

From the Judge's Perspective

Planning for the next season

Show season has wound down for 2011 and winter is upon us. The IaDCTA Championship Schooling show, held at the IA Equestrian Center on October 28 – 30, was the last outing for many horses and riders in the local area for the year.

Here are some guidelines on how to go about making a reasonable plan for you and your horse for the next season. Goals are an extremely important tool for making progress, and it is well worth your time & effort to spend some quality time considering what your plan of action should be. Don't be afraid to write things down as you go along with the planning and execution, to see how close you are to being on track for achieving your goals.

Hopefully, you have had enough feedback from your judges and trainer from this past summer to get a solid grasp on the good, as well as the troublesome points in your training. These points would also have been reflected in your show ring performance. Use this information as a starting point for your upcoming year's plan.

First, ask yourself the following question: should you stay at the same level and try to make improvements, or were you satisfied with your level of success at that level and wish to move up? Make a definitive decision about this matter, as it will influence what you practice in the upcoming months.

Did you decide to make improvements at the current level? If so, your next step is to make a list (go ahead - write it down!) of the parts of your tests, warm-up, or training that you feel you already do well. Follow that with a list of the more difficult parts. This list is important, because when left up to us as riders, we will almost always practice what is on the "easy" list more than we practice what is on the "difficult" list.

When I teach, I often ask the rider which is the horse's harder side. If the rider responds, "The right," the next question I will ask is, "Which way do you want to go first?" and the answer is almost always, "To the left." Riders will undoubtedly choose the easy side over the hard side, or the easy movements over the hard ones. Make a point to start on the hard side and practice the harder movements first every day, and soon they will not be the harder elements of your ride anymore.

Did you decide to move up a level? If so, in addition to the previous step, you will need to determine what movements are involved. It doesn't matter if you are moving from First Level to Second Level, or from First Level, Test 1 to First Level, Test 3; make sure that you study the tests enough to know what the elements of your next "level up" are. Next, make a list of the movements that



you already can do in that level, those that you have tried to do unsuccessfully, and others that you haven't even yet attempted. These lists are also important in that the moves which are easy should be the last on your list to practice. You need to start to incorporate ALL of the moves of the test that you want to do, into your routine. You don't necessarily need to practice every movement every day, but all the movements in the test should show up at least once in your routine by the end of the week. You do not want to get a month out from the show before you start to practice some element of the test. Such would not make you, or the horse, very confident on show day!

One way that you can ease the pressure on yourself a little here at the beginning of winter is to realize that even though you are practicing, for instance, turns on the haunches for your Second Level debut next summer, a few elements could be lacking here in November. You want the turn itself to still be of quality when you practice, but give yourself some wiggle room by allowing unlimited preparation time, or practice the turn 10 times in a row until it is a good turn, or go back in between the turns and refocus on rhythm or relaxation or suppleness, or whatever you need to get a good turn. Maybe you will only practice the right ones today and the left ones tomorrow. At least you did put in your practice time by the end of the week.

For the next three months (December, January and February), your practice sessions should focus a little more on the basics (steady rhythm, reasonable tempo, swing through the back, horse remaining reliably on the bit for simple maneuvers) and when things are coming together, practice a movement from

the test. For example, start on a 20 meter circle, get your horse energized but not fast, active but not tense, and then when things are reasonable, turn down the quarter line and try a leg-yield. If the first one goes well, try another leg-yield from the centerline. If it doesn't go well, then re-establish the connection, energy and swing on the 20 meter circle, get the horse more reliable, and try again. With a stepping-up process like that, you will build yourself toward the next level.

For the last three months before show season (March, April and May) you will need to step up the challenge a bit by making the horse reliable enough with the movements that you can start to ask for some accuracy, some reliability and adjustability.

For the **accuracy**, start to ask for the leg-yields in specific locations and hold yourself accountable for making the movement precisely from letter to letter. Even if you are just going from the quarter line to the rail, practice starting and ending at very specific points, even if you make the exercise easier than it's written in the tests. Your horse needs to become accustomed to slightly more demanding aids (for accuracy) and not be offended when you suddenly become more specific.

Reliability means that you get what you want on the first try. So again, be a bit more demanding of your horse and make the first attempt as good as the third repetition. Horses can also get into habits of not putting much effort into that first try since they know it will be repeated.

The **adjustability** factor comes into play when your horse starts to become accustomed to going from one movement to another. It is easier to practice leg-yields, then take a break, then practice lengthenings, then take a break, then practice canter departs, then take a break. As the season gets closer, the horses should start to be able to go from the leg-yield to the canter depart to the canter lengthening, then take a break. Work your way up to practicing an entire test by stringing your exercises together in any order (eliminating anticipation) and make your horse become adjustable to the task at hand.

By following this structure, you and your horse should arrive at next year's show season ready to go. Remember: don't be afraid to write things down, or to keep a journal about your sessions. Make sure that each session is at least as challenging, if not a bit more so in some aspect, than the previous session. Review the elements in your test/level often to make sure that you don't go a few weeks without practicing some important aspect of the test. If you are unprepared due to lack of practice when the show rolls around, that lack of confidence will filter right to your horse and inhibit your performance. Practice the hard movements and the hard side consciously.

See you in the show ring in 2012!



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