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Back to basics

The four corners of training



In the first part of a new four-part series, BHSI Stage 5 Performance Coach Brendan Bergin outlines the four corners of training

TRAINING the horse is more than just showing up to ride your horse a few days a week. A training programme is an ongoing holistic process with a number of different facets.

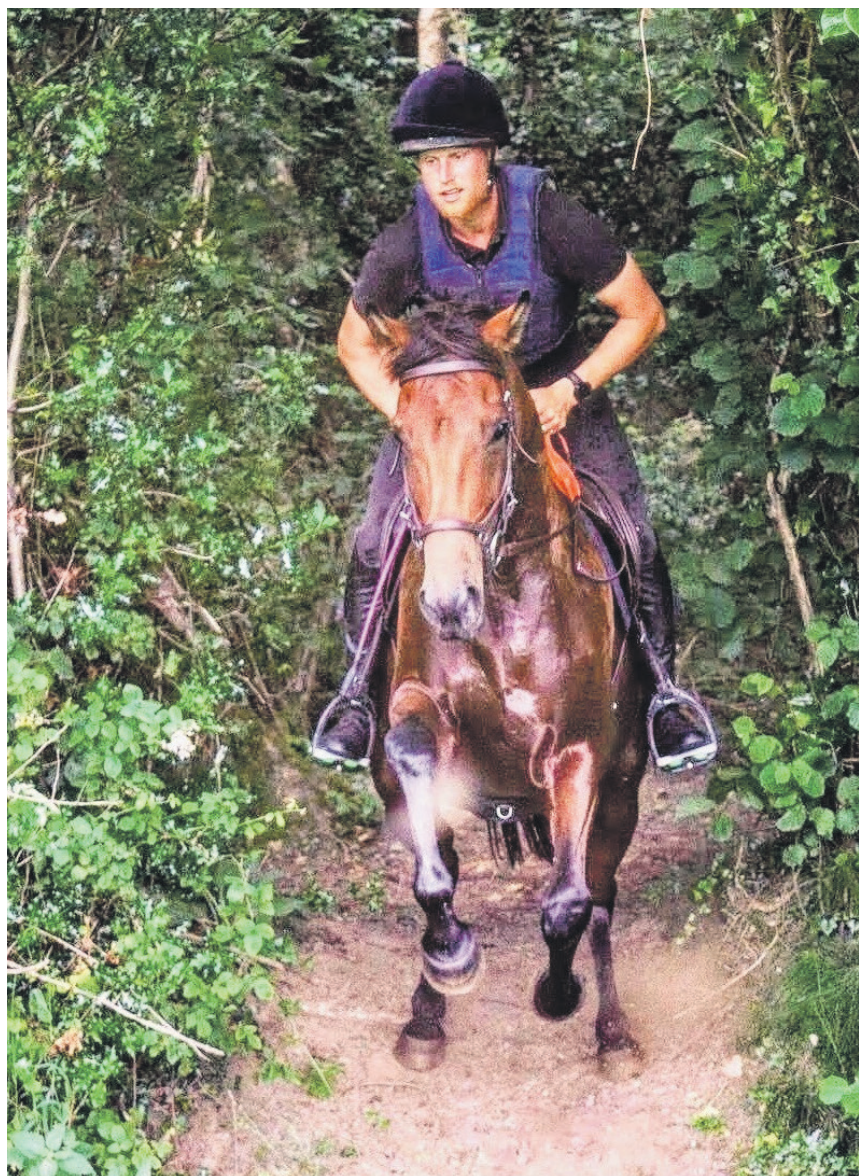
Developing towards a competition goal takes planning, organisation and probably most importantly knowledgeable help.

Before you embark on a training program you need to have an end goal for example; doing your first EI80 or EI90, your first novice dressage test or riding your first 1.10m affiliated show jumping course.

What are the skills required for the horse and the rider? As sportspeople our work should focus on developing our skills, as they develop you are less dependent on that all elusive luck. Plenty of riders hope it will be fine on competition day even if things are not working well at home.

In this article I am going to look at what the rider is responsible for. The rider is the managing director of the company, they have to look after the overall management without getting involved in minutia and micro-management.

The horse is the employee who has to work out day-to-day running, where to put his feet and how to work out little problems. With this in mind the rider has four main roles: look and plan, speed, direction, and balance/position.



It is important to develop the correct speed for riding cross country

Look and plan

Look and plan is the most important role of the rider acting as the horse's guide and advisor. To properly guide the horse you need a logical plan. When you ride, always use the same warm up routine to get your head in the game and to get the horse buying into the process.

Before you start developing your warm up plan do your research. What will you be required to do in competition? Have you done it before? Do you need someone to give you the roadmap? Do you need your coach to develop a warm up plan for you?

Remember your coach's role reaches beyond the arena just like the rider's role goes beyond riding the horse. My warm up comes from an eventing perspective so no matter what I am doing I always start the same way looking for the same outcomes, response from the seat and leg rather than the rein.

Speed

Speed is a broad reaching concept which essentially covers any change in pace. As riders we have to develop the horse's gearbox and cruise control

systems. Both of these are essential to achieve quality work in any discipline. Just like in a car you need to think that within each gear you can have different levels of revs (beats per minute) within each; we call this tempo. If we take the canter and gallop for cross country or show jumping think of having the following gears:

- Gear 1: Collected canter 300 to 350 mpm
- Gear 2: Working canter 350 to 400 mpm
- Gear 3: Medium canter (Ground cover) 400 - 450 mpm
- Gear 4: Extended Canter 450 - 520 mpm
- Gear 5: Gallop 525+ mpm

Within each of these gears the rider has to be able to vary the beats per minute the quicker the tempo the greater the potential ground cover. As riders we need to put in the ground work to have these gears well established in our horses. Once you have the stride length you can start varying the tempo without sacrificing gait purity. The same gearing system is true in trot but extreme care has to be taken in walk not to break the natural rhythm of the walk.

“A good coach should be able to see past the rider’s “conformation” and help them adopt the appropriate balance for their body type, fitness and skill level.”

Direction

Developing directional control is another facet of the rider's toolbox. The difficulty with horses is they are essentially wedge shaped which gives them a natural inclination to be crooked. The rider has to be able to control the wedge so the “arrow” is pointing in the direction of travel.

In an arena setting the horse needs to have the inside foreleg on the same track as the inside hind leg, often described as the shoulder-fore position, the horse will then be “straight”. When I think of directional control I always think of the right foreleg as attached to the right rein and the left foreleg attached to the left rein. When you want to change direction by shifting your centre (belly button) thus moving the rein attached to that leg. As you develop directional control you should nearly be able to change direction by turning your head as it makes up 15% of your body weight.

In training we are always looking to move the horse smoothly from one rein to the next. The smoother the turn the more flow in the movement and the less directional change will affect speed.

Balance and position

Rider style and balance forms the essential framework for communication. Most of us look to our heroes and it is hard not to dream of sitting like Charlotte Dujardin for your dressage test or having the balance of William Fox-Pitt across country, but you have to train where you are and develop from there forward.

One of the signatures of elite riders is their commitment to fitness and coordination work (of the horse). Riders should always view themselves as athletes and your fitness should be comparable to that of your horse. If you are eventing at 2-star you need to have good cardiovascular fitness and regularly develop core strength. A good coach should be able to see past the rider's “conformation” and help them adopt the appropriate balance for their body type, fitness and skill level.

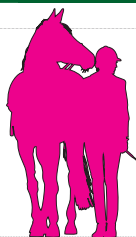
Putting it in to practice improving your rider responsibilities is essential development that requires constant attention on a daily basis. Try to set yourself the goal of addressing one small aspect each day. Work with your coach to develop a game plan to address your strengths and weaknesses to develop towards your competition goals. Over time these daily goals will act as building block for longer term goals.

To contact the author with questions or for coaching, email: Brendan@BerginEquine.com



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Horse Sense

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Back to basics

Transitions: Practice makes permanent



BHSI Stage 5 Performance
Coach **Brendán Bergin**
outlines the importance
of devoting time into the
development of horses'
responses

THE first article in this series looked at rider responsibilities and by devoting time into the development of responses, they can be relied on in later training.

The old maxim "practice makes perfect" can be substituted for the more realistic "Practice makes permanent." As we look to elite athletes in our sport we should notice that they do not move forward until work is well established. Like these top riders we need to rely on the help of knowledgeable experienced eyes on the ground to help with a broad view of horse and rider requirements.

In every discipline dressage, show jumping, or eventing the development of the horse's response to the aids and optimal biomechanical movement is critical to later competition success. Employing a holistic training and management plan pays dividends in the long run.

There are a number of factors that contribute to this developmental process. In this article we will look at the some of the key building blocks needed in the development of quality work built from a solid foundation.



The development of your horse's responses is crucial to competition success

Focus on quality transitions

Transitions are so much more than just changes of pace. Instead of riding them as a matter of course they should be a focused development process.

Developing smooth quality transitions requires shaping responses into soft reliable cues. As riders it is our job to understand the horse rather than the reverse. Horses are good at forming habits and responding to stimuli but they are not good at working things out.

It is worth remembering that horses are motivated by the application of pressure and are trained by the release of pressure.

So when you use your leg to move the horse forward the horse is reinforced by the release of the pressure. Good transitions require regular practice in each session yielding reliability in later competition. To that end it sometimes helps to think of response level on a gradient of one to 10 where one is unresponsive and 10 is hyper-reactive.

Aiming for horses to be in the middle ground between five and seven should give greater reliability in responses between transitions. Don't move on in your session until you are in the correct range for each transition which will boost reliability in your later work.



Develop equal feeling on each rein

Horses, like people, have sidedness both in freedom of movement at foot level and all the way up into their body. Take note for a few days of which foot you step onto the stairs with, I can nearly guarantee you will do it with the same one every time.

As horses are good at forming habits, so movement patterns are quick to form and are notoriously difficult to detrain. Just like using transitions to develop your speed control, you have to use changes of bend in the work to get the horse turning and bending on

cue. Turning and bending are equally important but totally different.

Turning is moving the horses forelegs left or right where as bending is evenly moving the horses ribs left or right. Once you have identified which way your horse likes to turn and bend you can work with your coach to develop the weak link.

A commonly used exercise to assess and develop bend and turn is the use of lightbulb serpentine and I personally and this exercise beneficial with a wide range of horses.

Suppleness and regularity

When you watch young horses moving in the field you will notice their natural suppleness and regularity in the pace.

In the early training process this suppleness and regularity is often disrupted causing habits which need to be resolved later. One of the main barriers which disrupts the horses natural aptitude is not allowing horses work forward or lack of clarity in the driving and or restraining aids. At the start of training the focus should be to keep the horses footfalls regular.

Once the horse is regular then you can start to build suppleness through the body. One of the best ways to improve the horse's suppleness through the body is using leg yield. As the horse moves away from the leg and continues moving forward it should develop mobility through the body.

Using leg yield through changes of bend on lightbulb serpentine can help the horse move his ribs and move with more freedom. As the horse gains confidence in the movement pattern and the riders aids and then moves forward supple energetic movement should be the result.

Balance and coordination

The horse's balance and coordination develops with training and should be a priority to build sustained improvement. As riders we need to use exercises to encourage the horse's proprioception. The horse's awareness of the ground is not only a key facet in its nature as a flight animal but also an important aspect for any horse working on or off a surface. Particularly for event horses who by the nature of the sport often work on uneven ground in self carriage, a quality often called "the fifth leg" is critical to rider and horse safety on course.

While nothing beats riding horses on varied terrain to get them thinking about their feet, pole work in the arena is very helpful. In recent years pole work clinics have sprung up everywhere with hugely elaborate patterns in use.

However, if your equipment is limited then using a few poles or ideally planks are equally beneficial. Even with just a single pole or plank there is a lot of benefit which can be derived depending on how you use it and the response that you are targeting.

If you come at an angle it can often have the benefit of encouraging the horse to stretch into a bigger step. Getting advice from a competent coach is invaluable if you are using equipment like poles as they can advise you on the best distance for your horse or how you can use the poles safely. Remember, an incorrect distance can cause significant injury, so careful placement and use will minimise the risk.

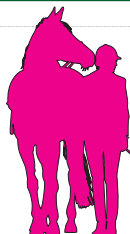
Putting it in to practice, development work is another fundamental building block in a successful equine partnership.

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Four steps to boost rideability

BHSI Stage 5 Performance Coach **Brendán Bergin** looks at four factors that will improve your horse's rideability

IN the second article in this four-part series we looked at some of the development work required to build the basic cornerstone reflexes and responses.

Keeping focus on quality work at each phase of the horse's education is the hallmark of successful experienced riders with dependable competition performance. Amateurs practice until they get it right but professionals practice until they can't get it wrong.

Rideability like everything else with horses is developed over time with good practice making greater reliability. However, some horses are naturally more compliant in their temperament than others. With horses who are naturally hot and reactive it is important to drill the following factors to keep horse and rider safe and successful on the competition journey. The factors we're going to look at in this article are consistency, self-carriage, partnership and holistic management.

Developing consistency

Previously we highlighted how practice creates repeatable behaviour which can be relied on in competition. A key part of building consistency is developing your aids and testing the signals you have trained over the course of your development work.

Understanding how to link progressive exercises increasing in difficulty towards your end goal will ensure continued development of consistency over time. Remember that all equine movement which can be put under stimulus control (on the aids) are made up of four base movement units (from the book *Equitation Science*).

Stop: which includes slowing down, shortened steps, halt and stepping back.

Go: which includes going



faster, extending steps and moving up from one gait to the next.

Turn: moving the shoulders left or right.

Yield: moving the quarters left or right.

Breaking down each movement into these basic responses will help you address weaknesses and ensure responses are more reliable.

Self carriage

Many horses are allowed to be over-dependent on their rider. This puts immense pressure on the rider to get everything right, some very elite riders are capable of this but the vast majority of us need the horse to fully play their part in the training process.

In any discipline the horse has to work in his own balance without the constant support of the rider. Of course this is particularly important in eventing where the horse is negotiating significant variation of terrain and has to adjust and adapt his balance and foot-falls. I like to think about self carriage like cruise control which needs to be tested on a regular basis.

The essential idea is that when you set the horse up at a specific pace they should continue at that pace in good form until an alternative aid is given by the rider.

One of the best ways to develop self carriage is to set up the pace and then release all pressure and see if the horse maintains pace and balance. If the horse changes readjust and release the pressure again and repeat until he holds the pace and balance.

When the horse practices "cruise control" it gives the rider more brain space to see the big picture and give clearer instructions. Self carriage is one of the most important skills to train in your event horse.

Self carriage testing appears in many dressage tests in the form of give and retake the reins. In this movement the only variable that should change is the rein contact. The horse should maintain balance and pace.

Independent partnership

Building on from self carriage is a strong partnership between the horse and rider team with mutual respect, trust and confidence. Each equestrian discipline has a multifaceted range of skills, constants and variables that require two brains working in harmony.

The rider has to take full ownership of their responsibilities (look and plan, speed, direc-



Brendán presenting at BHS national coaching convention Addington

tion and position and balance) while the horse has to buy into their role which is to make correct judgement for where to put their legs and how much energetic effort is required. Training the horse's reflexes will allow the rider to rely on the horse to make good choices in competition particularly working over fences.

In the early stages of a horse's training they rely on the rider to guide them through their role. Putting the time into development work will pay dividends as the horse's reflexes become reliable and consistent.

Exposing horses to simpler versions of the questions they will find in competition develops the horse's confidence and the rider's trust in the horse. When working through your training programme you need to include exposure to a large range of fences so your horse can develop their intuition and buy into the system!

Once the rider can trust the horse's judgement and the horse has faith in the rider's signals and cues then true reciprocal partnership will be established.

Holistic management

Taking a broad view of your equine management programme is essential to produce solid competitive performance. This includes every aspect of your horse's routine, equally important to competition training is support mechanisms and processes to keep horses sound in body and mind.

When performance is diminishing, addressing the whole picture leads to

more consistent change. This is one of the reasons why some yards with a variety of riders can have such long term success. Variety in the training will help you cover all the bases and can fill in some of the gaps. Riding out and lunging are often overlooked in their importance to the horse's complete training programme. Hacking, especially slow work, can be useful in the early training work to build fitness and proprioception.

Practicing lateral work and medium paces on the way home often helps maintain the energy and suppleness through the ribs and can help give the horse the right idea and feel. Lunging is also helpful both for the horse's biomechanical movement pattern development and for the rider to see the horse from the ground.

Good lunging like riding takes sufficient skill and practice, it is worth noting that lunging gadgets and equipment are no substitute for skill and technique.

Putting it into practice

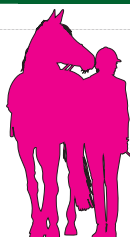
Building rideability is an ongoing process involving committing to a system rather than moving from one training fad to the next. With the correct approach and enthusiasm significant improvement can be made to the horse and rider and to their competition results by developing responses and reflexes.

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Back to basics

Small steps to become a happy athlete



In the final installment of this four-part series, BHSI stage 5 performance coach **Brendán Bergin** discusses how riders should approach the final days leading up to competition

IN the third article we discussed developing the horse's rideability and the reliability of the aids. Practising your skills until your performance is repeatable consistently will greatly increase your chances of good competition safety and success. I hope this series has illustrated how competing horses is not about narrow focused competition obsession. Competing is merely a snapshot of where your training is at that moment in time. Progressing the training of the horse and rider with continual improvement should be the goal of all training regardless of level.

In this final part of this four-part series we will be looking at the final lead up to competition day for horse and rider including final sessions, supportive management, tapering and rider mental state.

Final sessions

The world's most successful athletes have often explained the importance

of spending time rather than wasting time. The sharp focus of the final training sessions will be dependent on your specific discipline.

In eventing you have to employ the same core skills over all three phases remembering that each must map to the next in a logical cohesive process using the same signals. In your final sessions you need to hone the skills, further deepening the responses already trained rather than employing new aspects. Practising your test or the lines you expect to meet on course will brush up your final concerns.

During the course of your training you will have developed your rider responsibilities (look and plan, speed, direction, balance and position) which should be well established and easily drawn on in the final sessions. The horse's core skills should also be well entrained at this stage with quality transitions, equal feeling on both reins, suppleness, regularity and co-ordination. This in turn will solidify self carriage and a strong partner-



ship which you lean on during competition day.

Supportive management

In the final phase of competition training the supportive management is just as important as the actual training sessions. For eventing, soundness is one of the primary concerns. Wear and tear from fast work or cross country schooling can put pressure on joints and soft structures.

Special care must be taken when working on hard summer ground. Many traditional practices for maintaining soundness still hold true today but we must take note of the latest research to promote optimal health and soundness. Lots of options exist for cooling legs after fast work and it's worth doing research into the best option for you and your horse. Proper nutrition over the course of your fitness and training programme will supply the essential requirements for health, wellbeing and fitness.

For pre and post competition, electrolytes can be important for horses in strenuous work. However, you need to test out the use of them during training to ensure they suit your horse. Other supportive management pre-competition includes ample turn-out allowing the horse to move freely unencumbered by the rider. After competing turn-out when joints or soft structures

are sore or tight will help promote speedy recovery.

Tapering

There is a temptation, particularly with inexperienced riders, to over-ride in the final week. Oftentimes when people are coming up to a jump competition riders will jump every day that week rather than work on the canter ensuring the horse has enough rest so they can be competition fresh and ready.

Marathon runners in training usually undergo a massive reduction in training in the last two to three weeks prior to a big race. This is to allow muscles, joints and the cardiovascular system to fully recover to confer optimal performance on race day. While horses are much better adapted to strenuous activity with a highly developed cardiovascular system compared to humans, a horse's taper, while still important, does not need to be as long. When you are planning your season (in more conventional non-Covid times) there are usually a large range of shows available to choose from. You have to decide on which shows are your priority. Some shows are for training to bring on mental and physical fitness. Whereas other shows are season highlights where you are competing to win. For these season pinnacles tapering will give that winning competition bounce.

Wear and tear from cross country schooling can put pressure on the joints and soft structures of your horse

Rider mental state

Riders and coaches can often be overly focused and geared towards competition success rather than progress over time. The pressure on riders to be successful can be exhausting and stressful. This is especially relevant with the prevalence of suicide particularly among young men in the industry.

Mental self care should be a key priority with any person involved in the equine industry whether amateur or professional. As riders we can mount under a lot of pressure to make every session count and go exactly to plan. As a coach I am acutely aware that every session is not critical but every session is valuable, however the same is not always true as a rider. Making small incremental improvements is much more important than flashy big changes that don't last.

If you improve an average of 1% every session in 100 days the horse is 100% better.

Finally, your interior monologue can either help or hinder your progress. Ensure that you look at each situation with a realistic positive outlook. I try to end each session with a small star (small skill developed), a wish (skill you wish you could develop) and a big star (the session highlight).

The whole process of training horse and rider partnerships is to achieve the "Happy Athlete" as per the FEI rule's definition. Incremental development of small steps with the help of an experienced eye on the ground will make your competition day snapshot more successful.

Remember that competition is just part of the journey and improvement can always be found, but don't let the improvement get in the way of the satisfaction of a job well done.

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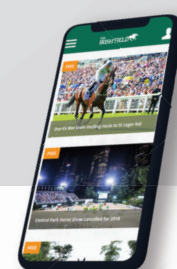
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