

## Finding a Distance

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Finding a distance is an indispensable skill for hunter riders. If they have the most stylish jumper in the class, they cannot win or sometimes even place unless they are successful in finding perfect distances to each jump on course. Really I should say that they aren't successful unless they can create the illusion of staying at precisely the same pace while on course and having each jump come right out of stride. Even for hunter riders the reality of getting eight perfect distances is rare, but top hunter riders are very skilled in judging where their horse will take off at a jump, usually being able to see at least five strides out and often earlier. When you can see "where you are", you can make subtle adjustments in your horse to make a distance and a line of jumps work, therefore creating the illusion of doing nothing and having the jumps come up perfectly before you. Having "an eye" is more natural for some than others, but this is a skill can be learned and developed.

There is more value to this skill than presenting a beautiful picture. If you know how to see a distance, you can stay with your horse and not interfere with his effort to jump clean. Or, you will see that the distance is going to be a bit long and you can act by letting go and adding leg to help him get to the jump sooner. You will also be able to tell when a distance is coming up too long to be comfortable and act by sitting up and collecting your horse so that he can easily add a stride and leave from a safe distance. Seeing the distance early can help you and your horse stay more organized for the next jump on course. If the jump is involved in a combination you'll be more prepared to help your horse through it cleanly. Finding and making distances work is important for a smooth, enjoyable and effective round.

There are three elements needed for the horse to arrive at a workable distance. The first is a balanced, supple rider who looks where he is going so he can direct his mount. Next, the rider needs to establish a flowing pace. Finally, he needs to maintain balance and pace while finding a straight approach to the jump; pretty basic and sounds simple enough – balance, pace, straight approach.

Finding a distance starts from the turn before the jump. The horse should be properly bent and moving forward in the turn. On the bend, the rider's inside leg (active aid) gets the horse to bend and the outside leg keeps him from bulging. The inside hand (active aid) uses an indirect rein aid to establish an inside bend, and the outside hand (passive aid) is opening. More simply put, both hands work as a pair into the outside of the turn. Remember: the hands direct the front of the horse, and the legs control the back. Because a horse tends to fall in, a rider uses these aids to balance in the turn. As the rider goes through the turn, he is looking at the jump. As soon as he sees a good approach, he straightens his horse out of the bend by moving his hands as a pair from the outside of the bend to the center, and straightens the horse's body by using the outside leg. The pace does not change on the approach. Common mistakes include: stalling in the turn, not straightening out of the turn, rider unbalancing by tipping forward or dropping eyes, riding backwards and changing of pace. To work on your eye, start with the first exercise I discussed last month: a pole on the ground (this may sound simple or boring, but believe me - whatever happens over a pole is exactly what will happen over a jump). In addition to thinking about your position and release, practice having a correct bend and forward pace in

the turn. Aim for the center of the pole, and straighten your horse by bringing your hands to the center so your horse's nose is directed to the middle of the pole.

Make your outside leg push the hind end over so it is following the front. As you make the turn, be sure that you do not slow down or speed up as you approach the pole. As you go over the center of the pole, keep your eye up and look straight past the pole so you can ride a straight line away. As soon as you succeed in having a nice turn and a straight approach at the walk, practice the exercise at the trot and finally at the canter in two point. When you feel comfortable and consistent over the pole, replace the pole with a small jump. If you are having trouble "seeing" a distance, first check your position - try opening your hip angle. Make sure that you are looking ahead and that your leg is on. If you are getting there too long (the horse has to lunge to make the distance work), you are either pulling back when you are turning or holding to the long one. Both of these are examples of "riding backwards". If you are sure your hand is soft and just guiding, you may be getting there long because you lack enough outside leg to straighten and keep the motor going (stalling in the turn). Getting too deep or too close is when the horse has to take a shorter stride right in front of the jump. This will occur if you are leaning too far forward or dropping your eye down, throwing the horse's balance too much on the forehand and preventing him from backing off the jump. You may be riding too much with your hand, picking to no distance.

You may also be getting to this distance because the horse is pulling you past the nice one. If this is the case, you must use your hand and body to keep him slow and soft until you find it in time to do something subtle about it. The trick is to do nothing to interfere until you see your distance. If it's too long, use your leg to help your horse get there sooner. When it's too deep, sit back to help him balance and back off. If you see nothing, do nothing and let your horse do the job he was trained to do. When it's right there, enjoy the perfect one and let it be.