

FEARLESS foundations

In the third part of our ultimate all-rounder series, international event rider **Sarah Gairdner** sets up some polework and jumping exercises that any rider can try at home to help them create a bold, confident and sure-footed horse who is ready to take on any challenge

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PART THREE

OVERTHINKING THINGS IS a habit that many riders find themselves falling into. It is often a default setting brought into their riding from everyday life. There is a lot to be said for 'just doing it' sometimes and trusting that the foundations are in place so that the horse can work out what he needs to do without too much interference from the rider. Setting out a well-structured floor-plan challenges both horse and rider and gives the partnership a focus, allowing them to enjoy themselves at the same time.

The ultimate aim of such training is to develop the horse's ability to think independently, make quick decisions and navigate different questions with confidence. Establishing trust in a controlled environment ensures that both horse and rider can respond effectively during unexpected situations, whether out on a showjumping or cross-country course, while hacking, or in daily training.

This session introduces a progressive series of polework and jumping exercises designed to keep training varied and rewarding. It is all about laying the foundations for a confident partnership while having lots of fun in the process.

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN:

- How the right floor-plan can improve rhythm and accuracy
- Ways to encourage a horse to think for himself
- Confidence tips to help horse and rider reach their full potential



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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 she 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 RIDERS & HORSES

SOPHIE CLARK and **KIERA BOYLE** are colleagues at Cavago, the online equestrian booking platform. Today Sophie is riding Energizer (Albie), a 15-year-old Dutch Warmblood, and Kiera is on Red, a 12-year-old Irish cob. Albie competed up to discovery level in showjumping, but now mainly hacks, while Red is the ideal riding club all-rounder.

In today's polework session with Sarah Gairdner, Sophie Clark's Albie negotiates the four-leaf clover grid, which is designed to encourage the rider to think

EXERCISE 1 NIMBLE AND SWIFT

Using trotting poles encourages the horse to engage his core muscles, promoting a more rounded and connected movement. Trotting poles help to develop balance, rhythm and coordination, and they are great to dot around the arena to pop over in between exercises to keep the horse engaged and rhythmical. Raising poles or using dressage white boards encourage the horse to be careful and to think more about where he's putting his feet.

TOP TIP

If you don't have any dressage boards at home, simply use raised poles instead.

How to ride it

- 1 Pick up an active working trot around the arena, testing your control over the rhythm by pushing your horse on and back a few times. If you're on a young horse, you might want to start off in walk and build up to trot later.
- 2 Start by asking him to go over one board so that he has a chance to get used to it. Look up and ahead and keep your legs wrapped around the horse's sides for support. If he backs off and has a wary look, sit up and maintain the forward energy with your legs and voice

to encourage him to give them a go.

- 3 If he's feeling unsure he might spring over the boards with legs everywhere at first, or even try to run past. This is where you need to stay confident and ride your line. Keep your rising the same, with your hands level and allowing, while your lower leg encourages the horse to keep moving forwards through the boards/poles. Be proactive rather than reactive to what he's giving you.



Using dressage boards encourages the horse (in this case Albie) to lift up his feet and use his body more

- 4 Once the horse has gone through, even if not as initially intended, make sure that you reward him. It may take a few tries for him to relax, but if you stay calm and positive he will figure it out and start to enjoy it and learn to figure out his legs.
- 5 Once he's comfortable you can gradually introduce up to five boards in a row, making sure that you've measured them out correctly (trot poles 1.2-1.7m).



Kiera Boyle keeps her legs wrapped around Red's sides for support as he goes over the dressage boards

TOP TIP

Try to relax and allow the exercise to do the job for you. If your horse rushes, for example, the poles will help to teach him to read what's in front of him and adjust his gait naturally without you having to over-manage the situation.



The key with the four-leaf clover exercise is to meet the pole in the middle



Once horse and rider are confident, the poles can be raised to make small jumps



Try to think of the line that needs to be taken ahead of time to avoid a navigational error

EXERCISE 2 THE FOUR-LEAF CLOVER

The four-leaf clover exercise is a favourite of mine as it's so versatile, and it really encourages the rider to think. The key is to keep turning in the same direction with a focus on maintaining a consistent rhythm throughout. With lots of open space involved, a horse may get overexcited and try to rush, but the beauty of this exercise is that you can make each loop as big or as small as you like to help you, using the turns and floor-plan to get the horse thinking.

How to ride it

- 1 Ride large around the arena on the left rein and pick up a forward, consistent working trot.
- 2 Look ahead to the first pole and ride a straight line towards it. The key is to meet the pole directly in the middle, so focus on keeping your rising regular and channelling your horse straight between your legs. Make sure that you're always looking up and ahead to where you plan to go next rather than down at the poles.
- 3 Once you've trotted over the first pole, ride ahead for a few strides before making a smooth loop around to the left, keeping your outside rein and leg closed to prevent the horse from falling out through his shoulder. You can raise your inside rein slightly if he tries to

motorbike around the corner. Keep the rhythm the same as you loop towards that second pole.

- 4 After that, ride another loop to the left in the same way as before towards the third pole and again to the fourth to finish, ensuring that you meet each one centrally. Also avoid letting the trot rhythm fluctuate in speed.
- 5 Once you have looped over all the poles once, change the rein and come in again on the right rein.
- 6 Try to think about your lines ahead of time so that you don't ride over the same pole twice by mistake.

Let's level up

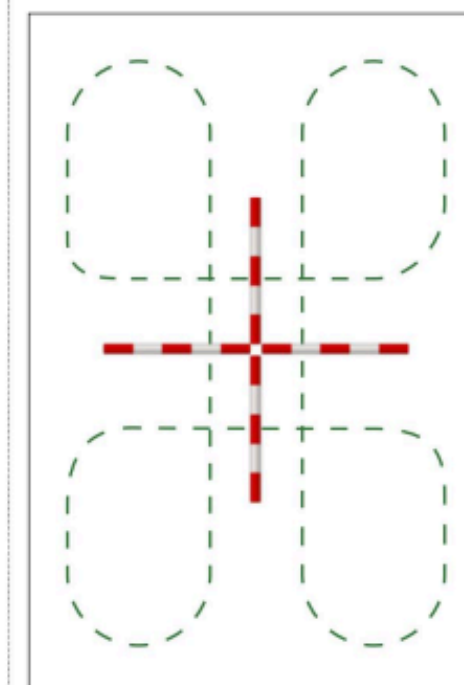
You can easily step up this exercise a notch by trying it in canter. This is excellent for improving a horse's balance and the exercise is perfectly set up to help regulate his speed. The key is to allow him to travel and stay in a nice forward rhythm — let him work things out for himself a little bit.

If you're confident in canter, you can even raise the poles into small jumping efforts. Keep the fences low as it's not about height, but about establishing rhythm by using the floor-plan. Counting really helps to maintain the rhythm, so see if you can do each quarter in the same

number of strides. Additionally, check that the stride pattern and floor-plan are equal to the right and to the left.

TOP TIP

Make sure that you give your horse frequent breaks as these exercises can be quite intense. If he's struggling, you can add a circle or a downward transition in between the poles to rebalance.



EXERCISE 3 BRAVE THE ANGLE

A true test of bravery and trust, this exercise may look simple but it is definitely a rider-frightener rather than a horse scarer. 'Brave the angle' is all about keeping your nerve and trusting the system, as well as conquering the mindset that you are jumping towards a wall or fence. Once you've done it a couple of times, you will wonder what all the fuss was about.



The rider should look ahead and not at the wall!



The rider should shift their weight a little to the inside as the horse jumps

TOP TIP

To build confidence, start by riding the poles on the floor and build up to fences.

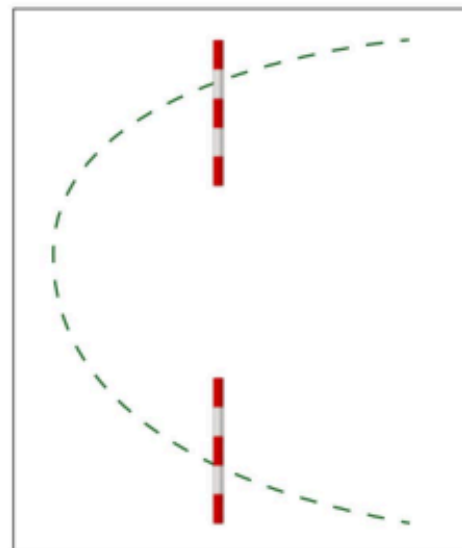
How to ride it

- 1 Establish the canter and ask for some gear changes, keeping the rhythm consistent. Ask the horse to lengthen and shorten his stride to check that you can adjust his canter.
- 2 Approach the first fence on an angle as you ride away from the middle of the short-side on a diagonal line back towards the arena wall or fence. It can feel daunting to jump towards the edge of the arena, but as long as you look ahead to where you're going next the horse will understand perfectly.
- 3 Jump the fence centrally at an angle, shifting your weight a little to the inside. Look where you want to go. You will have a stride or two after the fence to turn fully as you curve back in line with the track.

- 4 Canter straight for a few more strides, looking now to the second fence, which you'll also need to jump on an angle. Ride on a diagonal line away from the arena fence or wall towards the middle of the new short side, popping the fence as you go. This fence will feel more natural as you're riding back into more open space.
- 5 Ride straight towards the short side and then continue large and ride the exercise a few more times before having a break to change the rein, trying it the other way.

Let's level up

If your arena is large enough to mean that you can still have the four leaf clover exercise set up, you could incorporate that too. Start by jumping the two angled fences as before, but after the second fence, instead of simply riding large, pop over the fence on the outside of the four-leaf clover before looping back around to the first angled fence. This exercise is going to test your communication as a partnership.



Lessons learned

- * Using pole layouts involving multiple circles and turns will help to keep the horse and rider's brains engaged. They will also help to fix training issues, such as rushing or falling out with minimal interference from the rider. Using the poles for accuracy will help to highlight how precise the floor-plan needs to be.
- * By becoming comfortable with using their leg and position, the rider encourages positivity and forwardness while they are working over poles in the

arena. This is a great way to put controls in place before hacking or riding across country.

- * These exercises will have helped the rider to conquer their own mental blocks when it comes to scary exercises. Trust in the current set-up and system is key to unlocking full potential as a combination.

■ **NEXT TIME:** Great gridwork to hone the all-rounder even further for the jumping ring. 🐾



Kiera has unlocked a little of Red's potential during this session

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