in this country haven't experienced hills and mud.²

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In the arena

What about practising the different types of fences that you will encounter on a cross-country course?

Caroline says: I always start with a couple of angled rails, one positioned in one direction and the other in another, with a couple of non-jumping strides between them, jumped on a straight line. Once you can hold a straight line to a focal point, you can pick up corners and angles more easily.

Jumping narrow fences is a skill demanded at all levels of British Eventing competitions, and Caroline advocates spending a lot of time practising them. I have flags, and we train the horses always to go through them, starting off with walking through a set. You can also use jump stands.

I've also got some very narrow poles about 90cm that I use on curving lines

and in doubles, and horses get very used to them.

If I was going to invest in anything, it would be some short posts, some narrow poles and a couple of flags. Now that about 10% of any course consists of skinnies and narrow fences on curving lines, right angles etc, the horse has to automatically lock on to what you want them to jump.

Corner fences can worry riders, particularly at the lower levels, disproportionately. Caroline does a considerable amount of corner training with her pupils. You have to train horse and rider to hold a line, she says.

She often uses them as the second part of a double, so the horse is always on a good stride and therefore jumps them easily, reducing the magnitude of the question in the rider's mind. →

Rose Nesbitt tackling a skinny



Alice Sandberg at the Baileys JAS Final 2011



Recently I've done a lot of practise with a short back rail – as first seen at Badminton a couple of years ago, she says. Horses don't read it very well to start with and have to jump through it two or three times to understand it. You have to be incredibly accurate with your riding, but I use it more and more to get people used to jumping them.

She believes that is it very important for riders to practise walking lines on their feet.

'You need to be confident that you can walk the right line and then ride that line.'²

Indoor cross-country competitions

British Eventing's Baileys Jumping And Style (JAS) competitions start in January and continue until just before the start of the eventing season. And more and more competition centres hold simulated cross-country events, which can be very challenging and also fun for horse and rider. Caroline Moore runs several at Vale View Equestrian Centre in Leicestershire, which has two big indoor and two big outdoor arenas with a water complex and other features such as steps.

Practising your gears

Find a big area and practise going up and down the gears, starting with a coffin (bouncy, powerful and collected) canter, moving up to a more medium, showjumping-type canter and then into gallop within three or four strides, and back down again, says Caroline. Then I would bring a spread fence, a set of vertical rails and probably a little related distance into it, and change gears through these fences. That is really invaluable training.

How often?

As soon as you are into January, you want to develop a base level of fitness, advises Caroline. If you can get on to grassland every four or five days – if you aren't hunting you will find it very helpful.

Amateur riders should think about simulated cross-country work at least once a week. Don't wait to go cross-country schooling the week before your first event – make it part and parcel of the everyday training you do. If you make it part of the regular work process, you and your horse will find it much less of an issue and your skills will develop much more quickly. 🐾

i Information

Baileys Jumping and Style, British Eventing's indoor Eventing winter series starts again in January 2012. This is the perfect way to prepare your horse for eventing in a competitive atmosphere and a great opportunity for an outing before your first one day event. More details on www.britisheventing.com/jas

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Mental Toolkit

Andy Barton

Andy Barton is a mental performance consultant who works with many of the leading sports performers from the UK and around the world through his clinic 'The Sporting Mind' (www.thesportingmind.com). Andy's clients include some of the country's leading equestrians

Top Tips for Riding Success

1. Get in the right time zone

One problem many eventers have is that they can spend too much time focusing on what has happened in the past (e.g. the refusal three fences back) or what they think is going to happen in the future (e.g. the tricky fence coming up) so they don't actually pay attention to what is in front of them. You may have heard the expression being in the 'Zone' or 'Flow'. The 'Zone' only exists in the present, so when you are performing one of your disciplines it is essential that you stay in the present and take one fence or one movement at a time and forget about what has already happened or what is going to happen.

2. Say what you want

Our nervous systems cannot process negatives, so when you say to yourself something like

"don't knock the fence down", "don't make a mistake" or "don't be an idiot", you end up creating imagery in your head of doing exactly what you don't want to do. Making negative statements can lead to fear, anxiety and a lack of direction. It is therefore essential that you tell yourself precisely what you do want by making positive statements such as "stay focused", "be confident" or "relax". This way you are creating imagery that provides solutions rather than creating unnecessary obstacles.

3. Banish your excuses

Eventers will very often turn up to a competition with a whole host of excuses for putting in a bad performance even before they have started. They may have been delayed in traffic, they may have had a challenging week, they may not have had time to put in the practice that they wanted to do to

prepare or they may have had an argument with their partner. It doesn't matter what the excuse is or how legitimate it may be, each excuse will have a detrimental effect on your ability to get the results that you require. Top performers will leave their excuses behind, freeing themselves up to concentrate on putting in the best performance they can.

4. Q. How do you eat an elephant?

A. One bite at a time.

One problem many people have when they are targeting a particular goal is that they will very often only focus on the big goal. I am all for riders making big goals. If you never set a goal to win Badminton, for instance, it is very unlikely that you ever will. A big goal is, however, made up of many little goals and it is the effort you put in on the little goals on a daily basis that will determine whether

or not you will ultimately achieve your big goal. So remember to break your goals down into small chunks and then just focus on one bite at a time.

5. Have fun!

Whatever level they are at, one thing many riders forget when they are in a competitive situation is to enjoy themselves. What they tend to do is decide that it is too important to relax and have fun and they feel that instead they should take it seriously. The problem with taking a performance too seriously is that it makes us more self-conscious and can lead to being over-stressed and a tendency to focus on your fears. If you go out to have fun and ride with a smile on your face, it actually makes you feel more confident, relaxed and more able to adapt to unexpected challenges.