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PHOTO CREDIT: DAVID STATFORD

# CROSS COUNTRY TRAINING AT HOME BEFORE HEADING OUT TO A COURSE

## PART B

### TRAINING TO VISUALLY LOCK ON TO A JUMP; HOW A HORSE'S VISION WORKS.

A horse must see a fence before it can jump it. The time between when a horse sees a fence and jumping it is when the rider is receiving feedback from the horse on its opinion of the jump. Horses can learn to lock on to fences and should be trained to do so for cross country.



A horse sees a fence in a straight line ahead of it in sharp focus at about 5 canter strides away (approximately 20 metres). This is when you want a horse to lock on to a fence in the open. A horse will prick its ears when it sees the fence and this is a clear indicator it has locked on visually to the jump at this distance.

If a horse only sees a fence at 1-3 strides away by pricking its ears at this distance, it won't have had very long in sharp vision to judge the fence. At takeoff point, the horse will have no vision of the face of the jump, as the jump will be in the horse's blind spot. Horses do learn to jump from these approaches with progressive and accurate training, but the OTT must start with a longer approach to instill confidence and build a base for the rider to have time to correct a horse that attempts to run past a fence or stop in the time it sees a fence. We must avoid setting a horse up to refuse jumping by surprising the horse or moving along too quickly.



*The first photo is about 5 metres out from the jump and the ears are still pricked up as the horse has been visually sizing up the jump for a few strides. As they enter the blind spot at approximately 2 metres, the ears become neutral as the horse has accepted the jump and now can't see it directly. The rider must keep the connection of the leg and rein and maintain the impulsion as the jump is now judged by the memory that the horse had of it.*

Gaining the skill of locking a horse on visually to a jump can be created in an arena at home before going out on a cross country course.

### EXERCISE 2:

- Place a pile of 3 poles, or a bright small jump or drape a towel over a small jump depending on the horse's sensitivity, in an open space (e.g. the long side of an arena) with at least a 25 metre lead up and a 25 metre departure.
- In a 2 point jump seat at lengthened canter ride the horse to the short side of the arena, change to a 3 point seat and continue through the corner riding accurately to the line of the jump, in a soft elastic rein connection. Keep the horse straight and eyes looking ahead. The rider must also be looking ahead, over the jump.



*2 point seat, riders eyes on jump*



*3 point seat*



*Ears up, nose out*



*Accurate turn*

- Once the horse pricks it's ears, there is a slight collecting of the pace created by the horse's acknowledgment of the jump that isn't created by the reins. Connect on this acknowledgment and keep the rhythm, maintain the canter power and correct pace for the jump, supported with the leg and rein, while also managing the horse's reaction to the jump.



*Forward ride through turn*



*Visual lock & slight collecting*



*Maintain impulsion & rhythm*



*Keep straight & balanced*

The following exercises can be revisited if your horse is not getting a visual lock on.

- Increase your canter activity. Ride with a more open canter through the turn so the jump comes into view as a more urgent object to address. Keep softer hands in the turn or more forward arm reach.
- Check the balance of the horse's head and neck and the straightness or squareness of the horse from the turn. The horse's head should not be inverted and against the bit or held on the vertical because this will obscure the horse's vision of the jump.

The horse will lose some interest in the poles/jump after a few efforts, giving the responsibility to the rider. All jump training can be part of this exercise of learning to understand a horse's acknowledgment of a jump ahead.

This exercise can be done at the trot once out on a cross country course where the horse will be more reactive to its surroundings and jumps, but for an arena exercise, a canter is preferred.