



EXCELLENCE IN EQUINE NUTRITION

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Horse Sense, in association with



See a stride with confidence



BHSI performance coach **Brendán Bergin** has advice for riders on developing the skill of seeing a stride

RIDERS and coaches alike spend much of their careers discussing how one person can see a stride and another can't. This obsession is the holy grail of the show jumper and eventer.

The stress and anxiety caused by the pressure of this perceived skill is paralysing for so many riders. Many coaches make it their life's mission to train this skill using a huge variety of methods. Developing this skill usually causes an exponential increase in anxiety towards jumping.

Once the reality of seeing a stride becomes apparent, we can lose our need for a narrow focused approach and can broaden our horizons to the other more essential aspects of successful show jumping and cross country. Understanding how to improve your jumping essentially has four key aspects; self preservation, developing the horse's responsibilities, developing reflexes and training foundational skills.

1. Self preservation

One of our most inbuilt human instincts is the will to survive and not injure ourselves. This innate ability means that everyone, even the most novice rider, can come in to a fence and see that they are off the mark.

When we see the stride is wrong we all naturally get the fear or panic reaction. In this mode we usually offer a range of random responses; drive the horse at the fence, pull like an excited dog on a walk or suddenly lean over the horse's shoulders before take-off, loading the shoulders and making the horse's job harder.

None of these responses assist our jumping abilities. As you entrench into your panic response your horse's ability to get you out of trouble is exponentially diminished. Practicing undesirable responses results in potentially indelible jumping errors.



Developing reflexes and training foundational skills can help riders in seeing a stride

2. Developing the horse's responsibilities

All horses possess the same identical innate instinct to protect themselves from injury that we do. As a prey species injuries to the limbs can result in falling victim to predators and as such most horses are capable and motivated to be careful.

Millions of years of evolution cannot be knocked out by a few thousand years of domestication. Our role as riders is to create the most ideal circumstances for the horse to read the obstacle well and adopt the best approach. It

is worth remembering that as riders we can only influence the horse's basic responses:

- **Stop:** Including slowing down, which is essential on challenging terrain.
- **Go:** Including longer or faster steps which could be the difference in making a distance or cutting a stride out to make up time.
- **Turn:** Change the direction of the front legs to adjust the horse's balance keeping the forehead light and agile.
- **Yield:** Change the direction of the hind legs, keeping them under the horse to provide optimal propulsion over the fence.

Both fortunately and unfortunately we are not able to control when the horse takes off. In training, constructing fences with a rolled out ground line can give the horse a clear road-map of how to jump and read the fence. The horse has the opportunity to make the best choice to look after the rider.

With the horse's eyes located on the sides of their head they are not well evolved to judge distance. That adaptation gives them the unique gift to scan and flee from predator. This means that horses need more time than humans to process distance judgements. It is often suggested that the last three strides should belong to the horse, the job of the rider is to have the canter rhythmically organised by this time.

3. Developing new reflexes

Our innate instincts, as we stated above, can give rise to random behaviour which hinders progress. As riders we need to train new reflexes and coping strategies.

Good coaching is the cornerstone of new reflex development. Your coach can develop a plan to reprogram your reflexes making you less of a slave to

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your innate survival instincts. Committing to reprogramming can be a very uncomfortable experience.

The first phase is breaking down your old habits which goes entirely against the wiring of your brain. Just as practice makes permanent, habit is equally stronger than reason.

4. Training foundational skills

The key to successful jumping is to leave the roles of the horse to the horse and only look after our rider responsibilities. There are four aspects for riders to look after:

- **Look and plan:** As our head is the heaviest part of our body, by pointing your head you start to make subtle changes in direction. The power of intention is a vastly untapped resource which we can use to our advantage. This is particularly pivotal going cross country where gravity can be used to influence performance.
- **Speed:** I use speed as a somewhat all-encompassing term, including rhythm (regularity of pace), impulsion (available energy) and forwardness (willingness of the horse to carry the rider over the ground). By setting the horse up and going at the ideal pace they will have the best opportunity to read the fence and offer a suitable solution.
- **Direction:** Orientating the horse's eyes so they can see the fence early gives the horse the advantage of time to make optimal judgements about their role in understanding the obstacle. Offering a good approach can be the difference between having a pole down and leaving it up. Remember that often times a curved line provides more clarity for the horse and that slightly overshooting the fence usually offers more options (and advantage) than undercutting a turn.
- **Balance:** The rider's balance has to offer the horse maximal possibility to lift their shoulders. This is often best achieved by the rider staying behind their hands. This keeps us behind the horse's centre of gravity rather than pushing down over their shoulders. There is no single magic trick to seeing a stride other than meeting a genie in a bottle! Rather it is about developing your reflexes to not interfere at critical moments when the horse's concentration ought to be maximized and influencing the horse away from the fences to optimise way of going.