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PHOTO CREDIT: DAVID STATFORD

CROSS COUNTRY TRAINING AT HOME BEFORE HEADING OUT TO A COURSE

PART A

CHANGING THE CANTER AND JUMP POSITION; BALANCE & THE FLIGHT RESPONSE.

Horses are naturally flight animals in reaction to their environment. Loss of rider balance can trigger the flight response and create control issues at the canter/gallop, which are the foundation paces of cross country. Early re-training is very important for the event prospect OTT. Train to limit the flight response on cross country by riding in a balanced position at a slower pace, before riding fast. Practicing position changes will help familiarise the horse and rider to stay balanced and relaxed when changing the center of gravity (COG) for different paces and speeds, as required in cross country.

While OTT's are trained to gallop, a jockey is trained to ride at speed in a balanced position. A horse may run away from an unbalanced rider if a flight response is produced. It is the rider's responsibility to be able to maintain a balanced position where aids can put the horse under the riders COG. This will ensure that horse and rider can jump without bracing against each other and/or a rider searching to fix control by using stronger bits. A horse that is running away or against its rider is not ready to go cross country. It is interpretative to practice until there is understanding and smoothness in pace and seat changes.

You spend more time galloping between fences than jumping on a cross country course so a rider must be fit and strong enough to keep their balance and position for the duration of the course. Once basic flat work and jumping has commenced and rhythm and confidence of the riders' aids is established, consider incorporating the below exercises to keep variety in your training routine.

Commencing cross country training at home is a good starting point as about 50% of training drills can be practiced in an arena. Do several sessions of this exercise to develop consistency over a few weeks to progress.



Balanced position in trot & canter



Weight maintained over the rider's foot



The base position

EXERCISE 1:

Initially practice at the halt or walk if standing still is too demanding on a nervous OTT. Change position between 2 point and 3 point seats smoothly. Practice until you can keep your balance by standing in your stirrups over your feet. Keep your eyes forward as you change position, just like doing squats in the gym. Check your leg is steady and doesn't swing forward or backward when you change your seat position.



2 point seat



3 point seat

On a canter circle, practice changing between 2 point and 3 point seat without losing your leg position. This is a great way to learn the feeling of keeping your leg steady under your upper body as you change position. This puts you in control of your balance and avoids you landing heavily in the saddle. Try getting into a rhythm of gently rising to the canter switching between 2 point and 3 point seat.

Progress to ride 8 strides of each position for about 2 minutes using circles in a large arena.

In both seats make pace adjustments. Being able to adjust the horse's stride in either seat will be very useful when riding cross country jumps and terrain. Investigate and learn about how your OTT accepts the different seats when lengthening or shortening the stride as one may be smoother at this early retraining stage.

Lengthen the stride in the 2 point position and shorten the stride in the 3 point position for 8 strides, then shorten in the 2 point position and lengthen in the 3 point position.



Lengthen in 2 point seat



Shorten in 2 point seat



Lengthen in 3 point seat



Shorten in 3 point seat

WATCH OUT FOR THESE EASILY MISSED HABITS DURING POSITION CHANGES AS THEY CAN LEAD TO CONTROL PROBLEMS IN FAST WORK.

Pushing the lower leg forward into a braced deep heel when slowing down, turning, or changing from 2 point to 3 point seat locks the flexibility of a correctly functioning ankle, knee and hip angle that should be the base under the rider's weight. The horse will feel the bracing effect and be driven faster. This can also be the reason why a rider falls back into the saddle when returning to the 3 point seat. The rider may think a stronger bit is required, when in fact, a balanced position is required first. An unbalanced position can lead to a horse jumping extremely keenly and flat, which is a dangerous style for cross country as the horse is running away from the rider's loss of balance and can become against the hands.



The heel is braced a little forward and not under the weight of the rider. When the rider changes to 3 point seat they will land heavier in the saddle and cause the horse to hollow and run forward with the flight response. On a sensitive OTT this can escalate to running against the bit.

A slipped back lower leg, high heel, and pinching knee is another habit to watch for. When the horse feels this balance from its rider it has low impulsion and can become lazy in its pace and is likely to stop at spooky jumps and fall into trot when slowing down in the canter. The rider will naturally be sent forward when the horse goes to stop or peek at a jump and will soon learn of the rider's lack of ability to ride them forward.



The foot has slipped back under the rider's weight causing loss of balance in the rider. The rider will not be able to keep the horse moving forward if going toward a spooky jump. This has also caused the rider a loss of connection and they will be slower and less coordinated to hold a line to the jump if the horse wants to run out.

You will know when your horse is going well with position changes when your horse's relaxation in its back doesn't change. In other words, the rider's seat doesn't influence the horse in a negative way as the position changes and the rider's foot stays under the hips and shoulders as if the rider would land upright if the horse was removed.



The riders foot should stay under the riders weight as if they could land upright if the horse was removed.

It is important to remember that the pace in an arena is slower than cross country, making the position changes more subtle and the hip angles less closed. The faster a horse is asked to go, the more range and fitness a rider will need to use between the positions. Start with the arena exercises and develop skill and fitness to be ready for the faster work ahead.

ABOUT THE OTT USED IN THE PHOTOS

- Moe was born 25 August 2012, he is by 'Ferocity' from 'Smile'. He was trained on the Sunshine Coast by Mark Webb and raced as 'Smilecity'.
- Moe never won or placed in racing and retired in January 2016. He has since been retrained for dressage and show jumping and is owned by Hilltop Farm in Samford, Queensland.