

Jumping Tips

Common rules the beginning jumper should know.

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7-19-2004

Here are some basic philosophies to keep in mind when jumping: Build confidence from the start. Never test a young horse's courage over fences; give him a chance to learn how to be brave in the first place. For example, one famous Olympic-level event horse wouldn't jump into water as a youngster. He wasn't timid; he simply didn't understand what he was being asked to do.

Start any jumping session with a review of flatwork basics. Warm your horse up properly on the flat, and check that he moves promptly forward and back from your aids at all three gaits before you start jumping.

Always use an experienced lead horse when you're introducing a new jumping concept. Horses are herd animals. Let a youngster see his wise old buddy do it first, and he'll think it's OK, too.

Trot jumps first. Trotting will pay off in spades down the road. Trotting teaches your horse to remain calm on the approach to his fences and encourages him to rock back on his hocks and jump correctly.

Never give your horse the option of refusing. For the first several months of your horse's jumping training, keep the jumps so small that he can go over them from a standstill. If your horse questions a jump, never let him turn away and reapproach the fence. If you allow this, you're teaching your horse how to say no. Instead, quietly keep your leg on, for as long as it takes, until your horse can hop over the jump from a halt or walk.

Go with your horse, however green his effort. Green horses jump in all sorts of awkward ways. Make sure you reward your horse's endeavor by following him in the air with your upper body and arms, even if he jumps from a standstill. Be ready to grab mane or hang onto a neck strap, which you shouldn't be shy about using. If you catch your horse in the mouth as he attempts to jump, you'll quickly teach him that this game is not fun.

Train progressively. Let's say you progress to a three-element grid one day. Great. But the next time you do grid work, start again with one element and gradually build to three. Begin cantering jumps another day? Terrific. But trot jumps as a warm-up the next time you jump, then try cantering. Review the steps you've learned before you go on.

If you get into trouble, make it low and simple. If your horse loses confidence for any reason during a jump session, don't take a chance. Quickly lower the jump or simplify the question.

Find a ground person to help you. Just in case you need to lower jumps or change a grid, you need a helper on the ground. By the time you get off to change jumps and get back on, your horse will have had way too much time to think about whatever is worrying him.