

Hints from the Hunter Ring - The Basics

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As a hunter rider who is a newcomer to the event world, I have enjoyed my recent participation. In many ways, it has been a refreshing change from the horse show realm. Dressage is a great test of skill and obedience, and even though it is subjective, I appreciate reading the test with the judge's comments and viewpoints. The show jumping phase is a fun test of technique, and galloping cross-country is exhilarating. I like that everything happens at a set time, and I have been impressed with many good riders and wonderful horses. It is also nice to see competitors that are so self-sufficient and hard working.

This summer I took plenty of lessons in dressage and cross-country (thank you Nina Fout!). I also watched experienced event riders on big cross-country courses and in dressage tests. I learned a lot, but when watching riders on show jumping courses I also found myself wanting to teach. Just as I learned a lot from this sport, I think event riders might benefit from the reactions of a hunter rider. Most "see" problems are basic balance and position skills. Secondary to this, I see many people unable to stay in a rhythm and execute a smooth, clean ride -- too often, they are riding backwards or pushing flat out past the distances. Lastly, many riders would benefit from a well thought out plan to go clean yet fast.

Basics -- eyes up, heels down, the rider's position to the jump and in the air-- have a direct effect on the horse's effort. Many lower-level competitors ride with their reins too long, do not have a secure lower leg, and fall with their upper bodies either behind the motion or up on the horse's neck. When they get to the jump, they throw their bodies forward to catch up and usually leave their hands in their lap, stiffing the horse in the mouth. This type of ride disturbs the horse's balance and concentration. The rider's forward body pushes the horse on his front end, making it difficult to lift his shoulders and front legs off the ground -- especially if he is getting stiffed in the mouth. If he clears the obstacle, he will land heavy on his front end and the next jump will be even more difficult.

More advanced riders are better with their hands, but many of them lack body control over the top of the jump, which reduces their effectiveness. With a tricky distance of two related jumps, a proper position and balance can make the difference between having a rail or not. The other common fault is the rider dropping his eyes, looking down either in front of the jump or down at his horse instead of at the next jump, which also throws the horse on his front end. That slight mistake can be the difference between a nice deep distance and a chip.

With mastery of the basics, the rider is a lot closer to a smooth, clean round. In order for a horse and rider to be successful, the horse must also be responsive to the rider's aids, and the rider must learn to guide without interfering. The rider must adjust his position from riding on the flat because the horse is in a more forward balance when galloping to a jump. However, there is a fine line between being more forward and galloping flat on the front end. The latter is the ride that pushes the horse past the perfect distance or makes him jump flat with no bascule. The other type of ride happens when the rider never lets go of his horse and is always holding to "the long one." When a horse is being ridden backwards, he can't use his hind end to

push off to this long distance so he has to lunge to make the jump -- or, if he isn't very scopey, he will opt for the chip-in. The lunge option results in a long, flat frame on the landing, making it hard for the horse to "back off" the second obstacle and jump clean in the combination or a line. If he chips-in, the horse will have a tough time making it down a line or through a combination. These two different rides also make it impossible for the horse to change leads because he does not have his hind end under him. I have also seen a combination of riding backwards and galloping flat ride when the rider rides backwards at the ends of the ring, then guns his horse as he sights in on the jump. This kind of ride is not only frightening to watch, it is an accident waiting to happen.

In the ideal ride, the rider stays off the horse's back in a balanced two point, establishing a flowing, steady rhythm with a soft arm that guides the horse around the course and releases at the jumps. A forward rhythm that does not change allows the horse to jump freely out of stride and enables the rider to "see" (if he is looking up) the distance. If the distance doesn't come up perfectly out of stride, the rider will be in a safe, effective position to help his mount make a distance work well or even give the illusion of every jump coming right out of step. This type of ride lets the horse figure out how to jump in a confident manner and be equipped to help his rider when there is an error in judgment. A rider who is smooth and working with his horse creates an effective, pleasing picture.

The last necessary component for a fault-free round is a well thought out plan developed on the course walk and in the schooling area. On the course walk, the rider should consider several points in addition to where he is going and where the start/finish flags are. He must know his horse. How big is his stride? How scopey is his jump? How will the footing affect his stride and jump? What will make him spook? Does he tend to land on a particular lead? Many of the courses at horse trials are set on a hilly spot in a field. How will these hills affect the horse's balance and stride? The answers to these questions suggest how the lines and combinations will ride. The rider should plan to avoid time faults -- where can he save time by cutting turns, not by galloping fast and running through the jumps! If he doesn't have to go first, he should watch the others to see how the course rides and where the trouble spots are.

The schooling area is also important. Very often it looks like riders are simply galloping over jumps just the way they are set in the schooling area. It's nice to start small and build gradually to give the horse a chance to warm up and feel his stride and how tractable he is. More thought needs to be put into preparing the horse to jump clean and pay attention to the jump. If a horse tends to have rails down behind, the rider should be trying to get his horse to have a hind rub before he goes on course. If the horse doesn't respect the jump enough by a straight approach, angle a few. Before going in the ring or while watching others on course, the rider should mentally go over the plan for the course. On course, it's important to remember that the distance to the first jump of a line or combination will determine how the second jump will ride. For example, if the first jump is long, the second will come up quick.

It is a good idea to take a few lessons from a hunter/jumper trainer to reinforce the points I've mentioned in this article. You can greatly benefit by taking lessons from a hunter/jumper trainer and by observing top professionals in their game -- in the schooling area, walking courses, and in the ring. Breaking from the familiar can result in new and valuable insights that will improve your skill and ability both in and out of the show ring.