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Horse Sense, in association with



Back to basics

The four corners of training



In the first part of a new four-part series, BHSI Stage 5 Performance Coach Brendan Bergin outlines the four corners of training

TRAINING the horse is more than just showing up to ride your horse a few days a week. A training programme is an ongoing holistic process with a number of different facets.

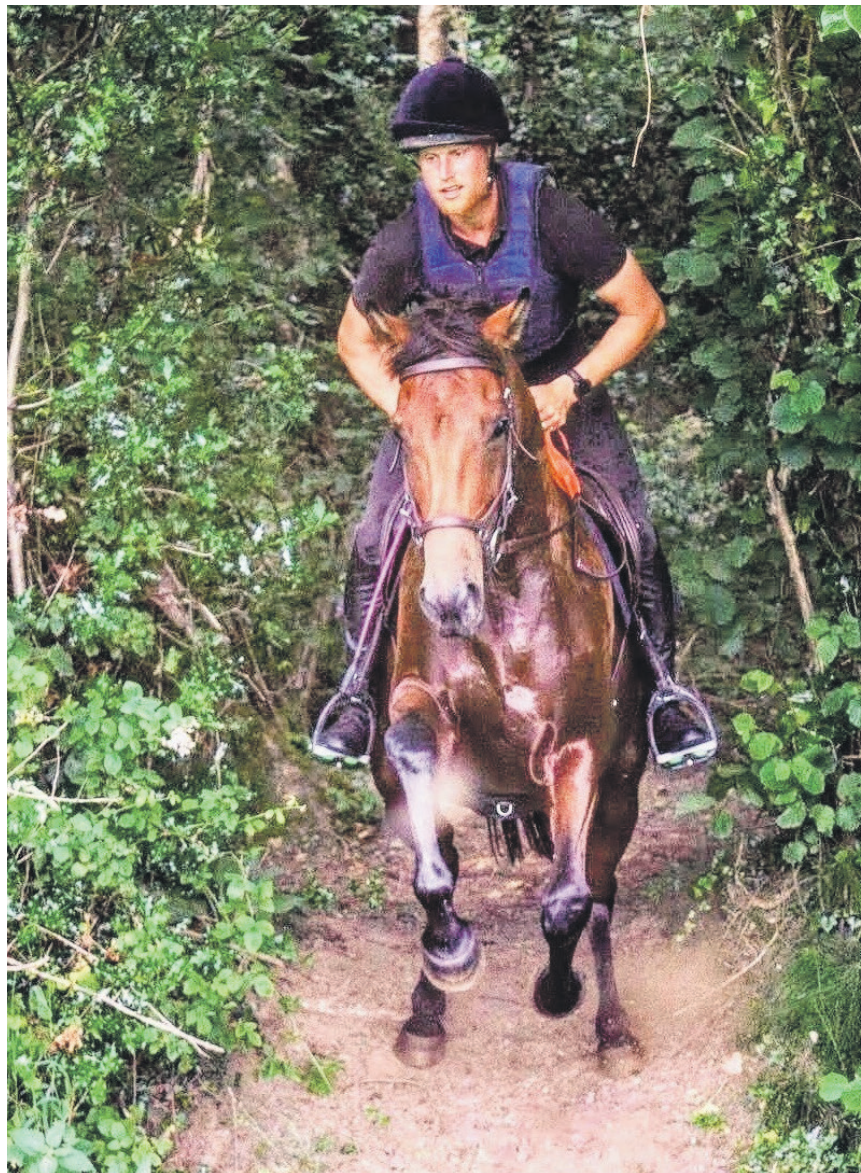
Developing towards a competition goal takes planning, organisation and probably most importantly knowledgeable help.

Before you embark on a training program you need to have an end goal for example; doing your first EI80 or EI90, your first novice dressage test or riding your first 1.10m affiliated show jumping course.

What are the skills required for the horse and the rider? As sportspeople our work should focus on developing our skills, as they develop you are less dependent on that all elusive luck. Plenty of riders hope it will be fine on competition day even if things are not working well at home.

In this article I am going to look at what the rider is responsible for. The rider is the managing director of the company, they have to look after the overall management without getting involved in minutia and micro-management.

The horse is the employee who has to work out day-to-day running, where to put his feet and how to work out little problems. With this in mind the rider has four main roles: look and plan, speed, direction, and balance/position.



It is important to develop the correct speed for riding cross country

Look and plan

Look and plan is the most important role of the rider acting as the horse's guide and advisor. To properly guide the horse you need a logical plan. When you ride, always use the same warm up routine to get your head in the game and to get the horse buying into the process.

Before you start developing your warm up plan do your research. What will you be required to do in competition? Have you done it before? Do you need someone to give you the roadmap? Do you need your coach to develop a warm up plan for you?

Remember your coach's role reaches beyond the arena just like the rider's role goes beyond riding the horse. My warm up comes from an eventing perspective so no matter what I am doing I always start the same way looking for the same outcomes, response from the seat and leg rather than the rein.

Speed

Speed is a broad reaching concept which essentially covers any change in pace. As riders we have to develop the horse's gearbox and cruise control

systems. Both of these are essential to achieve quality work in any discipline. Just like in a car you need to think that within each gear you can have different levels of revs (beats per minute) within each; we call this tempo. If we take the canter and gallop for cross country or show jumping think of having the following gears:

- Gear 1: Collected canter 300 to 350 mpm
- Gear 2: Working canter 350 to 400 mpm
- Gear 3: Medium canter (Ground cover) 400 - 450 mpm
- Gear 4: Extended Canter 450 - 520 mpm
- Gear 5: Gallop 525+ mpm

Within each of these gears the rider has to be able to vary the beats per minute the quicker the tempo the greater the potential ground cover. As riders we need to put in the ground work to have these gears well established in our horses. Once you have the stride length you can start varying the tempo without sacrificing gait purity. The same gearing system is true in trot but extreme care has to be taken in walk not to break the natural rhythm of the walk.

“A good coach should be able to see past the rider’s “conformation” and help them adopt the appropriate balance for their body type, fitness and skill level.”

Direction

Developing directional control is another facet of the rider's toolbox. The difficulty with horses is they are essentially wedge shaped which gives them a natural inclination to be crooked. The rider has to be able to control the wedge so the “arrow” is pointing in the direction of travel.

In an arena setting the horse needs to have the inside foreleg on the same track as the inside hind leg, often described as the shoulder-fore position, the horse will then be “straight”. When I think of directional control I always think of the right foreleg as attached to the right rein and the left foreleg attached to the left rein. When you want to change direction by shifting your centre (belly button) thus moving the rein attached to that leg. As you develop directional control you should nearly be able to change direction by turning your head as it makes up 15% of your body weight.

In training we are always looking to move the horse smoothly from one rein to the next. The smoother the turn the more flow in the movement and the less directional change will affect speed.

Balance and position

Rider style and balance forms the essential framework for communication. Most of us look to our heroes and it is hard not to dream of sitting like Charlotte Dujardin for your dressage test or having the balance of William Fox-Pitt across country, but you have to train where you are and develop from there forward.

One of the signatures of elite riders is their commitment to fitness and coordination work (of the horse). Riders should always view themselves as athletes and your fitness should be comparable to that of your horse. If you are eventing at 2-star you need to have good cardiovascular fitness and regularly develop core strength. A good coach should be able to see past the rider's “conformation” and help them adopt the appropriate balance for their body type, fitness and skill level.

Putting it in to practice improving your rider responsibilities is essential development that requires constant attention on a daily basis. Try to set yourself the goal of addressing one small aspect each day. Work with your coach to develop a game plan to address your strengths and weaknesses to develop towards your competition goals. Over time these daily goals will act as building block for longer term goals.

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