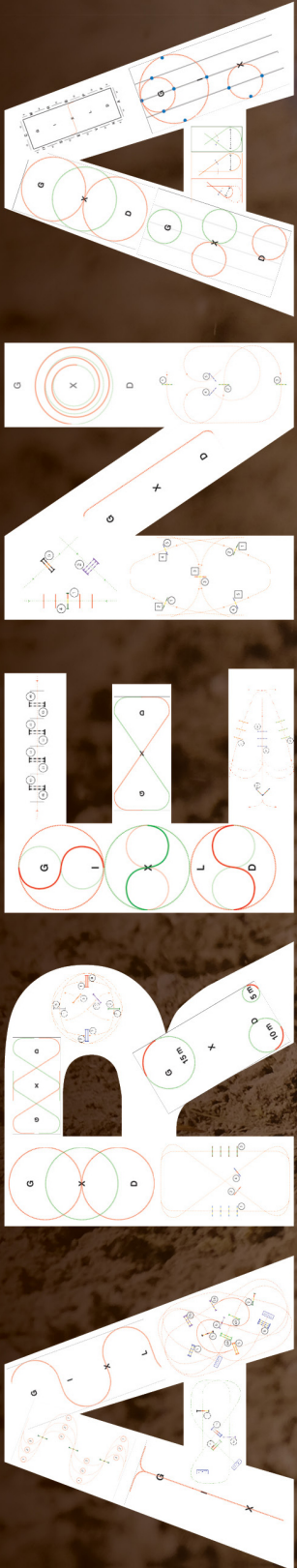


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ARENA TRACKS

ARENA TRACKS

A Rider, Trainer,
and Instructor's
Reference for
Dressage, Jumping,
and Cavalletti
Exercises



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INTRODUCTION

The reason for writing this book is that through my years as a teacher of the art of riding, I would always be asked the question, “*Where can I look up these tracks?*” This was in reference to the figures one rides, or is directed to ride by a trainer or instructor, on a horse in an arena. I would always give a recommendation that consisted of several books and additional websites.

While in the process of creating a new rider’s educational system for use in Asia, I realized just how challenging it was to find information about the classical arena tracks. This was when I decided to do something about it: I created a simple overview of the common arena tracks so that, at the very least, I would have something I knew was correct to recommend to my own students.

These classical tracks are ultimately at the foundation of *everything* we are doing in the arena with the horse. It starts with the beginner rider just off the longe line learning the most basic tracks all the way to the most experienced rider working a horse at the highest level of equestrianism. Jumping courses even consist of a combination (or variation) of classical arena tracks strung together from start to finish marker!

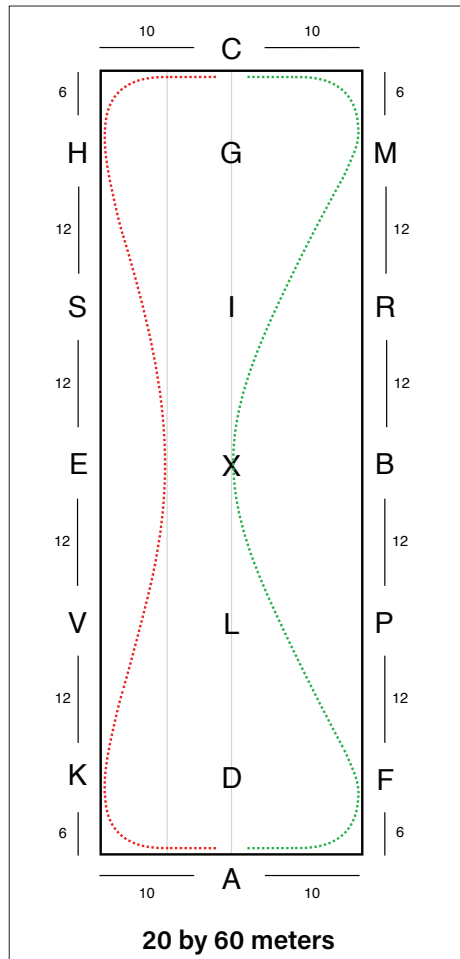
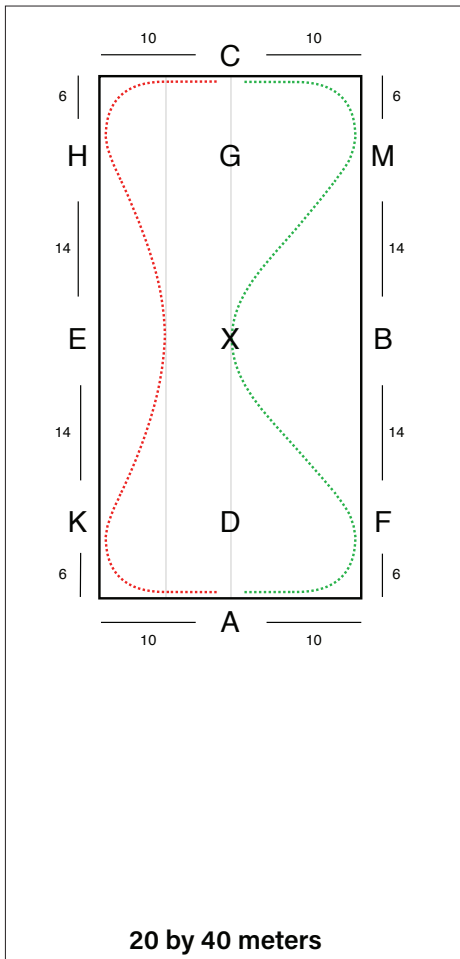
The classical arena tracks that I outline in Part One (p. 3) guide the rider in how to safely navigate the arena in an organized way (starting with the most basic, progressing to intermediate, and finishing with the most advanced tracks), in addition to being a useful tool in the physical development of the horse. For the instructor, they are an important tool for communicating with the student.

The purpose of Part Two (p. 27) is to tie in jumping tracks and exercises in a way that correlates to the classical arena tracks on the flat and the escalating

levels of difficulty they represent (from most basic to most advanced). The goal with the jumping exercises in this book is to serve both rider and trainer with a set of helpful tools for training the horse in a classical way. Even if these exercises are not physically ridden by the reader, the hope is to inspire individual creativity within the parameters of physics and ethics that classical horsemanship has developed over thousands of years. The encouragement of continuing studies is what has the potential to make us into better humans for our horses.

Single-Loop Serpentine

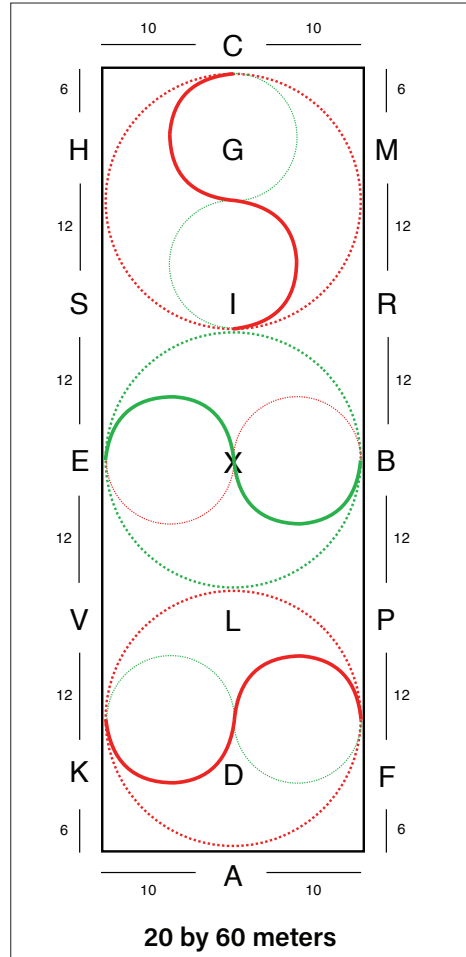
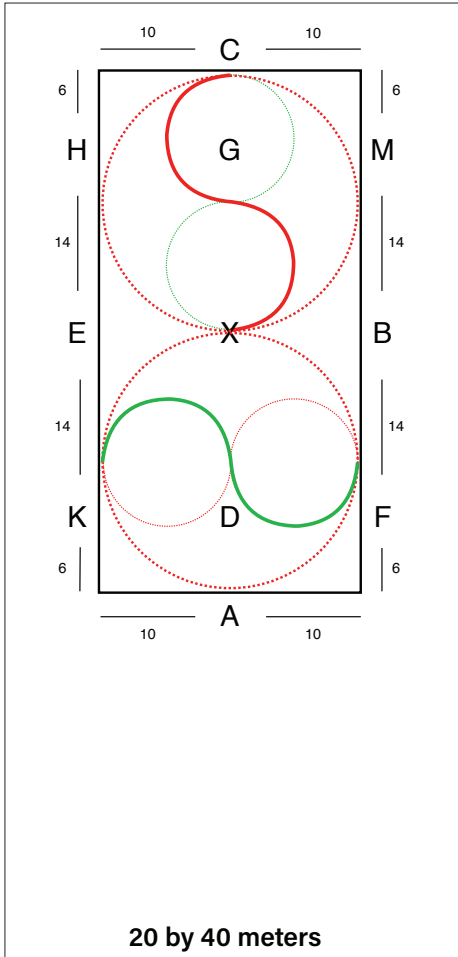
- **Purpose:** Suppling through the bending line and change of flexion to the turning side.
- **Possible tracks:** From left and right using the quarterline for orientation. If stated in instructions, it can be ridden into X.



Note: Often used to introduce the feel of counter-canter. When ridden in canter, flexion will (in general) remain to the canter side, which is different in walk and trot where the flexion changes to the turning side. In all United States Dressage Federation (USDF) tests, this track is ridden to X.

Change Direction Through the Circle

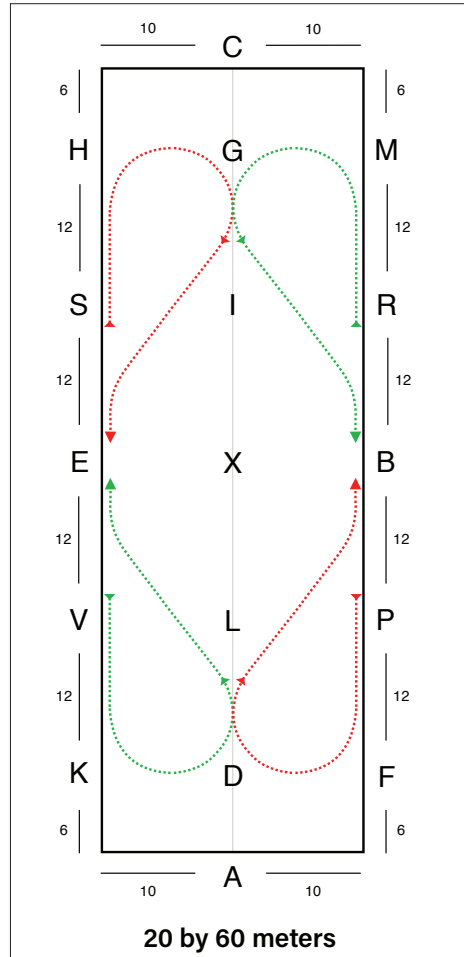
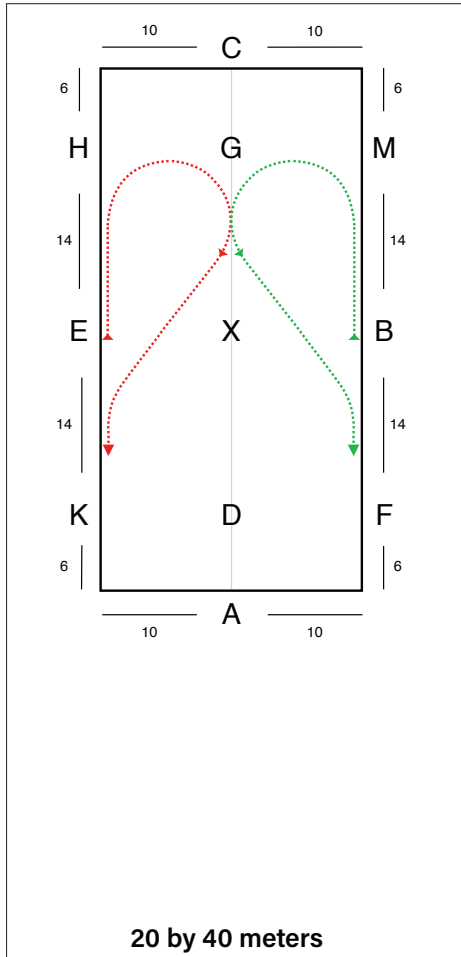
- **Purpose:** To change direction within the circle.
- **Possible tracks:** From left and right; from short and long sides.



Note: Think of the track as two, half 10-meter circles, using the circle's opposite turning points as start and finish.

Half-Circle Back

- **Purpose:** Used to change direction.
- **Possible tracks:** Usually ridden from middle to end of long sides.



Note: Riding the first part of the track as a half 10-meter circle with the associated turning points can be helpful.

POLE EXERCISES

The illustrated arena size for the Pole Exercises is 30 by 50 meters. The exercises and courses with a green track indicate basic level exercises; orange tracks indicate intermediate level; red tracks indicate advanced level. Pole exercises can be used for horse and rider in preparation for jumping as well as for variation in any training plan.

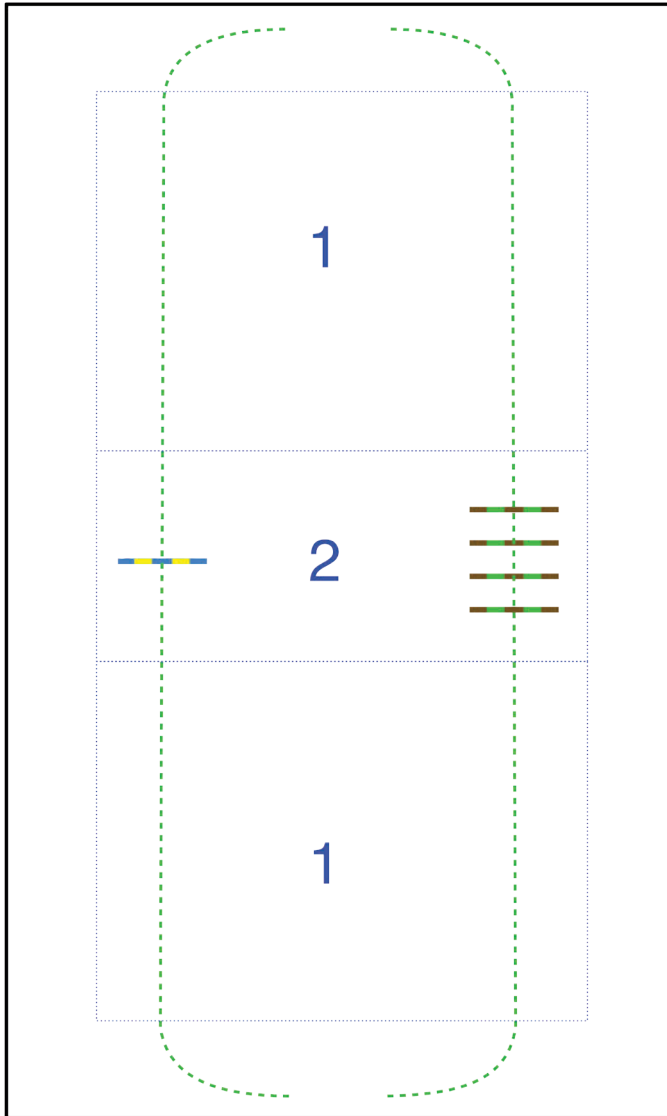
A Formula for Success—Poles

These are core exercises that are meant to help horse and rider through a structured development. This basic knowledge helps both rider and trainer know which step to take next when sufficient skills are achieved, but also which previous step to go back to when difficulties are experienced.

The Beginning

Single pole and trot poles on a straight line, the single pole is the most basic exercise in the education toward jumping and is generally approached at the walk and trot during the beginning phase. The trot poles are the next step following the single pole, wherein the rider will feel the horse taking higher steps with more suspension. The trot poles should ideally be set to a regular length of step. For most horses this will be 1.2 to 1.4 meters, but the rider and trainer should be open to changing the distance to accommodate different types of horses and give the best possible experience for each.

- **Purpose:** The rider learns about steering to poles on the ground, gains an understanding about the approach line to an obstacle, and practices balance in regards to the rider position—including how and when to transition to half-seat and incorporate a long release (the rider slides the hands about halfway up the horse's crest, allowing the horse freedom to use his body over the pole or jump). The horse learns to step over poles on the ground with the goal being to maintain relaxation and a steady rhythm throughout.



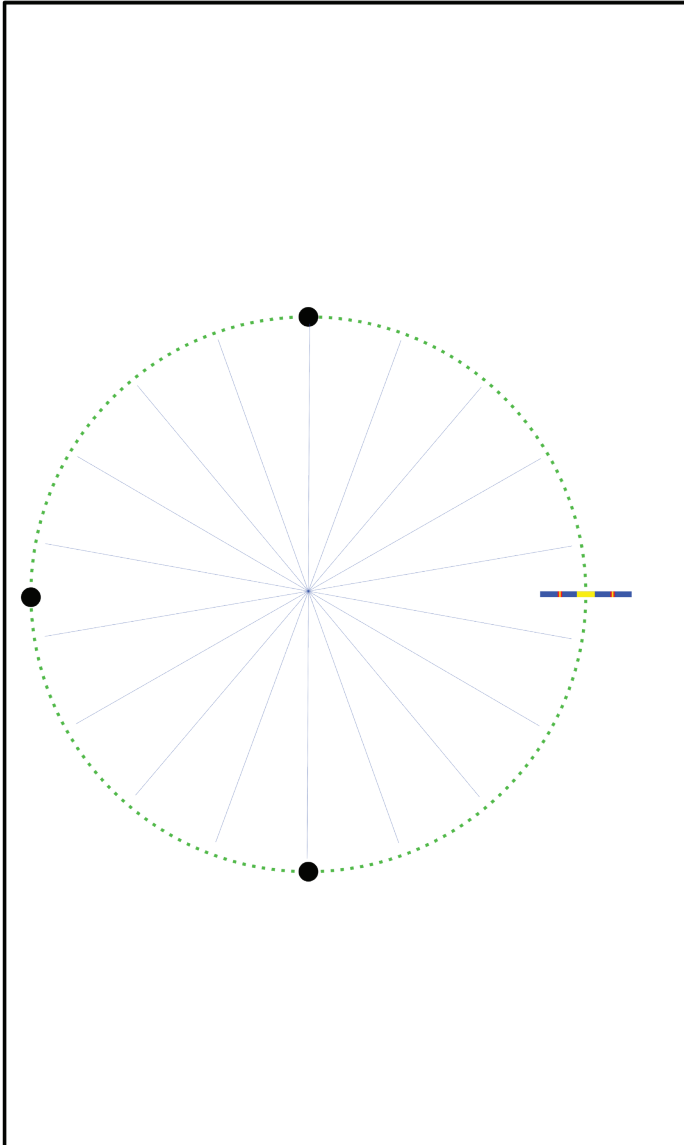
Single pole and trot poles. In Zone 1, the rider is in half-seat; in Zone 2 the rider gives a long release with a grab in the mane, and after the long release, the rider remains in half-seat to ensure correct balance with soft hands through Zone 1. Upon exiting Zone 1 after the pole exercise, the rider changes back to another position, either rising or sitting trot for the upcoming long side.

Note: The exercises can be ridden in both directions, but for the most basic level, should not be ridden consecutively—this provides the rider with time to analyze and adjust rhythm and positioning in the saddle as necessary.

Symmetry and Rhythm

A single pole on a circle in trot and canter to school rhythm and symmetry of the track. The circle is a valuable tool since the pole reoccurs on every round ridden and allows for quick improvements. Poor symmetry of the circle makes it more challenging to maintain a steady rhythm, therefore, the quality of the exercise stems from the understanding of the tracks and rhythm ridden in dressage. Being able to relate to the turning points while riding circles of different sizes is a great help in understanding and maintaining symmetry (to review turning points, see p. 13).

- **Purpose:** The rider learns about the importance of the track and rhythm over a single pole, together with the importance of how weight aids and rein aids should communicate the same instruction to the horse. A frequently occurring problem is when the rein aid tells the horse to turn as the weight aids (unintentionally) tell the horse *not* to turn. When this happens, communication with the horse becomes only about which aid is stronger and overriding the other. In this situation, the horse must choose which of the rider's aids to follow, but in the long term many horses will start to ignore the rider's weight aids altogether. In this basic level exercise, the horse is learning to go over a pole on the circle in a relaxed manner without any unintentional changes in speed and rhythm.

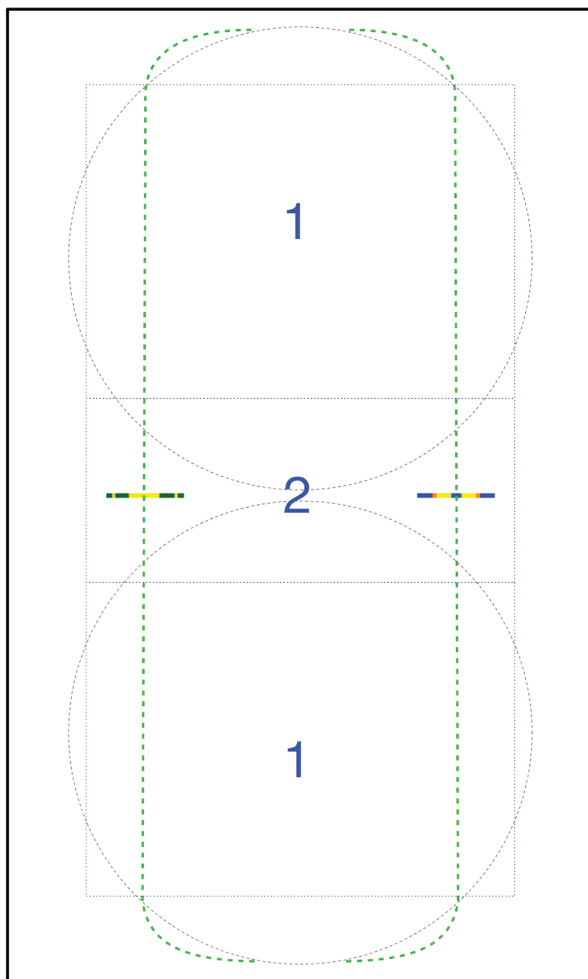


A single pole on the circle.

Note: Observe the turning points on the circle and how the fourth turning point is in the center of the pole. The blue lines illustrate the importance of maintaining regular speed and stride length.

Rhythm Straight Ahead

A single pole on a straight line in canter. This basic level exercise is used to school the ability to maintain a regular rhythm with a good track. Although it is not technically a difficult exercise, it is not easy to ride a precise track in a regular rhythm. The straight line in canter generally requires a bit more skill and feel from the rider than the same task ridden on the circle.



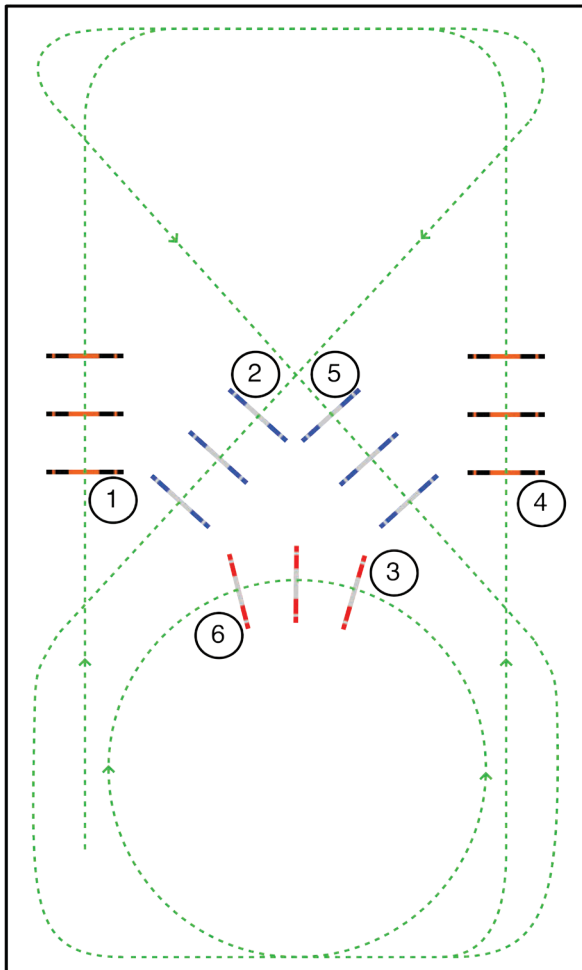
When rhythm and track are well maintained, half-seat and long release over the pole can be incorporated as preparation for jumping. The rider will be in half-seat in Zone 1 and demonstrate a long release with a grab of the mane in Zone 2. The better the timing and coordination becomes, the later the rider changes to half-seat before the pole, and eventually, at an advanced level, the change occurs in sync with the horse taking off to clear the pole.

- **Purpose:** The rider uses the skills taught in canter over the single pole on the circle to ride a straight line in regular rhythm and stride length.

A single pole on the straight line. Placing one pole on each long side simply provides more options, and a circle on the short side can be used as a help to reestablish rhythm and balance if needed.

Basic Rhythm and Track Course Incorporating Circles

This basic course includes the tracks straight ahead, diagonals, and circles—all three of which are basic tracks (see pp. 5, 7, and 11). Keeping the variation of tracks minimal allows the rider to focus on essential skills such as a good rhythm and a track ridden with a relaxed and balanced horse.



▪ **Purpose:** To maintain good canter rhythm and track while riding straight ahead, circles, and diagonals.

An exercise that can be set in most arenas, with more poles added to the canter poles in a larger arena and singles poles used in a smaller arena. Common distances used between canter poles are 3.00 to 3.25 meters (9.8 to 10.6 feet), which can be adjusted to accommodate different types of horses and stride lengths, but also to change the level of difficulty of the course.

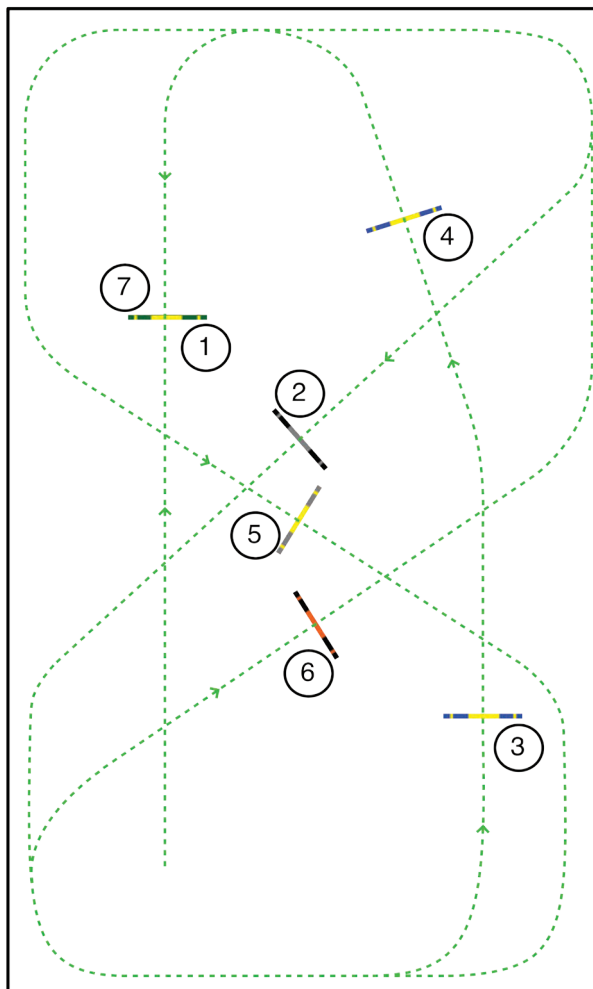
Note: By using the tracks illustrated here, there are several options where the course can be started with the additional option of reversing the direction that the poles are ridden, as well. By reversing the course, the approaches change from longer to slightly shorter on the straight lines.

Longer Basic Rhythm and Track Course

This basic course includes some variation and modification of the basic tracks used in the arena. The slightly longer length of course and the fact that the track is not mirrored from left to right is an additional challenge for the rider. Maintaining a relaxed and balanced horse ridden in good rhythm on a good track are fundamentals that will remain important regardless of the level of horse and rider, from most basic to most advanced.

▪ **Purpose:** To maintain good rhythm and track while riding a variation of the basic tracks.

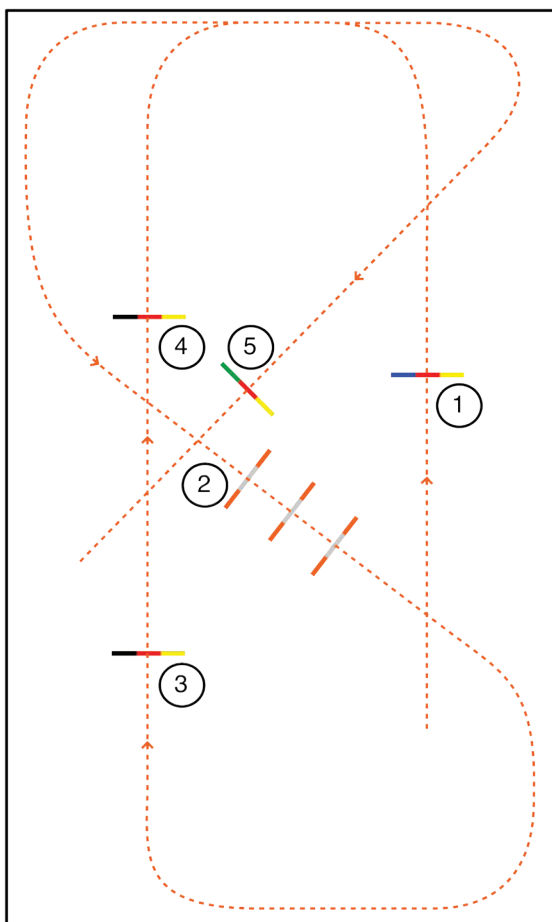
An exercise that can be set in many different sizes of arenas, however, if the course is set in a narrower arena, caution must be taken that the turns do not get too small in diameter, as this creates a very different level of difficulty than intended. The rider and trainer have many options in adding length to the course through the use of the poles in two directions, as done here with pole numbers 1 and 7.



Basic Course Incorporating Related Distance

This setup brings a related distance into the course, and obstacle number 2 (the canter poles) helps the rider determine if the length of the canter stride is suitable for the distance (which, in this illustration is set for five normal strides). To understand and ride a related distance with the intended number of strides is a major milestone in understanding the canter stride of the horse in between obstacles.

- **Purpose:** To introduce a related distance and be able to ride the intended number of strides with canter poles, guiding the rider toward suitable stride length for the related distance. Good track and rhythm are key skills that should be maintained throughout the course.



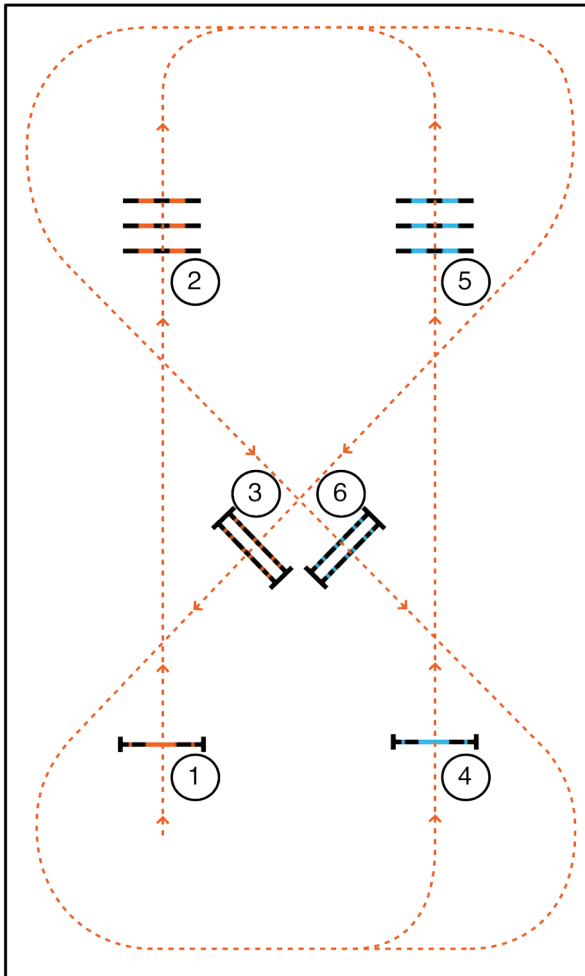
An exercise that can be set in many different sizes of arenas. In this course, the canter poles (obstacle number 2) are set with 3.00 to 3.25 meters (9.8 to 10.6 feet) in between, which for most horses and riders will ride normally. The canter poles set up the horse and rider for five normal strides in the related distance (pole numbers 3 and 4), which has the measured distance of 18.50 meters (60.6 feet). Note how after pole number 5, the rider can continue to number 1 and repeat the course. The distances in the canter poles and the related distance can be adjusted to suit different types of horses and stride lengths.

Jumping Without Tension

This exercise continues training with transitions and obstacles (to review transitions and obstacles, see p. 116) as transitioning between trot and canter are very suppling and can serve as a great source for information about potential jumping-related tension in the horse. When tension is present, it is important to analyze where it could be stemming from. Among the various reasons for tension,

there are two common sources: Either the rider has had previous stressful experiences that trigger a stressed state of mind (often leading to tense application of aids and a lower cognitive ability) or the horse has had them.

Note: Certain breathing patterns such as slow breathing through the nose are generally linked to a calm state of mind, whereas fast breathing through the mouth is often linked to



This exercise can be set in many different arena sizes. The distance from Obstacle 1 to the trot poles is in the setting depicted is 25 meters (82 feet); however, this measurement can be adjusted for different arena sizes and levels of difficulty. The trot poles are placed with 1.2 to 1.4 meters (3.9 to 4.6 feet) between each pole.

a more stressful state of mind. *If the rider is mindful of how to breathe, it is often possible to control the balance of the autonomic nervous system in a way that is beneficial for riding.*

In this exercise, it will make a noticeable difference if the rider is in a more relaxed state compared to a “fight or flight” state in which the muscles are usually tense and the fine-motor skills are less refined. This control over mind and muscles is very important since most of the rider’s communication with the horse is kinesthetic.

This exercise starts with Obstacle 1, which is jumped out of canter, after which the rider gently transitions to trot and continues to Obstacle 2 (the trot poles). If tension is present (which could lead to difficulties with the transition) it can be of great help to ride a large circle around Obstacles 3 and 6, thus providing the horse and rider with more time in preparation for the trot poles. After the trot poles, the rider transitions to canter and continues to Obstacle 3 (an oxer on the diagonal). If the rider experiences difficulties in establishing a suitable canter for jumping after the trot poles, a large circle around trot poles number 2 and 5 can be beneficial.

The exercise then continues with Obstacles 4, 5, and 6—a mirror image of Obstacles 1 through 3. With a relaxed and responsive horse, the exercise can also be ridden in the reverse direction: the horse and rider begin over Obstacle 6 from the opposite direction, then continue to number 5 (the trot poles), then immediately transition to canter and jump Obstacle 4 (which comes up quickly after the transition to canter). The more relaxed and responsive the horse is to the rider’s aids, the more harmonious this portion of the exercise will be.

The rest of the exercise (Obstacles 3 to 1 ridden in the reverse direction) is a mirror image of Obstacles 6 through 4 (obstacles should be built in a way that they are safely jumpable in both directions).

While riding this exercise, it is important to keep the emphasis on harmony and quality. Height is a factor that can be added when everything else is demonstrated at a satisfactory level. A good starting height is the height where horse and rider can make minor mistakes without causing stress, tension, or loss of confidence.

- **Purpose:** Riding transitions as a suppling exercise and as a gauge for determining levels of tension or relaxation in the horse related to jumping.

One Obstacle with Several Options

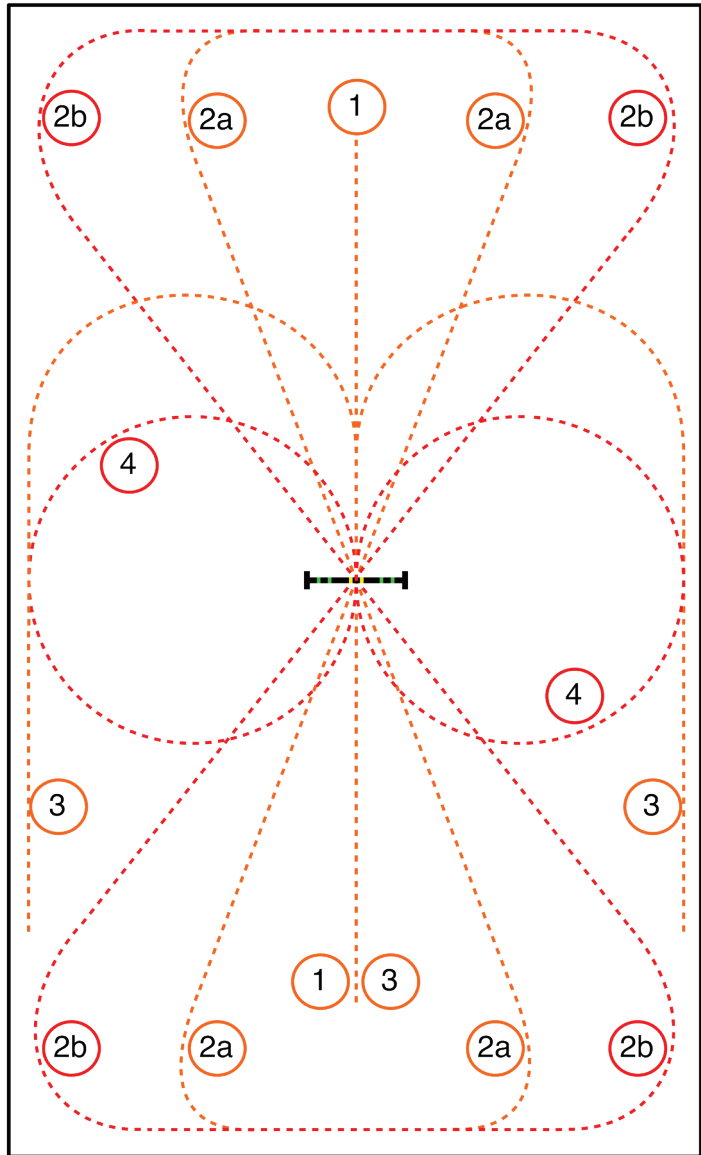
This is not so much a specific exercise as it is training and exposure to different arena tracks over a single obstacle. The horse and rider will almost certainly see these tracks or a variation of them while jumping against the clock on an intermediate to advanced level, and therefore, this type of training should be a natural part of the education for horse and rider. It is also important to consider that speed is a factor that generally influences the level of difficulty of any exercise, and so, awareness and practice of different speeds should be included as a part of regular training and be on an adequate level of mastery before being used in conjunction with jumping.

The track marked with number 1 is the centerline, which can serve as a valuable check to determine if the horse can remain relaxed on a straight line over an obstacle (for the horse to be able to stay straight and relaxed is an important prerequisite before starting to work on turns and angles). If these basic requirements are not met there is the possibility for the horse to become nervous and tense, which can lead to future loss of confidence.

Track number 2a introduces the use of angles in the approach to the obstacle—in this case the angle is about 70 degrees, which for most horses on an *intermediate* level does not cause any doubt to proceeding over the obstacle. Introducing angles should always be done with a lot of sensitivity as to how the horse is responding to ensure the best possible learning experience for both horse and rider.

Track 2b takes the track to a more *advanced* level with an angle of about 50 degrees. If the introduction to jumping out of angles has not been introduced gradually with specific focus on how the horse is responding, there is a risk the horse becomes insecure and loses confidence as the level of difficulty is increasing. It is important to remember that if signs of insecurity appear, it will generally be helpful to take a step back and make the task less challenging (this could mean changing fence height or the angle of approach). The degree of angles mentioned here is only for illustrating a gradual progression—slower advancements for creating the best possible learning environment for horse and rider is *never* incorrect.

This exercise can be set in many different arena sizes. If the arena is very large it can be helpful to use cones to guide horse and rider toward the desired tracks.



Track 3 is similar to a half-circle back, and the level of difficulty can be controlled by how early the horse becomes straight prior to the obstacle (the fewer straight strides the horse can take before the takeoff, the more the level of difficulty increases).

Track 4 is a smaller scale version of *change direction out of the circle* (see p. 45). This is considered an *advanced* track since the takeoff at the obstacle is out of a turn and the landing is directly into a turn. Also, the size of the arena and the height of the obstacle have a large impact on the level of difficulty.

Training with tracks like these in a safe and calm environment allows for a deeper development of the knowledge and awareness of what challenges are within the comfort zone for any horse-and-rider combination. The odds of success for horse and rider drastically improve when training tracks in a systematic, calm, and controlled environment, and therefore, their odds for success when performing under pressure improve as well.

Note: Once the horse and rider have developed enough experience and trust in this exercise, the vertical can be replaced with a spread obstacle.

- **Purpose:** Systematic practice and exposure to many common situations that occur in the *intermediate* and *advanced* levels of jumping competition courses.

Training the Unpredictable

In this exercise, the horse and rider are exposed to a very short approach out of the turn, due to the placement of Obstacles 2 and 5. In this situation, the possibilities to adjust the tracks for a different takeoff spot are very limited as the placement of the obstacle and the outside parameters of the arena significantly restrict possible track options for horse and rider.

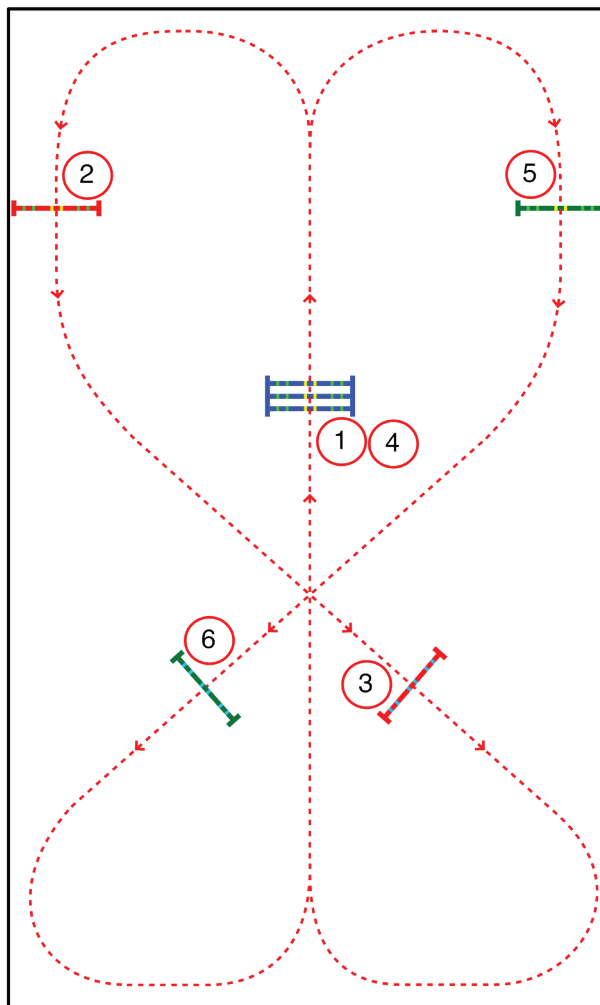
Approaching the turn to Obstacles 2 and 5 in a higher speed is more advanced than approaching out of a slower speed; therefore, the triple bar on the centerline is placed as Obstacle 1, which encourages the rider to maintain a good forward pace. These two factors (speed and turn) create an excellent training experience for the rider, including learning how to support the horse appropriately

This exercise can be set in many different arena sizes; however, if the arena is very large it can be helpful to use cones to guide horse and rider toward the desired tracks. Obstacles 2 and 5 are placed 10 meters (32.8 feet) from the corner. This distance makes the turn *less advanced* with lower height and *more advanced* as the height of the obstacle is increased. When the obstacle height is not increased over the course of progression through the exercise, the distance from the corner to the obstacle can be shortened instead to progressively increase difficulty level.

after slowing down and how to help the horse rebalance for a turn. The successful execution of this turn depends largely on fundamental skills (such as the ability of the rider to ride a good track and rhythm).

This exercise teaches best when ridden with a relaxed horse and a rider who only gives support for the takeoff spot that comes up at the jump. With a tense horse, it is difficult to maintain a good rhythm and track; therefore, this particular exercise is not suitable to be ridden until the horse is relaxed and strong enough to make balanced small turns.

A warmup can be ridden over Obstacles 3 and 6 in the reverse direction before starting the exercise. The exercise itself begins on the centerline over



Obstacle 1—the triple bar (in the rider’s first round, this can be built as an oxer in order to gradually introduce an obstacle with increased spread). The types of obstacles and their exact placement in the arena are the factors that control the true purpose of the exercise.

The construction and placement of the triple bar serve two important functions: First, ensuring that horse and rider are engaged in an active forward canter (this can also be encouraged by utilizing canter poles set for a forward canter stride as an alternative to the triple bar). Second, controlling the diameter of the turn, since this will have a significant influence on the level of difficulty. Changing either of these components will largely change the nature of the exercise. The immediate task for the rider after the triple bar is to bring the horse back from a longer stride to a balanced, shorter stride suitable for the turn. Immediately thereafter, the rider must give correct support for the takeoff spot to the obstacle coming up next.

Over Obstacle 2, the rider looks to Obstacle 3, which requires the rider to turn shortly after the landing from Obstacle 2. Obstacle 3 is placed in its exact location in order to check that no tension or disturbance to the rhythm occurs due to the previous short turn ridden to Obstacle 2. It is common for tension to arise in a situation that is thought of as difficult, and this tension often carries through the rest of the course—often with a negative impact on performance.

After Obstacle 3, the rider continues directly to Obstacle 4 (unless a circle is determined to be beneficial), then rides the mirror image of the exercise in the opposite direction. Obstacles 3 and 6 can eventually be replaced with oxers; however, this change should only be made after determining that the horse and rider are handling the current task in a manner that supports their skillset improvement and dual confidence.

Starting the exercise over lower height obstacles can be very helpful in determining how to progressively increase the level of difficulty in the most suitable way for each horse-and-rider combination.

- **Purpose:** Practice for the rider to support the horse out of a very short approach for any takeoff spot that the situation provides.