

FINDING THAT flow



Carefully curated exercises can help both rider and horse find their zest over fences. In the final part of our ultimate all-rounder series, international event rider **Sarah Gairdner** explains which grids can improve the canter and therefore boost technique and confidence

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JUMPING CAN OFTEN be overcomplicated, but at its core it is pretty simple. For many riders the idea of popping a fence feels daunting — often because they overthink it. If they have a forward, rhythmical canter, they are already halfway there. Add a bit of accuracy and trust in the horse and the rider has the perfect recipe for a smooth session.

In fact, jumping is about 90% flatwork and only 10% airtime. This means that the work put in on the flat — especially when developing a quality canter over poles and through thoughtful exercises — is what really sets the partnership up for success.

In this session with Sophie Clark and her lovely horse Hendricks the aim is to find that ideal canter gear;

one that allows everything to flow. The jumps themselves are secondary. They simply reveal where the canter needs tweaking. By focusing on maintaining forwardness and rhythm on the flat, the jumps slot in effortlessly, proving that when the canter feels right, the rest really does take care of itself.

PART FOUR

MEET THE TRAINER

SARAH GAIRDNER is a four-star event rider and UKCC Level 3 coach. She has produced horses to advanced level in eventing and regularly coaches riding club and Pony Club teams, while also teaching privately at her base in Banbury, Oxfordshire. Find her on Cavago as Danesmoor Eventing.

MEET THE RIDER & HORSE

SOPHIE CLARK is riding Hendricks, a 15-year-old KWPN owned by Angela Gates. Hendricks is an ex-event and dressage horse with plenty of talent, but he now enjoys a quieter life hacking and attending low-level jumping clinics.

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN:

- How to develop a consistent canter rhythm that forms the foundation for both flatwork and jumping
- How to improve accuracy and straightness by focusing on a floor plan.
- Using awareness of stride patterns to maintain rhythm
- Methods for building confidence by allowing the horse to travel forwards, even when nerves start to creep in

Jumps are secondary to the ideal canter gear, as Sophie Clark and Hendricks discover during their training session with Sarah Gairdner



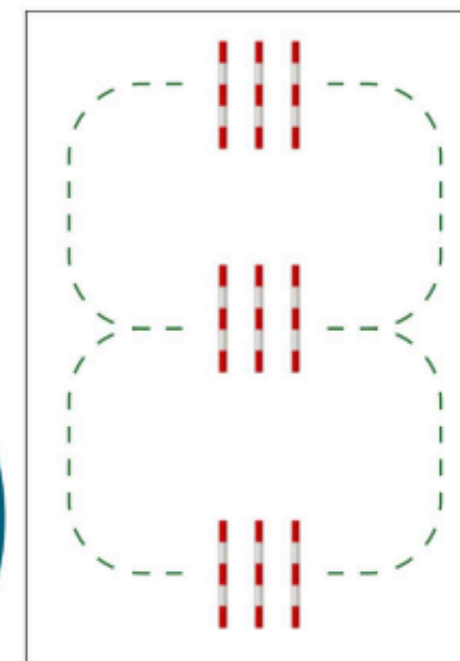
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EXERCISE 1 RULE OF THREE

To kick things off we are going to start with trotting poles. Set up three poles in a figure of eight shape. (Plenty of threes will make it easy to remember.) The goal here is to focus on the floor plan while checking your steering, encouraging your horse to think about his foot placement, and practising riding accurate lines before you introduce fences in the next exercise.

How to set it up

Place a set of three poles over the centre line at each end of the arena and crossing through X so that you have a figure of eight pattern. Set the poles for trot at a distance of 1.2-1.7m apart.



How to ride it

- 1 Once warmed up, start by riding large around the arena and pick up a forward flowing, high quality working trot. Work away from the fence line so that you're riding both sides of the horse and immediately checking your straightness.
- 2 As you approach the first corner of the short side, begin your first loop. Aim for the middle of the first pole on a straight line, keeping your eyes up and ahead. Maintain a consistent rising trot and keep your hands still but allowing so that your horse can figure out the poles on his own. Keep your legs gently wrapped around his sides, especially if he's a little unsure about it at first.
- 3 Ride towards the middle set of poles, continuing to look ahead so that your horse knows which direction to turn. As you ride around the turn, remember to keep looking at the line you want to take, guide your horse with your legs and keep your hands quiet to maintain a level contact. Think about your balance and keeping your shoulders away from your horse's shoulders.
- 4 Ride over the third set of poles in the same manner, maintaining the rhythm and turning to the middle set to change the rein and complete the figure of eight.
- 5 Continue riding the layout several times until your horse is relaxed and flowing around the floor plan in a pleasing rhythm.

TOP TIP

You can use dressage boards as poles to encourage the horse to step through more actively.



The rider should look ahead as they negotiate the poles



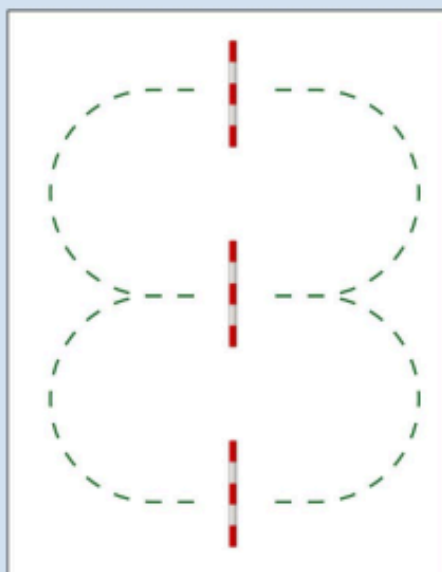
The skinnies that Hendricks is jumping are intended to encourage straightness and accuracy

EXERCISE 2 ON THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW

Once the horse is confidently navigating the poles, take it up a notch with some jumps, but keep them low. This isn't about height. While you can use regular fences for this exercise, in this session we've chosen skinnies to help encourage straightness and accuracy. The goal is to maintain a consistent canter by developing an awareness of stride pattern. Keep your focus on the rhythm and floor plan rather than the take-off point. When you're riding an even floor plan and have an even canter on both reins you can count the number of strides in each loop to develop an awareness of the pattern. The aim is to have the same number of strides through each loop.

TOP TIP

Increase the challenge by using skinny brush fences or placing fillers underneath. We went with a clear groundline to help Hendricks better judge his take off.



TOP TIP

Intertwine the two exercises by having one loop with a fence and one with trotting poles to keep the horse thinking. Also add in some transitions.

How to set it up

Set up three fences on a figure of eight pattern along the centre line with one at A, another at X and one at C.

How to ride it

- 1 Pick up a good quality canter on a circle. Check your communication by testing a little bit of on and back while you're on the circle.
- 2 Once you're happy with the canter, look to the first skinny fence on the short side. Stay on the circle, but straighten up when you're on the line to the fence.
- 3 Pop the fence, making sure not to fold too much so that you can be ready to ride to the second fence.
- 4 Ride a half circle towards the middle of the second fence by closing your outside rein and keeping your outside leg against the horse's sides. Use your eye and leg to indicate where to go.
- 5 After you've popped the fence at X, loop back towards the next short side.
- 6 Repeat the exercise the other way until you've ridden a full figure of eight. Ride this two or three times and then have a walk break.
- 7 Once comfortable with the floor plan, start counting each loop to see if you can make each one the same number of strides. If not, it could be either that your canter rhythm has changed or your lines aren't as accurate between the fences as they could be.

EXERCISE 3 IN YOUR STRIDE

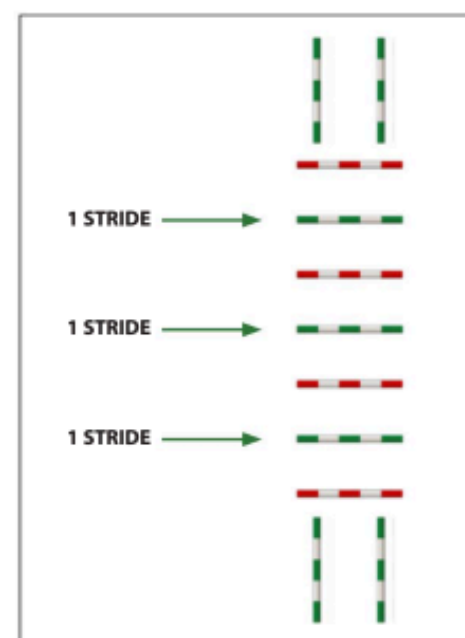
Now it's time to try out a new exercise to feel your canter stride pattern through a simple three-part one-stride grid layout. In this session we are going to take it step by step as Hendricks is a bit unsure at first. To begin with, his canter became shorter, which meant that he was initially struggling with the distances. Sophie focussed on regaining the quality canter she had created in the previous exercise to rebuild their confidence, though, as well as Hendricks' trust, allowing him to pop down the line effortlessly — a great progression to witness.

TOP TIP

Build up the exercise gradually. Start using the canter poles on the ground to establish your rhythm and then build up each element one at a time.

How to set it up

Place three fences on the long side of the arena set one stride apart (approximately 6.4-7.5m). We also use two white boards (or short poles) at each end to go in between to keep the focus on the floor plan both when entering and exiting the grid.



How to ride it

- 1 Establish a canter around the arena, or come onto a circle if you want to. Focus on that consistent rhythm. If coming from the previous exercise, a few gear changes to make sure that the horse is still in front of the leg is a good idea.
- 2 Ride your line towards the grid and breathe. Keep your riding consistent and don't change anything — you

should maintain the same canter you established on the circle. Fight the urge to half-halt or interfere with the horse's striding as you round the corner. If you have a good canter, the striding will take care of itself.

- 3 Look up and ahead as the horse takes off over the first element, keeping your eyes on where you're going and keeping your legs wrapped around his sides to encourage him to maintain that same rhythm when he lands so that he's ready for the next jump. Some horses might jump the fence awkwardly and lose momentum if the approaching canter has been too quiet, so it's really important to ride positively so that you make it to the next fence.
- 4 At this point I could tell that Sophie and



Hendricks is becoming a little apprehensive and his jumping laboured, so....

DID YOU KNOW?

A good quality jumping canter can be visualised by walking a distance with four of a person's strides to one horse's stride. When setting up an exercise, allow two human strides for take off and two for landing to create a competition distance. Every horse is an individual and when developing the canter the rider needs to work with a coach who can show them how to set up the exercises for their particular horse's stride and what it feels like to canter that stride for jumping.

Hendrix are becoming a bit apprehensive as the canter shrinks, the distances become too long and the jump more laboured. When this happens we need to take a step back by lowering some of the fences to poles until refinding the canter that's required.

- 5 This exercise helps you to focus on the quality of the canter. The jumping efforts begin to feel smooth and with practice over time you and your horse will find your flow so that your jumping canter is easy to establish.

TOP TIP

Keep your focus on maintaining a steady rhythm and count the strides as a way to measure consistency.



...Sarah takes them back to poles to refine the required canter

BUILDING CONFIDENCE TO LET THE HORSE MOVE FORWARD

It is natural to feel nervous when approaching a fence, but one of the most important things a rider can do is trust their horse and allow him to move forwards. Often riders unintentionally hold their horse back out of apprehension, but this can cause them to lose their rhythm and flow. Instead, focus on staying relaxed, maintaining a steady contact and giving the horse the space to travel forwards. The more the rider trusts their horse's ability to handle the situation, the more confident they will both become. Remember that a forward-thinking horse is often the key to a smoother, more successful jump.

Lessons learned

- * Developing a consistent canter rhythm is the foundation for both flatwork and jumping, ensuring that the horse remains balanced and confident.
- * Riding with precision, especially over skinnies, concentrates the mind on straightness and improves the horse's focus on the task in hand.
- * The exercises are progressive and help to prepare for the more challenging Exercise 3 which tests the quality of the canter, and this helped to get a great feeling jumping through the grid.
- * Adopting a positive, confident attitude helps both horse and rider flow through exercises with ease and accuracy.



Hendricks is rewarded for a job well done