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Introducing Cross-Country Jumping

Once you are comfortable riding in the open, it is fair to introduce your horse to low logs or similar natural obstacles. Always think forward and aim for the jump to “hold the horse.”

What I mean by the jump “holding the horse” is when the rider, with seat and rein contact, focuses the horse on the upcoming jump. Then, through his training, the horse is “thinking” forward but “waits” for the jump, listening to the rider, and doesn’t rush or panic on the approach. The horse is respectful of the jump without hesitating or dropping behind the rider’s leg. When the horse has been educated to understand the *close* distance, there is no need to pull back on the reins on the last strides to the jump because the jump is “holding the horse.”

Start with small, simple fences and work your way up. It is important that the horse “pick up on” or focus on the jump while maintaining a rhythm, rather than getting flat and rushing to it. Generally, cross-country jumps help here because most horses are a bit wary of them and tend to back off a bit. For safety, you want to teach the horse to jump the jumps slowly before you attempt to go fast. The horse must understand that there is no need to rush at cross-country jumps. You want a horse that is respectful of the jump but not thinking about stopping.

Cross-country schooling is about getting—and keeping—your horse



8.1 A & B Ryan Wood jumping a small cross-country jump on Davinci, a green horse. When the horse is comfortable cantering back and forth over a single fence he'll put a few jumps together.



confident. I would much rather keep the day's training a bit easy and come back another time than overface my horse by testing how difficult a jump or new challenge he can handle. It is very hard to regain a horse's confidence and trust after a bad cross-country schooling session or a problem at a particular type of jump. Generally, the only way to remedy this is to go back to a much easier obstacle that asks the same question, for instance, a smaller ditch or a lower jump, and by repetition gain his trust again. If this happens, it makes the process of his education much slower (and more time-consuming for the rider and trainer).

Venue

Finding the appropriate cross-country schooling area for your horse is essential, especially for your first time out with him. I usually start a cross-country schooling session with very small logs on the ground, 8 inches or lower in height, that are quite long (giving the jump a wide face to approach). These give the inexperienced horse plenty of room for error. When the jumps are low, the horse should be able to trot over them easily and the wide face makes it easier to keep the horse going toward the log without running out at the end. Starting simply will build up the horse's confidence.

Getting Started

Exercise

- 1 Begin by trotting the same jump in both directions at least six times to get the horse confident and in a rhythm. It is ideal to trot the jump and then immediately canter away. This reinforces the goal of encouraging the horse not to rush at or flatten to the jump on the approach, stay in front of your leg as he jumps, then move away from the jump in a nice canter.
- 2 Next, I find another log or similar jump of about the same height or a little bit bigger (fig. 8.1 A). Trot this jump as well, then if you have two jumps close to each other, trot the first jump and continue in canter to the next one (fig. 8.1 B).
- 3 If this goes well, find a third jump and link the three. I jump these three logs or small fences a few times until the horse is confident and enjoying himself. Again, repetition of a positive experience will build your horse's confidence and earn you his trust.
- 4 Depending upon how he copes with this basic experience, your horse should be able to handle jumping a course of 8 to 10 straightforward, log-type jumps in a row. If he breaks into trot on the approach to a jump, this is okay as long as he is committed to keep going. When he stays relaxed as he trots and gets deep (close to the jump) for takeoff, this is a good habit to encourage. Eventually, you want your horse to be able to canter around the entire course quietly and in a steady rhythm.
- 5 Keep the jumps small and straightforward in case you encounter resistance (fig. 8.2).

Holding Your Line

A good cross-country horse will stay forward and straight on the line that the rider chooses when approaching the fence. It takes some time for your horse to develop the level of understanding needed to trust you and jump the jumps this way. Again, making things simple and building up slowly will help keep the horse confident. As the “questions” get more challenging—say the jump is on an angled approach in which you jump from left to right or right to left across the fence—the temptation is for the horse to run past the jump rather than jump over it.

Exercise

To introduce your horse to *angles*, I approach the introductory jump on a slight angle. For

example, instead of coming to the jump on a 90-degree straight approach, angle slightly to 70 degrees and then eventually 45 degrees.

You not only want to angle your approach, but also the departure so that the horse maintains a straight line on the entire approach, take-off, landing, and getaway over a single fence.

This can first be practiced in trot and then at the canter once the horse has developed confidence. Finally, you can make a straight line between two or three jumps at an angle (figs. 8.3 A & B).

Cantering Jumps

You want the horse to understand where he is going, so stick to a shorter, powerful canter stride—not flat and fast on the approach to a jump. This way, he has more time to analyze the question rather than rushing at it and letting the momentum carry him over the fence. Riding a controlled canter is safer than running flat out at a solid obstacle.

Rider Position

The last stride or two to the fence are crucial. You need to be firm and clear with your aids so the horse knows his job is to jump the fence in front of him. Your legs encourage

8.2 Keep the jumps small and straightforward in case you encounter resistance. Ryan stays calm and focused as Davinci has second thoughts about jumping this small log. By sitting close to the horse and keeping his leg on, he encourages the horse forward as he uses an opening right rein to straighten the horse who is drifting left.





8.3 A & B Here, Jennie and Dreamboat are jumping an in-and-out on an angle.

the horse forward, your seat sinks closer to the saddle, your shoulders are up and back, the rein contact is steady so that you can quickly correct any deviation from the line, and your eyes are up and looking where you want the horse to go.

Galloping and Jumping Out of Stride

Teaching your horse to jump out of stride will help you maintain a steady rhythm around a course. In most cases, the course is made up of about 70 percent “forward-riding” jumps, which, ridden properly, are a great way to get your horse *thinking* forward—confidently and bravely.

On a well-designed cross-country course in competition, the course will start off with forward-riding jumps, then after each technical section the designer will include more forward-riding jumps to get the horse and rider forward and confident again. It’s important to be able to ride these jumps in a positive and correct way so you can really take advantage of the opportunity to get the horse forward and confident.

What I call a “forward-riding” jump is usually a maximum-dimension jump with a nice, direct approach so you don’t have to shorten the horse’s stride but can go forward positively to the fence: You don’t need to collect the stride or substantially slow down for the approach.

Exercise

1 I practice this in the arena where the jumps can fall down. This is not just for figuring out on the cross-country course. In the arena, I position a jump like a triple bar or a sloping oxer where you have a good long

forward approach to it, with the idea that the jump is going to “hold the horse” (see p. 123) so you can come to the fence on a strong, forward stride without having to hold back on the reins.

2 Once the horse understands, he’ll use his instinct, and if he needs to, shorten his stride on his own. Rather than keeping the horse on a contained, short stride you can let him come forward in a free and open stride.

Rider Position

Approaching the jump, decide on the stride that you want and be a little more forward with your position—not sitting back in a defensive position deep in the tack, but lifting your shoulders slightly and bringing your seat a little closer to the saddle. As you get in close to the jump, keep increasing the impulsion without going faster. Use your leg to keep the horse’s back legs moving and powering through to your hand so if your horse gets close to the jump and needs to shorten his stride, he has energy to do that.

On the approach to the jump you need to have the horse in the length of stride and pace that you want and feel like you’re riding both forward and up, with the horse balanced—*not* down on his forehead and long. Being in the correct balance helps the horse either to shorten his stride or move up to the fence, lengthening (or “opening up”) his stride to meet the jump at a correct takeoff distance.

Various Types of Fences

Galloping Fences

A big percentage of the cross-country course is made up of forward-riding (galloping) fences. Jumping at a gallop is the basis of cross-country riding so it is important to learn to ride these types of fences (generally ascending oxers, tables, and the like) and use them to keep the horse confident and in front of your leg.

Galloping-type jumps require a forward, positive gallop or canter stride. Whether you are leaving the start box or approaching the jump, you must develop a forward, connected gallop. On the approach let your seat come back into the saddle, close your lower leg and keep a feel of the horse's mouth to connect him and create more power, rather than allowing him to go faster. Again, you come from a galloping position back into the saddle without slowing down, but with a feeling of the horse becoming more connected and powerful. As you are approaching the jump, it is important to keep the horse's head up so that he sees the jump.

Rider Position

You will go from standing up in the irons to putting your seat back in the saddle. This gives you strength and connection from your seat and leg to the connection of the bit. You should then keep pushing and holding and containing the stride. On an aggressive horse this can be a gentle feel of the lower legs; on a cold or lazy horse this can be quite a strong and aggressive ride to get the horse's gallop more elevated.

As the jump gets closer, aim to get the horse more elevated ("up in front") without

slowing too much. You will also lower yourself down deeper into the saddle and close your lower legs to hold the power to the jump. On the last few strides, use your judgment and the horse's instinct to shorten or lengthen slightly for a good takeoff stride. Because the horse is so powerful in the approach, if an adjustment of stride is needed it can be done easily without becoming a "backward" ride where you pull on the horse to shorten his stride, or a weak "move-up" ride where you lengthen the stride to meet the fence at a good distance but lose the impulsion necessary to clear the fence.

Over time, the horse should start to look for the jump while you develop enough power in the canter approach so, if needed, the horse can adjust his stride to meet the jump at a good takeoff distance, slightly shortening or lengthening to the jump as necessary. You should stay with the horse's motion without getting too forward, and as the horse jumps, let the reins slip through your fingers.

When you are jumping at speed it all happens quickly—the horse can stumble or hit the jump, and by slipping your reins and staying a fraction behind the motion you will be in a safer position. Upon landing, shorten your reins and stand up in your irons again as you return to your galloping position.

A Small Ditch

Once your horse is cantering over logs quietly and in good balance, I would introduce him to a small ditch. I stress the word "small" here! Ideally, you want a ditch that is quite narrow so your horse can easily step over it. A size less than 15 inches wide and 6 inches deep will be



8.4 A & B Ryan is introducing Davinci to a small ditch—then a bigger ditch.

enough of a challenge but small enough that if he is worried you can still encourage him over it without a big battle.

Exercise

- 1** Once your horse has popped over the ditch, have him *trot* over it in both directions a few times (figs. 8.4 A & B).
- 2** When first introduced to a ditch, it is quite common for horses to hesitate slightly, then jump. A slap with your whip behind your leg on the last trot step before the ditch will reinforce your leg aid, asking him to leave the ground more confidently.
- 3** Once he is confident here and if you are in the same vicinity as your 8 to 10 cross-country jumps, then you can incorporate the ditch into your course.

Note: The next time you school your horse expect him to jump over the baby ditch and then move on to a slightly larger and wider ditch. I really like the idea of trotting the approach to ditches when schooling because it reinforces that you don't have to go fast to jump these. This is not necessarily how you should ride a ditch in competition, but taking it slowly in training is a good way for your horse to learn and thoroughly understand the question.

Rider Position

On the approach to a ditch you need to be strong with the horse at the last stride in case he hesitates when he sees it. I am usually in



8.5 A–D Jennie jumping a more experienced horse over the ditch and rails. Note how she stays balanced and in the middle of the horse on the approach, over the fence and on landing.

a bit of a defensive, behind-the-horse position with the plan of being quite aggressive on the last stride to encourage the horse to stay “forward-thinking” as he jumps (figs. 8.5 A–D).

As the horse jumps it might be necessary to let the reins slip through your fingers so that you don’t pull on his mouth.

The Water Jump

It is essential for event horses to be comfortable with water. Most courses have at least one water

crossing or jump, even at the lowest levels. At the major Four-Star events, the “Head of the Lake” or another named main water complex, is usually the most exciting part of the course for the spectators.

I have already touched on exposing my green horses to water (fig. 8.6). I even like to get my advanced horses’ feet wet whenever I have the opportunity. When you are riding in the open and want to take some time to school through the water, keep in mind that



8.6 Now Ryan is introducing Davinci to water at the walk.

natural streams and creeks are not always ideal. If you're not sure what the footing on the bottom is like, you have to be a little wary about going through streams that are muddy and slippery because the horse could lose confidence should he slip. If the stream has a good firm base of gravel or something similar, it is a good place for gaining your horse's trust. Also note the depth of the water and how fast the current is flowing.

I think it is quite reasonable when schooling a water jump on a cross-country course to walk your horse into the water before you start jumping it so he is confident the water is not too deep and the footing is good. Most horses will instinctively come out of water better than going into it, so to begin, I usually find an approach to the water jump where I can enter without jumping, just trot my horse in and through the water, then if there is a raised edge or small bank, I will jump the horse out. Once I have trotted in and jumped out a few times I will reverse the direction and trot off a ledge or small bank into the water, and trot or canter away through the water (figs. 8.7 A & B).

As with the ditch, if the horse hesitates you want to be quick with your whip behind your leg to encourage his commitment, riding forward away from the fence on landing.

No two horses are the same and you will need to adapt your riding and training to each individual. Some horses will want to race out of the water; this is not a great habit to have because once you move up the levels there will be another jump shortly—either in the water itself, or leaving the water—so your aim



here is to jump in confidently, land balanced, and canter away without rushing.

Rider Position

Be prepared with your riding approach! You need a secure position: Both your heels should be down and firmly in the stirrups. Your upper body should be a little defensive, leaning back with a longer than usual contact on the rein. Should your horse hesitate abruptly, your body unexpectedly goes forward; since you need to be effective when this happens, a longer rein contact will allow you to sit back more and have more flexibility. I prefer that he stays steady and committed on the approach and not hesitate when he jumps. Not many horses will

8.7 A & B Trotting in over a small drop and cantering away through the water.

just launch into water; some may rush on the approach and then on the last stride, back off and jump cautiously.

Once your horse is jumping off a small bank or ledge into the water confidently then you can progress to a small jump into the water, such as a log. This requires more trust in the rider from the horse. Keep in mind, a horse that is rushing will steady on the last stride before the water. Make sure your position is a bit defensive and sit back so that you can absorb any sudden slowing or hesitation. You want to maintain your position to be



effective in encouraging the horse to move forward. If you are struggling to maintain your position, you cannot ride effectively so you should spend more time working on developing your strength and technique in the saddle on the flat.

Cantering a Jump into Water

To canter into water, the horse needs to learn to deal with the distraction of the splash while staying focused on the jump. Usually, the first few times the horse will, what I call, “Hang in the air,” or hesitate once he starts to jump. If he’s a little green he might be concerned about landing in the water. As a general rule you want to be quite positive and keep the horse going forward to the jump and in the air (figs. 8. 8 A & B).



I like to keep the schooling in water pretty straightforward so the horse stays confident. Doing short amounts is better than trying to rush things; if it’s not going well, coming back another day is better than trying to make it harder and harder the first time you introduce water. Even with an experienced horse, I will often just walk around in water to reassure the horse, keep him exposed to the water, and confident. I don’t always make him jump into the water.

8.8 A & B Jennie’s horse is hesitant to jump into the water but she sits deep in the saddle and closes her leg, allowing him forward with her hand until he takes the leap.



Rider Position

Once your horse is jumping in, your rein contact should be slightly longer than usual. You want to think of guiding your horse with your hands rather than holding him. The longer reins will also allow the horse freedom of his head and neck as he jumps. The aim is for the horse to jump in committed and “forward,” then land and canter away on the first stride (figs. 8.9 A & B).

A large percentage of horses will hesitate when first introduced to water. You can build a lot of trust here by keeping a good position and quickly encouraging the horse forward and straight when and if he hesitates at the jump. You want to give him a good experience by

8.9 A & B Jumping into the water and confidently cantering away.

allowing him to stretch and “round” into the jump without holding back on his mouth.

Types of Bank

There are a few varieties of bank jumps. For example, you might canter in, jump up, take a stride or two on top of the bank and then drop off. It takes the same type of preparation as the jump up and the jump down (see pp. 136 and 137). The degree of difficulty can get harder: The top of the bank can be a one stride or a bounce and then off; or you can jump up and off, then up and jump off another bank and



8.10 Jumping up a bank.

back down. Schooling both up and down banks will be preparation for whatever type or combination of bank jumps you may encounter.

Jumping up a Bank

Schooling over banks is good practice and training for the rider's position and good for the horse's education. Jumping a bank teaches the horse to be clever with his feet and legs as he jumps up, lands—and learns to be safe when

he jumps off. In general, horses naturally go *up* the bank in a more forward-thinking manner than they do when jumping off, so I start a green horse jumping up a small bank (fig. 8.10).

The jump could be something as simple as a step up rather than a full, man-made bank, so that the horse learns to go up and then forward. I start in trot and try to keep the stride short so the horse gets nice and close to the jump up. Keep him forward and positive but

in control so you have steering and straightness and the horse doesn't take off too far away from the jump up.

Once the horse is confident about trotting up the step or bank, then you can proceed in canter with the same idea. Sometimes if the bank is too small the horse won't pay much attention to it in canter, so it's nice to have something big enough that the horse respects it but still small enough so it's easy for him to jump up and then go forward. You're looking for the horse to stay straight and listen to the rider on a short-strided canter approach, and then, when he lands, to go forward away from the jump.

Rider Position

Be a little more forward with your upper body here, because once the horse jumps there's a tendency for riders to get left behind. Even grabbing hold of some mane to keep the balance is not a bad idea. If you're more comfortable you can use a leather neck strap to help keep your balance and, more importantly, not pull on the horse's mouth as he jumps. Staying just slightly forward with your upper body will help you stay in motion with the horse as he jumps up.

Dropping off a Bank

Next you can reverse the direction you approached the bank, and turn it into a small drop fence. At this stage, *trotting* is a good way to introduce the horse to dropping down. It's okay for the horse to be cautious so I don't mind a green horse hesitating a bit, but always keep him "thinking" forward and realizing that

he has to go off the drop. He is not going to learn by just rushing off the jump—it's good if he can take his time and jump carefully off. Again, the horse should stay straight and canter away from the little drop off. When he is confident, you can also canter the approach.

Rider Position

The rider's position going down the drop (figs. 8.11 A & B) is the opposite of going up the bank (see fig. 8.10). As the horse drops down he'll lower his head and neck and you need to be able to follow this by allowing the reins to slip through your fingers. Also, keep your upper-body back a little bit. This is a good defensive position should something should go wrong with the jump or if the horse stumbles on landing.

Keep in mind that as the drops become bigger, gravity causes the rider to fall forward and over the front of the horse. At this point, focus on keeping your upper body back, still allowing the horse to jump by letting the reins slip through your fingers. On landing, as the horse is cantering away, shorten up the reins and get back to your galloping, more forward seat.

The next stage is *cantering* to the drop off. Again on the approach feel that you are "waiting" with the upper body. Try to get the horse to stay in a short canter without really holding him—most horses are going to back off and shorten their stride to the jump down, and it is not imperative the horse canters *all* the way to the drop. Let anticipation "hold" the horse so he slows down his canter or even breaks to trot before dropping off, letting the reins slip on the drop, then shortening them as you canter away.



8.11 A & B Jumping down a bank. Jennie's position is in balance with the horse: She is sitting up but not too far back and letting the reins slip through her fingers so the horse can use his neck as he drops down the bank.

It's a matter of preparation, keeping the horse straight, getting forward on the up, then getting back with the upper body in preparation for the drop, slipping the reins and then cantering away.

As the degree of difficulty gets harder the same principles apply: you want a short, powerful canter on the approach, a slightly forward position to stay with the horse, then a more defensive position on the "off," allowing the horse to take his time and be calculated about the jump off so he is clever and smart about it.

Jumps on top of the bank add difficulty to the question. Again, the important thing is for the horse to stay in front of your leg and look for the next jump.

Corners

A *corner (apex jump)* is usually introduced at a hard Training Level course or at Preliminary Level. I first show a corner jump to a horse in the jumping arena, not on cross-country. These are easily built with a barrel supporting both rails at one end, and with two small jump standards on the other end so the rails can fan out (fig. 8.12). First, keep the jump small so there's not much angle at all and then widen it as the horse becomes more confident.

I usually build the jump so the horse approaches it at a right angle to the corner, or “square” to the front rail. If anything, the horse will want to run out to the “pointed” side of the fence, so keep that in mind as you bring the horse straight to the jump.

The biggest challenge is teaching a horse

that he needs to go *straight* on the line of your approach.

The canter approach could be described as a “strong,” show jumping style canter. You don’t want the horse in a big “open” canter, but rather a more contained, strong stride. Once the horse is confident and jumping the corner



8.12 Introduce jumping a corner over a small fence.



8.13 Jennie is jumping a corner fence. The vertical poles in the photo are so that the horse gets used to jumping with flags as he would find on a competition cross-country course. If your horse tends to drift or run out you can add guide rails, using show jumping poles to help keep him straight and focused.

straight in both directions then you can make the jump wider, by opening the two standards. For a Preliminary Level horse, the fence can be 4 to 5 feet wide on the “open” side.

You should practice being able to ride to the corner on somewhat of an angled approach

and keep the horse straight on his line as he jumps the jump. This is good training for both horse and rider later on because you will encounter fences where you’re not able to approach the corner on a perfectly right-angled approach. There are other ways to train the corner—being able to approach it off a turn is important, as well.

Usually, I find that a corner is not a big jumping effort but more of a technical effort. It’s important for the horse to understand the corner jump, go over it calmly and confidently,

and not need an aggressive ride to the jump.

Once you have the horse confident in the arena you can start jumping corner fences in cross-country schooling (fig. 8.13). Here, I like to have some kind of wing (or rail) to help the horse because, should he get confused and start running out, it can be difficult to get him “straightened out” again. Once your horse is confident jumping a corner with a wing, you can remove it and get the horse to understand that he doesn’t need a prop to stay *straight* as he jumps.

The same principles apply to the approach as they did in the arena: a show jumping canter speed; keep the horse in front of your leg; and no rushing. Without being hard with your hand keep the horse straight on the last stride and do not let him drift as he jumps.

Rider Position

The rider’s position for jumping corners is a little bit more defensive. The last approach stride is really important because that’s where the horse can drift or try to run out. Stay strong in your position to keep the horse straight.

Again, once you get more confident with your horse you can vary the approach line. Ultimately, you want the horse to come to this jump in a positive but controlled way and understand that he is to jump the jump on the same line as you approach the fence.

As courses get harder you will likely encounter a corner that’s related to another jump or jumps. This can be a straightforward oxer to a corner or two corners in a row where the horse has to hold his line. These situations can be practiced in the arena, too: It all

comes down to the training and the horse understanding what he needs to do. He must stay soft and listen to the rider about what is needed in the approach but still be thinking forward and straight.

Narrow Fences

Narrow fences are a big part of our sport, especially from Preliminary Level up. I start to introduce my horses to narrow fences pretty simply in the jumping arena with shorter jump poles, which can be cut to about 6 feet, or usually half the length of a standard jump pole. You can use barrels lying on their side with a “V” pole on each side acting as a way to help the horse understand he needs to stay straight to the narrow face.

Like the corner jump, a narrow jump is not usually a big jumping effort but it requires understanding by the horse and an accurate ride. I usually introduce the horse in trot, which allows me and the horse more time to “read” the jump and relax as I come in.

First, trot two or three different narrow fences in the arena in both directions until the horse is comfortable (8.14 A). The next step is to canter to the narrow jump (8.14 B). Again, you can use “V” poles or another way to encourage the horse to stay straight. The canter needs to be short and organized and you don’t want the horse strong in your hand—he needs to be light and engaged, waiting and looking for the jump. I find that it’s really helpful to make the horse familiar with narrow jumps. Because they’re not usually big jumping efforts, once the horse understands the question, narrow fences are relatively easy for him.

Once the horse is comfortable with them in the arena I introduce him to jumping narrow fences on cross-country (fig. 8.15). You don't want to be in an open, galloping stride—you need to be able to collect and make sure the horse is waiting, not rushing.

Narrow jumps vary a lot as you go through the levels, but the same principles always apply.

Rider Position

Remember when schooling narrow fences cross-country that you make sure the horse is properly prepared in his approach. Problems most likely occur when the rider gets too forward and aggressive, and the horse does not

have time to see the fence, so he ends up rushing past it.

An emphasis must be placed on him not rushing but staying in front of your leg and *straight*. You need to be really conscious of this, especially in the last stride or two before the jump.

Combinations on Cross-Country

Combination fences consist of several elements. They are set up by the course designer at different places on the course to test the horse's willingness to come back into control, as well as test the rider's ability to comprehend the "question" the designer is asking, and ride it



8.14 A & B A narrow fence. When starting out it is a good idea to add guide rails to keep the horse straight (not shown here). The narrows can get higher as the horse becomes ready for the challenge.



8.15 When a horse is comfortable with narrow fences in the arena, introduce him to one on cross-country.

appropriately. It is important when walking the course to completely understand what needs to be done when jumping the combination.

To me, the most important part of riding a combination is getting the canter approach correct and the first jump of the combination ridden well. In most cases, this involves coming back from galloping speed to a shorter, more controlled canter approach. When training, practice this so that you have the right judgment and sense of whether you are on the correct approach. This can vary from getting the horse back to a very collected “coffin canter” (see below) or a shorter (or longer) “show jumping stride,” or a forward and balanced galloping approach.

Most combinations require you to approach in a different canter; I really like to get the first jump to “hold” the horse so you have a lot more control on the landing to be able to execute the rest of the combination. Mistakes are often made, first, when the horse and rider haven’t come back to an organized canter, or second, the first part of the combination is ridden too aggressively or “open,” so the rider needs to react and be hard on the horse to get him to come back for the last part of the combination.

Combinations also require the rider to think quickly, be aware of what needs to be done, and react promptly to the situation. Simple things like keeping your eyes up, being aware of the whole combination, and what needs to be done, next, are all very important.

Rider Position

The rider’s position needs to vary depending on the question being asked, so it’s hard

to generalize. Having the horse organized and listening to you is important. Remember that most combinations only take a couple of seconds to get through, so every second counts once you’re in the combination.

It’s important to know your horse and anticipate what he’s going to do in there; if it’s a short-strided combination and your horse has a big stride, you need to get him to come back at the beginning. If your horse has a short stride you may need to ride into it more “forward” than somebody else does. It is important to be able to quickly react to the situation you’re in so that you can make the appropriate correction. When the horse jumps in weak, you need to react with your leg to give him the power to get through the rest of the combination, and if he jumps in too boldly you need to quickly get him back and organized.

Coffin (“Ditch and Rails”)

The coffin, consisting of an upright jump with one or more strides to a ditch and then another stride or more to another upright fence, is quite a big test for horse and rider. Bravery is required for the ditch, but because of the striding and the approach you are unable to come in fast and forward. The rider needs to be able to create energy and power on a short stride for the “coffin canter.”

At home, practice keeping the horse on an 8- or 10-foot stride and still in front of your leg so you have power in the canter. Riding this type of combination requires that you go from a gallop for the previous jump to a short canter stride. You have to estimate, on the approach (depending on how long it takes you to produce

this type of canter) just how far before the first fence of the combination you will start preparing for this jump.

Rider Position

Once you have obtained this canter, stay on the short canter stride (without a considerable amount of lengthening or shortening of the stride), to meet the first part of the jump. In the last stride before the jump be prepared with your position for your horse to set his eyes on the ditch and stall or hesitate. This means keeping your lower leg active and, if necessary, the spur. The horse should be in an uphill balance, “sitting down” behind, with your upper body slightly back in preparation for the moment in case he stalls or hesitates.

Once your horse jumps the first rail your job is to really urge him on over the ditch. This requires you to keep the horse dead straight, which can come from a nice, confident feel of his mouth on both reins to correct him if he wants to drift, as well as a strong lower leg and a feel for what the horse is doing underneath you. If the horse is going forward and not hesitating you don't have to be aggressive, but as soon as you get the slightest indication that the horse is backing off in front of the ditch, you need to give him some encouragement. Timing is everything: If you allow the horse to back off and do not correct him, a refusal or stop can result.

As the horse is jumping the ditch your position should be a bit defensive, that is, you should stay back with your upper body and not get in front of the movement so there will be a slight feeling of getting left behind. To me

this is acceptable as long as you don't catch the horse in the mouth as he jumps: You must allow the reins to slip through your fingers as he bascules (rounds his body) over the jump.

On the landing you will be in a situation where you have your horse straight and going forward but your reins are long. It's fine to approach the last part of the combination with a longer rein as long as there is still a connection to the horse's mouth. If the first part of the combination is three or four strides from the ditch then you'll have time to shorten your reins, but if it's one or two strides to the ditch then it's better to negotiate the ditch and then jump out of the combination with a longer rein so that you are not constantly trying to reorganize. Your lower leg should stay in position to activate the horse as needed.

Sunken Road

The “sunken road” is similar to the coffin: It usually consists of a jump, a short distance to a drop down and then one or two strides to a bank back up, with a short distance to another jump. When done correctly, the sunken road is very much like a grid situation you can set up at home in your arena. Your approach will depend somewhat on the space between the fences. If it's a short distance, obviously you need to have the horse on a short canter stride—he can even trot off the edge of the drop so he has plenty of room to get through the combination (8.16 A & B).

Rider Position

Enter the combination after developing the desired canter for the approach, making sure



8. 16 A & B Jennie jumps down in and up out of the sunken road.

the horse is dead straight, that you have a good feel of his mouth, and that your leg is on so he doesn't drift. Generally, there is not the same hesitation from the horse coming to a sunken road as to a coffin, so you can have a more forward body position, which makes it easier to steer the horse. A lot of the time, these jumps do not need to be ridden aggressively. Especially when the distances in the combination are short and the horse needs to have time to figure out where to put his feet and be a little clever, taking it a bit slow is the safer option.

The rider can actually go forward with the horse as he is dropping down. You don't want

to be overly forward: You need to stay back with your shoulders, but stick with your horse so you're in a good balance coming out of the base of the sunken road combination.

Bounce Fence

A bounce on cross-country is a way for the course designer to make sure the horse will come "up" in his balance, sitting back on his hocks and with a more collected jump. How you ride a bounce depends on the distance between fences—if it's a forward-riding bounce you'll need a strong show jumping canter with power and energy. If the distance is shorter

than 12 feet or less, a shorter canter stride is required.

The canter approach that you decide on will also somewhat depend on your horse. If he's very aggressive, you may have to "overdo" the collection and get through to him that he needs to be respectful of the jump and not rush. Other horses lose their confidence in a situation like this and need to be ridden more aggressively.

Rider Position

You want to keep the horse straight, so have a good contact from your leg to your hand and feel that the horse is on the aids. You definitely need to get the horse close to the first element, so keep him organized and not rushing that last stride. Allow the jump to "hold" the horse, and try to relax and not anticipate with your upper body; wait for the horse to jump the first element before you allow your upper body to go forward because if you get ahead of the horse, you will have less control and ability to act should anything go wrong in the middle of the bounce.

Personal Experience

One of my worst experiences in eventing was in a sunken road at Rolex Kentucky in 2004. Connaught was a brand new ride for me and was jumping through the course brilliantly. I felt that I got him back to the right length of canter stride but probably he was against my hand, so even though he was on a short stride he was a bit too ready to "explode." He jumped the first part of the combination well but then jumped way too hard across the bottom part, which caused us to get to the last part very close to the bank.

That year you had to come up a bank and then bounce out over a rail. Because we'd gone too powerfully in, when we got to the "out" bank, we didn't have enough power to jump up and then bounce over the rail, so we stopped at the rail. Unfortunately, there wasn't much room to stop so my poor friend and I fell into the bottom of the sunken road. Fortunately, Connaught was fine and later went on to jump through that sunken road many times, which is a true test of a horse's bravery and gutsiness.