A jump ahead

with Jen Hamilton

Part 5 - Problem Solving

Problem solving

All horses are natural jumpers. Just ask any young rider who’s jumped a horse bareback - fallen down trees, buckets supporting rake handles and just about anything else that can be found lying around are jumped with joy.

Regardless of their natural talent, competition horses, just like human athletes, learn and improve through progressive skill development, and this requires laying good foundations...

First on the flat:

• Go forward
• Come back
• Turn left
• Turn right
• Stride control

Then jumping:

• Go between the standards and over the coloured sticks
• Stride control
• Technique over the jumps

I have been asked to give examples of some ‘problems’ and explain how rider, horse and I, as coach, have dealt with the problems.

First things first

Before attempting to improve performance or resolve problems we need to consider the following:

• Is the horse sound?
• Is the horse and is the rider capable of jumping the height and width we are asking?
• Does the horse understand the exercise or task and is it appropriate?
• Is the rider helping or hindering the horse?
• Does the horse want to jump and/or is the horse jumping out of fear?

For the purpose of this article, I am going to assume that the horse is sound and athletically capable of jumping the jumps and that, given the right direction and training strategies, the rider is capable and confident enough to help improve the horse.

In this series:

• Part 1: Position and rein aids.
• Part 2: Turns and stride control exercises.
• Part 3: Stride control and improving ‘rideability’ over jumps.
• Part 4: Improving your horse’s technique (gymnastics).

Artwork by Cristina Wilkins

Canadian NCCP Level 4 Showjumping Coach Jen Hamilton is a passionate and dedicated coach who travels the world imparting clinics to riders of all ages and abilities - from pony club to FEI level.

With a commitment and level of energy that is difficult to equal, Jen makes her lessons work for every horse and rider - to create positive outcomes - through strategic and purposeful exercises.

During a recent visit to Queensland, Horses and People arranged exclusive sessions for Sales Manager Karen Lyon, who kindly volunteered herself and her young Warmblood stallion, Kinder Surprise, to illustrate and bring you Jen’s unique and effective coaching style in a series that is set to challenge your discipline and desire to learn.

Last month, Jen explained some standard gymnastic exercises to improve your horse’s jumping technique and, this month, she gives us real case examples of improving horses with correct training.
**Missy and Krista**

**Missy’s case study**

My first example is a young mare of Thoroughbred type. Missy’s owner and rider, Krista Foley, came to train with me about three years ago.

_KF:_ “Missy was green and had an awful canter that was very strong out, covering way too much ground on her forehand. Using the reins to try to set her on her hind-end did not work very well, as she would either grab the bit and pull or she would want to buck.

In our early lessons with Jen, we spent a good deal of time using cavaletti to help her learn to compress her canter and rock back on her hind-end. I remember doing long lines of one-strides and bounces (including those set on a bending line) and, after time, progressing to a bounce in then three short strides to a bounce out.

As well as those, Jen had me lunge her over a line of curved cavaletti at home to help teach her to balance herself and not lunge across them.”

_JH:_ “When I first saw Missy I thought that she could jump but, so what? The hardest part of jumping a course is getting to the jumps and that means cantering.

Missy really did have an awful canter. Krista looked like she was riding three horses - a head and neck out the front, hocks and a tail out the back with Krista sitting in the middle.

The primary problem with Missy is that she was very weak behind and, therefore, uncoordinated and out of balance in the canter.

Missy was weak and couldn’t carry her weight on her hindquarters - she dragged herself around on her forehand and leaned on her rider trying to find support and balance. She had difficulty maintaining the canter for more than eight strides.

**Training strategy for Missy**

The training strategy was to teach Missy to canter - improving her strength and coordination. Missy was cantered during hacks out, on the lunge and over cavaletti set at bounce distances, as well as jumping over three- and four-stride distances in straight lines and bending lines.

Serpentines and circles were added to the daily routine once straight lines improved. Stride control over poles and jumps were introduced, along with gymnastics for stride control, strength, balance and jumping technique.

(See Parts 2, 3 and 4 of this series)

To make it simple: Missy was cantered a lot! Krista and Missy worked hard together and, about six months later, we started to see a measurable improvement.

A greatly improved canter, combined with a good flatwork and jumping program, has resulted in Krista and Missy representing their province, Nova Scotia, at the Canadian Interprovintial Championships in Bromont in 2014.
Fiamo and Jill

Fiamo's case study

Fiamo is an 11-year-old 16hh Hanoverian gelding. His owner and rider, Jill Swain, rode with me as a junior. Jill started training Fiamo with me three years ago.

JS: “Fiamo was jumping at the fences and not using himself properly. You set up three white planks jumps with a very tight distance between them to help him make his arch in the proper place over the jump. It seemed to work very well and made him much smarter on figuring that out.

I was finding the distances between the jumps were riding very tight for me. You changed my landing position, as well as keeping my eye up over the jump. It really seemed to help me fit the strides in much better.”

JH: “Fiamo’s primary problem is that he is very scopey. He is athletic, supple and jumps very clean. While this is a positive, sometimes you just can’t have it, but, remember, Rideability is the most important element in show jumping. The biggest scope and talent over the jump is meaningless if you can’t get to the jump!”

Training strategy for Fiamo

Fiamo's primary problem is the same one that Missy had and it has the same solution.
- Caualletti exercises (See previous page) for strength training combined with exercises to change the shape of the arc (bascule) and stride control.
- Exercises to change the bascule - shape of the arc over a jump (See illustrations on right).
- Trotting to jumps.

Overshooting the arc

Overshooting the arc causes the horse to land too far away from the jump, shortening the distance between jumps. Overshooting the arc also causes the first strides away from the jump to be long and flat.

The ideal bascule

In theory, the horse's body should form a perfect half circle over the jump - bascule.

Rideability’ is the most important element in show jumping. The biggest scope and talent is meaningless if you can’t get to the jump!
Further education

All distances in feet (‘)

This line was jumped in both directions.
The 22’ between the planks is tight and the 60’ distance allows 4 or 5 canter strides.
- Gymnastic to oxer in 4 strides
- Oxer to gymnastic in 5 strides
- Gymnastic to oxer in 5 strides
- Oxer to gymnastic in 4 strides

The 60 feet distance allows 4 or 5 canter strides.

Oxer

For Fiamo, we also added placing poles halfway between the verticals to help slow his momentum and teach him to rock back on his hocks.

“Missy and Fiamo are lovely horses made better through training. Two different problems but both arising from the same root cause - they needed to develop strength in their hindquarters.

Strategy:
The three-verticals gymnastic at 22 feet is a tight distance and it was a challenge for Fiamo, so we had him canter to the oxer in the easy four strides.

Going in the opposite direction, Jill had to shorten the stride - setting up the correct canter stride on the short side of the arena to enable another stride to be added in the 60 feet - for five strides to make the tight vertical gymnastic easier to ride. We were also teaching Fiamo to control his stride on the landing side of the oxer.

Once Fiamo understood the exercise - slowing down at the vertical gymnastic so he could curl around the jumps and go forward to the oxer and open his body to jump the width - we educated him even more by changing the number of strides in and away from the gymnastic verticals.

The verticals jumped from a tight distance taught Fiamo to slow down at the base of the jump, rock back on his hindquarters, push and curl around the jump - improving the shape of the jump (bascula) and controlling the first strides on landing.

Riding the 60 feet distance in four and five strides increased his ‘rideability’, and taught Fiamo to judge distances.

The change in Fiamo’s jumping style - the highest point of the arc was over the highest point of the jump - made him much easier to ride. Jill’s position improved because she could follow the smooth arc of the jump, and Fiamo’s stride was easier to control on landing and between jumps. Jill also had to remember to keep her chin up over the jumps and on landing, so she wouldn’t collapse her position.

In summary
Missy and Fiamo are lovely horses made better through training. Two different problems, but both arising from the same root cause - they were not strong enough in the hindquarters. Both problems were basically solved with the same exercises adapted to their individual needs:
- Correct position of rider
- Stride control
- Gymnastics
- Patience and correct training

Correct training is about correct repetition - not drilling the horse to death. It requires designing and integrating specific training exercises into your general flat work and jumping program.

The key training principles are:
- High frequency - low intensity (training time)
- High intensity - low frequency (competition time)

What does this mean?
Training requires a high frequency of correctly practicing a skill to make it a learned skill (to make it a good habit). If you only practice a new skill once a week, the skill won’t become a learned skill.

High frequency means the skill is practiced daily or at least three times a week - i.e. ‘little and often’.

Competition, on the other hand, is a high intensity time and is not done daily. Once the competition period starts, the daily riding is meant to keep up fitness and maintain skills. If the horse is over-trained at this time, the horse often becomes sore and sour. Go for hacks. Let the horse enjoy itself so it will continue to enjoy its job.

Remember: Calm, Forward and Straight.
Happy training and competing!

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