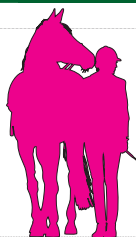




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Horse Sense

Practical advice for all horse owners

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Back to basics

Transitions: Practice makes permanent



BHSI Stage 5 Performance
Coach **Brendán Bergin**
outlines the importance
of devoting time into the
development of horses'
responses

THE first article in this series looked at rider responsibilities and by devoting time into the development of responses, they can be relied on in later training.

The old maxim "practice makes perfect" can be substituted for the more realistic "Practice makes permanent." As we look to elite athletes in our sport we should notice that they do not move forward until work is well established. Like these top riders we need to rely on the help of knowledgeable experienced eyes on the ground to help with a broad view of horse and rider requirements.

In every discipline dressage, show jumping, or eventing the development of the horse's response to the aids and optimal biomechanical movement is critical to later competition success. Employing a holistic training and management plan pays dividends in the long run.

There are a number of factors that contribute to this developmental process. In this article we will look at the some of the key building blocks needed in the development of quality work built from a solid foundation.



The development of your horse's responses is crucial to competition success

Focus on quality transitions

Transitions are so much more than just changes of pace. Instead of riding them as a matter of course they should be a focused development process.

Developing smooth quality transitions requires shaping responses into soft reliable cues. As riders it is our job to understand the horse rather than the reverse. Horses are good at forming habits and responding to stimuli but they are not good at working things out.

It is worth remembering that horses are motivated by the application of pressure and are trained by the release of pressure.

So when you use your leg to move the horse forward the horse is reinforced by the release of the pressure. Good transitions require regular practice in each session yielding reliability in later competition. To that end it sometimes helps to think of response level on a gradient of one to 10 where one is unresponsive and 10 is hyper-reactive.

Aiming for horses to be in the middle ground between five and seven should give greater reliability in responses between transitions. Don't move on in your session until you are in the correct range for each transition which will boost reliability in your later work.



Develop equal feeling on each rein

Horses, like people, have sidedness both in freedom of movement at foot level and all the way up into their body. Take note for a few days of which foot you step onto the stairs with, I can nearly guarantee you will do it with the same one every time.

As horses are good at forming habits, so movement patterns are quick to form and are notoriously difficult to detrain. Just like using transitions to develop your speed control, you have to use changes of bend in the work to get the horse turning and bending on

cue. Turning and bending are equally important but totally different.

Turning is moving the horses forelegs left or right where as bending is evenly moving the horses ribs left or right. Once you have identified which way your horse likes to turn and bend you can work with your coach to develop the weak link.

A commonly used exercise to assess and develop bend and turn is the use of lightbulb serpentine and I personally and this exercise beneficial with a wide range of horses.

Suppleness and regularity

When you watch young horses moving in the field you will notice their natural suppleness and regularity in the pace.

In the early training process this suppleness and regularity is often disrupted causing habits which need to be resolved later. One of the main barriers which disrupts the horses natural aptitude is not allowing horses work forward or lack of clarity in the driving and or restraining aids. At the start of training the focus should be to keep the horses footfalls regular.

Once the horse is regular then you can start to build suppleness through the body. One of the best ways to improve the horse's suppleness through the body is using leg yield. As the horse moves away from the leg and continues moving forward it should develop mobility through the body.

Using leg yield through changes of bend on lightbulb serpentine can help the horse move his ribs and move with more freedom. As the horse gains confidence in the movement pattern and the riders aids and then moves forward supple energetic movement should be the result.

Balance and coordination

The horse's balance and coordination develops with training and should be a priority to build sustained improvement. As riders we need to use exercises to encourage the horse's proprioception. The horse's awareness of the ground is not only a key facet in its nature as a flight animal but also an important aspect for any horse working on or off a surface. Particularly for event horses who by the nature of the sport often work on uneven ground in self carriage, a quality often called "the fifth leg" is critical to rider and horse safety on course.

While nothing beats riding horses on varied terrain to get them thinking about their feet, pole work in the arena is very helpful. In recent years pole work clinics have sprung up everywhere with hugely elaborate patterns in use.

However, if your equipment is limited then using a few poles or ideally planks are equally beneficial. Even with just a single pole or plank there is a lot of benefit which can be derived depending on how you use it and the response that you are targeting.

If you come at an angle it can often have the benefit of encouraging the horse to stretch into a bigger step. Getting advice from a competent coach is invaluable if you are using equipment like poles as they can advise you on the best distance for your horse or how you can use the poles safely. Remember, an incorrect distance can cause significant injury, so careful placement and use will minimise the risk.

Putting it in to practice, development work is another fundamental building block in a successful equine partnership.

To contact the author with questions or for coaching, email Brendan@BerginEquine.com