



# EXCELLENCE IN EQUINE NUTRITION

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# Horse Sense

Practical advice for all horse owners

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# Use the off season to your advantage



BHSI stage 5 performance coach **Brendán Bergin** has advice for riders on making the most of the off season

**T**HIS year has been a roller coaster with huge interruptions in getting into a flow for the competition season.

Now is the time to get to grips with the niggles that have been unravelling your performance and blocking your success over the season. How you frame the challenge of 2020 will allow you to develop for the upcoming 2021 season.

The down season will allow you to take the time to review the basics, engaging a good coach, organising a training plan and assessing results.

As we look to the top of our sport one of the key features of successful elite sport is simplicity and constant consistent revision of the basics. Dividing responsibilities between rider and horse is often a sensible approach.

Some of the key rider responsibilities include:

➤ **Look and plan:** Knowing where you are going and looking there!

“How you frame the challenge of 2020 will allow you to develop for the upcoming 2021 season” \ Louise O'Brien photography



➤ **Speed:** Adopting the correct pace and cadence for the job in hand.

➤ **Direction:** Ensuring you are guiding the whole horse rather than dragging his head around.

➤ **Balance:** Ensuring that your position is consistent and effective facilitating optimum communication with the horse. As humans we constantly need to address and improve our innate imbalances.

Building your horse's basic responses will form the cornerstone of your horses career. I like to think of these as the lego blocks that build the ideal equine partner:

➤ **Go:** Ensuring that the horse moves off the leg with good impulsion (available energy) for the task at hand. This is what can get you out of trouble on the cross country course and requires constant review.

➤ **Stop:** Ensuring the horse is attentive to the restraining aids whether a momentary rebalancing steadying aid or the square halt on the centre line.

➤ **Turn:** A clear equal response to left and right where the rider is in unencumbered control of the shoulders in particular. The rider should be able to position the horse's shoulder practically anywhere.

➤ **Yield:** Moving the hind quarters. Being able to move the quarters into the optimum position is important at all levels but particularly as you move up the dressage grades into lateral work.

## Good coaching

Good coaching is an undervalued resource which needs to be employed to maximal effect. A coach's job is to unlock the potential of horse and rider and be the eyes on the ground. A coach can also act as a catalyst for ideas helping bring you to the optimal conclusion on a training plan.

Choosing someone who prioritises your personal development and sticking with them will reap dividends in the long run. Many students only show up for coaching a few weeks before a competition which robs them of the true value of personal development.

While pre-competition coaching is an important aspect of the final success polish it is nothing without the foundation work of regular development coaching sessions. Equally hopping from coach to coach can be detrimental and confusing to many riders.

While having new eyes from time to time can be a useful exercise to develop the rider you need a regular coach to keep you personally growing.

## Organising a training plan

Having a training plan with goals and milestones to reach is one of the surest ways to maintain your progression. There is little progressive development value in getting on and just randomly riding about the arena or deciding sure I just feel like jumping today.

It is prudent to have a weekly and monthly routine to develop each aspect of your riding game.

For example, my week starts on a Tuesday with a dressage session working on whatever aspect I have from the previous weeks training (or a dressage lesson). Wednesday is hacking where I work on my balance and on the horse's fitness with hills, etc. Thursday is a lunge day for the horse focusing on stretch and top line development.

Friday is usually a lesson focused on jumping. Saturday is usually a dressage session and Sunday is usually an easy "cavaletti" jump session focusing on my jump position and form and finally Monday is a day off for the horse.

Every rider has specific positional and balance issues to address which can be a limiting factor to your performance. Most riders have a specific handedness and it is not always the obvious and need constant review and attention.

Obviously the proof of any competition training plan is success in competition. However in the interim you have to have a measurement process with your coach or some other independent measurement system.

From an eventing perspective dressage is a key component so dressage online can be ideal during lockdown to measure progress and you can then assess how the horse is fitting into the scale of training.

The scale of training is a fantastic measurement tool to see where you are at in your development and what areas need attention. Looking incisively at your dressage sheet with your coach will give you all the information that you need grow.

## Breakdown of the scale:

- **Rhythm:** This is the regularity and correctness of the paces.
- **Suppleness:** This is the mental and physical plasticity and swing through the whole body of the horse. The mental aspect is essential to this.
- **Connection:** The connection and acceptance of the riders seat, legs and hands.
- **Impulsion:** The bounce and energy flowing throughout the horse's body, often thought of as available energy.
- **Straightness:** Initially hind legs following front legs and eventually the whole body following a specified line.
- **Collection:** The development of carrying power so the horse can carry himself up hill.

Every adversity is an opening to opportunity. Making the most of the training opportunity offered by the down season is an untapped resource we should all be exploiting!

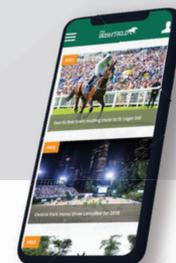
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