

DRESSAGE, EVENTING, HUNTERS, JUMPERS

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PRACTICAL HORSEMAN EXTRA

Top Tips to **ACE YOUR HUNTER ROUNDS**

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RIDE YOUR HUNTER ROUND LIKE A PRO

Wow the judge with this top hunter rider and judge's show-ring tips.

PART 1: Practice pace and turning to a line.

BY TOM BRENNAN

When deciding how to pin hunter classes, judges ask themselves, "Which of these horses would I most like to ride?" With rounds lasting only 90 to 120 seconds, there's not much time to demonstrate that your horse is the answer to that question. From the moment you enter the ring to the moment you leave, your performance must exude ease and confidence. Communication between

you and your horse should be nearly invisible. Nothing should distract the judge's attention from your round. In fact, the best riders seem to melt into the scenery—all you notice is the horse. Exceptional hunter riders allow the horse's expression to come through so every obstacle he meets is simple, forward and enjoyable to watch.

How do you produce a round like this? By making a fantastic first impression and demonstrating beautifully consistent rhythm from beginning to



Riding a hunter round, I work on demonstrating beautifully consistent rhythm, smooth turns and balanced takeoffs so all a judge will notice is Lynn Ellen Rice's 9-year-old gelding Callucci.

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TOM'S TIP

Canter the first fence of a course as if you've already cantered four jumps. Don't ride hesitantly and underpaced, a common mistake for Adult Amateurs.

end as well as smooth turns and balanced takeoffs and landings. I'll give you tips and exercises to practice at home to achieve these things. This month, I'll discuss how to practice maintaining your pace to a jump and through a turn to a line. Next month, I'll share an exercise on how to turn around a fence to jump another fence on a diagonal and another exercise to turn your head while jumping through a grid to improve your ability to look ahead.

Start the Way You Want to Finish

A winning round starts right from your opening canter and first jump. This is not a warm-up or a freebie jump—it counts. Canter the first fence as if you've already cantered four jumps. This sets a tone that you plan on doing this round smoothly and with confidence.

The most frequently used symbol on my judge's card for the first jump in the Adult Amateur division is the notation I make for slow and close. Riders tend to be hesitant and underpaced. As a result, they end up too deep and/or weak to the first jump. This makes me think, "Do they even want to jump that?" If the feeling you're presenting is, "I'm not sure I want to be out here right now," then you shouldn't expect a great score.

Some hesitation comes from nerves. For tips on combating them, see the sidebar, "Keep Your Cool," on page 32. Some of it is lack of experience. Perhaps the biggest difference between amateurs and professionals is that amateurs "wait until it's time to go" whereas professionals "go until it's time to wait." Professionals are confident going forward to the jumps—even when they have not yet determined a takeoff spot. If you are

already going forward and need a small stride increase to get to the jump correctly, it's available to you. If you need to wait and give your horse an extra fraction of a second to settle the stride, that's easy to do, too.

However, if you're overly cautious and don't go forward to the jump, you won't have those options. You may see a distance late in the approach and try to attack it. Startled and thrown off balance by this sudden change, your horse will make a mediocre jumping effort and land on the other side disorganized. Worst-case scenario: You approach the jump cautiously and then see the need to slow down even more. At this point even the most athletic horses will struggle to do their job.

Without impulsion, straightness and confidence, our kind partners find themselves digging out of holes our backward rides produce right in front of the jump. This can result in an awkward chip, a refusal or crash. Even if the jump isn't a total failure, you still have created a drastic change in pace, which is a major fault in our sport because of these unsafe scenarios.

Similar errors occur often on single fences with long approaches. For some riders, this is a Pandora's box. Feeling as if they have too much time and need to be doing *something*, they get caught up in changing things—sometimes multiple times—whether they are looking for the perfect distance or trying to straighten their horses.

Riders showing in the 2-foot to 3-foot-6 hunter divisions merely need to arrive in the vicinity of a good takeoff spot to give their horses the opportunity to jump a fence well. They don't need the same precision that riders jumping 4 or 5 feet need. Instead, they should focus on establishing the right rhythm, pace and track, and then relinquish control of the distance.

The following exercises will help you do that. You will need an adjustable horse who is willing to go calmly forward. (Although these exercises are designed primarily for riders jumping at or below 3-foot-6, they're easy to modify for all levels.)

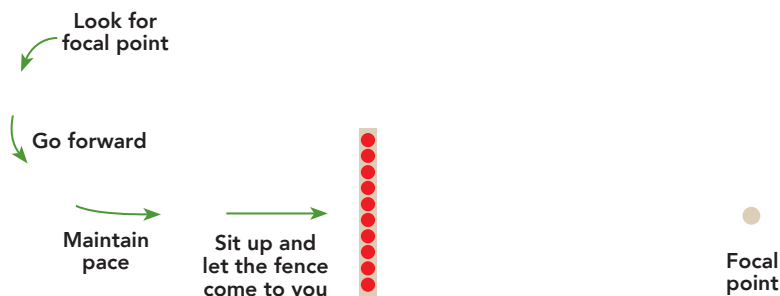
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From IHSA to A-Circuit

Hunter rider, trainer and U.S. Equestrian Federation 'R' judge **Tom Brennan** began his successful career as a member of Stonehill College's equestrian team. While earning his degree in psychology, he won two individual championship titles at the Intercollegiate Horse Shows Association Nationals and captained his team to the IHSA team championship title in 2002–03. He then joined Tony Workman's training business, Winter Hill Farm, in Hillsboro, Virginia, as a groom and worked his way up to his current co-trainer position. Along the way, clients such as Lynn Rice helped to partner him with talented horses in the show ring. He qualified for Indoors for the first time on Dividend, then rode Gramercy Park and Purple Heart to multiple major championships. In 2012, Gramercy Park was named the USHJA World Championship Hunter Rider Program Hunter of the Year and Tom was named the WCHR National Emerging Professional Champion. To learn more about Tom, go to www.PracticalHorsemanMag.com.

Pick up the Pace



1. To practice riding forward and straight to the fences, I place a simple flowerbox on a quarterline. I put a chair at the far end of the arena in line with the flowerbox so I can focus on it while I make my approach.

2. As I canter Callucci around the turn to the flowerbox, I look beyond it to the chair. When it lines up with the center of the flowerbox, I ask him to go forward. This creates a confidence and rhythm in our approach. You can see he is perfectly straight. As a consequence, I don't need to make any major changes to his stride in front of the flowerbox. Instead, I simply sit up a few strides away from it and let the "jump" come to me.

Homework: Pick up the Pace

Begin by practicing picking up more pace. *Get comfortable with the concept of going forward until you see it's time to do something else, whether that's calmly and subtly asking your horse to wait or to increase his stride slightly without changing his rhythm.* Here's how:

Place a flowerbox or pole on the ground on a quarterline or on a long approach on a diagonal. The goal is to go from one end of the ring to the other end on a straight track, jump-

ing the obstacle "out of stride"—maintaining the same forward, rhythmic canter the entire way, *without making any changes.*

As you enter the turn, look where you want to end up. Find something specific to focus on, like a leaf on a tree branch or a knot in the wood of the indoor wall. This is your focal point. The ground pole or flowerbox should just be a part of the straight path to your destination. You can glance

at it briefly, but focus primarily on your point *beyond* the end of the arena. Your body will follow your eye and so will your horse. If he strays from the track, don't take your eye off of your focal point. Keep looking at that point while using your legs, seat and hands to guide him back on track.

Coming through the turn, go forward. This not only improves your chances of jumping the flowerbox out of stride, but it also helps make your horse straighter. Imagine if you have a loose piece of string on a table in a serpentine-like shape. If I



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3. In the air over the flowerbox, I keep my eye on the chair—where I want us to end up. My job at this point is to let Callucci take care of the jump while I stay quiet and balanced in the saddle.

4. After he lands, my eye is still on the chair. This helps me stay on track without losing my pace or rhythm. Again, Callucci remains perfectly straight, following the cues from my balance and focus on the chair.

tell you to straighten it by pushing on either side of the string, it will take forever to get it straight. However, if you pull the two ends apart to lengthen the string, it'll straighten right out. It is the same with your horse. The best way to straighten him is to lengthen him.

Once you've established that forward canter, stay on it. Tell yourself that this is no different from any other approach. I hear so many students ask, "What do I do when I don't know what to do?" Trust that when you don't see a distance to the pole or flowerbox—whether you're 20 strides away or two strides away—you have taken care of your pace, rhythm and path. All you have to do is sit up and let the jump come to you. *Whatever the outcome, it will be better than a last-minute change coming from panic.*

Canter this way over the pole or flowerbox in both directions two or three times. Then go on to other things. Revisit the exercise later in the ride or on another day that week, just to remind yourself about the importance of a consistent pace, path and rhythm. Repeating these consistent approaches will give your "eye"—your ability to judge the distance to a good takeoff

spot—a chance to develop. You will never get that chance if you change your canter on every approach.

Make Smooth Turns

Another often-underestimated element in an exceptional hunter round is turns. Done correctly, they make jumping much easier. Done incorrectly, they make jumping *much* more difficult. If riders turn too early or too late, they usually end up attacking the jump, pulling back on the reins, hoping for more time or trying to move the horse left or right to correct the path belatedly. All of these throw your horse off balance, limiting his ability to jump a square, straight, quality jump.

Maintaining the same pace around turns is challenging for many riders. They canter to the end of the ring, lose the pace on the turn and then try to find the canter again afterward. In

▶▶ TOM'S TIP

If you don't see a distance to a fence, trust that you've taken care of your pace, rhythm and path. Sit up a bit and let the jump come to you.

Maintain Pace Through the Turn



1. As I canter around the end of the ring, I turn my head to look at the first jump in the line. Meanwhile, I stay balanced in the saddle and connected to Callucci, ensuring that he maintains his nice forward rhythm. I initiate my turn as the standard of the second jump in the line starts to come into view between the standards of the first, as you can see in this photo.



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Keep Your Cool

To begin a round with confidence, make sure you have done your homework, arrived early enough to learn the course and discussed your ride with your trainer. The more times you can get in the show ring, the better your nerves will be. If you are not able to show frequently, find ways to mimic a competition scenario at home or at a friend's farm. Set up a course in the ring and put a few warm-up jumps in another ring or adjoining paddock. Warm up in this separate area just as you would for a show, then walk into the ring and ride the course as if you were at a horse show with nobody talking you through it. Jump the course just once and tell yourself to live with the results. This "no-second-chances" attitude will help you learn to process your rounds and prepare better for next time.

To perform your best on show day, use the same strategies that schools teach students before tests: Get a good night's sleep, don't leave things to the last minute, wake up early enough to eat a good breakfast and stay hydrated. It can be mentally challenging to wait hours for your class at the horse show. Many riders get too nervous to remember to eat or drink, and that really affects their performance. Try to get something in your stomach a few hours before your class, even just small sources of protein, like nuts and grains. Fuel the machine to keep your body performing and your brain firing. If you can, bring a supportive friend to remind you how fortunate you are to have the ability to ride in a horse show. This is all supposed to be fun! Afterward, assess your day as a stepping-stone in a long journey, not the end result.

a beautifully smooth hunter round, that canter has to be present and accounted for throughout the entire turn.

Another troublesome habit that ruins turns is riding with "laser vision" between your horse's ears. Riders who do this usually turn first and then look to see where they are. It's like shifting lanes in a car: You shouldn't just turn your car and then see if you ended up in the correct lane.

These mistakes are especially common when the approach to the jump involves going around another obstacle. For instance, having to go around an outside line to get to a single jump on the diagonal seems to really play with people's eyes.

Riders tend to wait until they're past the first obstacle before planning the turn. By then, they have missed the correct turn and end up on the wrong track to the fence. They spend the next several strides correcting that mistake and re-organizing, which often destroys the jump and the flow of the round not to mention confuses the horse.



2. Then, as the two fences line up, I focus my eyes on a point beyond the far end of the ring while asking Callucci to go forward to the center of the first jump. You can see that his focus is straight ahead as well.

3. As he jumps the first jump, I keep my eyes focused on that point beyond the end of the ring. Despite the extreme heat (during a mid-summer photo shoot), Callucci is still looking eager and interested in his job. His trajectory stays perfectly straight while we're in the air over the first jump.

4. As we approach the second jump down the line, I drop my weight lightly into the saddle to support Callucci on takeoff, but I am still concentrating on my focal point. I know that he is in the best position to jump well because we've maintained a great rhythm, pace and track from start to finish.

TOM'S TIP

To correct at least half of your turns, turn your head to look where you want to end up BEFORE you start your turn. Your body and your horse will follow your eyes.

The solution to turning problems like these sounds simple, but it isn't always easy: Look before you turn. Get comfortable turning your head to look where you want to end up—*before* you start your turn—then bringing your horse into line with where your focus is. Remember, your body and your horse will follow your eyes.

Homework: Maintain Pace Through The Turn

By giving yourself a system to rely on, you can develop quality turns and eliminate erratic and inconsistent approaches from your courses. This next exercise, turning on a line, and the ones I'll share next month will improve your turns and your ability to look ahead.

Turning on a line builds on the focal-point skills you learned in the previous exercise. Set up two fences in a line down the side of the arena, at least five strides apart (72 to 76 feet, depending on your horse and fence height).

Canter to the end of the ring and squeeze your legs on

your horse's sides while holding enough rein contact to prevent him from going faster. This will engage his hind end with energy and improve his canter. It also will help you maintain the pace through the turn so you have the same canter when you leave it that you had when you entered.

As you canter across the end of the ring, turn your head to look at the first jump in the line. When the second jump comes into view between the standards of the first jump, initiate your turn to the line. As you complete the turn and the two fences line up, ride to the center of each one, focusing your eyes on a point beyond the far end of the ring.

Practice these two exercises until you're comfortable maintaining your pace to a fence and around a turn to a line. Next month, I'll give you two more exercises that will build on and enhance those skills. 🐾

Practical Horseman *thanks* Lynn Ellen Rice for providing the facility and horse for the photos in this article.

TOM'S TIP

Maintain the same pace around turns. The canter has to be present and accounted for throughout the entire turn.

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TO BLANKET OR NOT?



Choosing to blanket your horse can depend on many factors, such as whether or not he's clipped, the weather, his overall health and his turnout situation.

A few simple rules will help you decide which blanket to choose when.

BY LESLIE THRELKELD

In the early autumn, when temperatures begin to dip at night and we start dragging our own winter clothes out of storage, horse owners everywhere begin an obsessive daily debate: Does my horse need a blanket today?

There are many blanketing options available, and numerous factors play into this decision, so you can easily drive yourself crazy trying to decide when to blanket and which blanket to use. To help preserve everyone's sanity, we asked professional groom and stable manager Max Corcoran, who spent 11 years with Olympic eventers Karen and David O'Connor, to share her blanketing system. Her trick is to follow a few simple rules, set flexible guidelines and *try* not to overthink it.

Blanketing Guide

| TEMP (°F) | UNCLIPPED | TRACE-CLIPPED | FULL-CLIPPED |
|-----------|-------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <55 | X | X | sheet or light |
| <45 | X | sheet or light | medium + neck cover |
| <35 | X | medium | heavy + neck cover |
| <25 | X or medium | heavy | heavy + sheet or liner + neck cover |
| <15 | medium | heavy + sheet or liner | heavy + sheet or liner + neck cover |



TIP

Unclipped horses usually do not need to be blanketed because their hair naturally puffs up when it's cold, trapping in body heat.

Unless the weather is wet, many unclipped healthy horses are content without a blanket.

Unclipped Vs. Clipped

Your horse's blanketing needs depend on whether

or not he's been body-clipped. Here's what Corcoran recommends for the different situations:

■ **Unclipped:** Horses who are healthy, in good weight and have not been clipped at all during the fall or winter do not need to be blanketed. That's because they have built-in insulation. Their hair naturally puffs up when it's cold, trapping in body heat. "That rule goes out the window if it's wet," Corcoran said. A little rain or snow is no big deal, but when precipitation saturates the coat, the hair can't fluff up to keep the horse warm. Your unclipped horse will also

struggle to stay warm if his coat is very dirty or mud-caked, so groom him regularly.

■ **Trace-clipped:** A trace clip removes the hair from the chest, belly and lower parts of the neck and flank. This type of clip keeps a horse from sweating too much when ridden but leaves some of his winter coat to provide warmth when he's not exercising. "For every layer you've taken off your horse by clipping, you need to put back on him by blanketing," she said. "I think it's a misconception that a trace-clipped horse has plenty of hair. The neck, belly and shoulders are still major muscle groups that hold heat. If that's where you clip, they have nothing protecting them."

Corcoran gives a horse with a trace clip one less layer than a horse with a full body clip.

■ **Full-clipped:** A full body clip removes all the hair off your horse's body but includes the option of leaving the legs unclipped. This clipping method eliminates all of the warmth and protection a horse's coat naturally provides. At the very minimum, your horse needs a sheet when the temperature dips below 55 degrees Fahrenheit.

Sheet/Blanket Types

A blanket collection can easily become large and complicated. Corcoran tries to keep things simple with three pieces of horse clothing: a turnout sheet, a medium stable blanket and a heavy turnout blanket. You might also like to have a medium turnout blanket. But in a pinch, a medium stable blanket with a turnout sheet on top works the same, so long as the stable blanket has two belly straps to keep it secure. For horses who are tough to fit and have blankets that tend to shift, leg straps are helpful but not always required. Note that turnout sheets and blankets may be used indoors or outside, but stable sheets and blankets are not waterproof so should be used only indoors unless topped with a waterproof layer.

The term "fill" determines how warm a blanket is and is measured in grams (g). The greater the fill, the more insulation the blanket will provide to your horse.

■ **Turnout sheet/light turnout blanket—** a waterproof sheet that protects a horse from wind and rain but provides only minimal warmth. Fill: None–100g.

TIP

If your horse has no shelter in his field, consider the wind-chill factor and blanket according to the “feels like” temperature.

■ **Medium stable blanket**—a non-waterproof blanket designed for indoor use; will not protect a horse from rain but provides some warmth. Fill: 200g–280g.

■ **Medium turnout**—a waterproof blanket that provides some warmth and protects a horse from wind and rain. Fill: 200g–280g.

■ **Heavy turnout**—a waterproof blanket that provides heavy warmth and protects a horse from wind/rain. Fill: 300g–400g.

Weather Conditions and the Environment

When calculating how the weather factors into your blanketing choices, also consider your horse’s basic living arrangements. Wind, for example, is not a concern for stabled horses. Some barn doors can even close up snugly, allowing the animals’ body heat to keep the barn toasty. To determine the temperature difference, place one thermometer inside the barn and one outside. Check them late at night or early in the morning. Then you’ll know how much warmer your stabled horse is inside the barn and be able to adjust his sheet/blanket layers according to that temperature.

When your horse is in a pasture, does he have access to a shelter to get out of the wind, rain and snow? Here’s how various conditions can affect his comfort:

■ **Wind** makes weather conditions colder. If your horse has no shelter in his field, consider the wind-chill factor and blanket according to the “feels-like” temperature.

■ **Rain:** Body-clipped horses turned out in temperatures below 60 degrees



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should wear at least a turnout sheet or light turnout blanket. If it’s going to be below 55 degrees, raining for most of the night and the horses are outside without access to shelter, Corcoran usually puts a turnout sheet or light blanket on the unclipped horses, too. Keep in mind, dampness may make it feel colder and factor into the “feels like” temperature.

■ **Ice/freezing rain:** If there is going to be freezing rain or sleet, consider keeping your horse inside. Besides being very cold, this type of weather makes it challenging for horses to keep warm because it can flatten or soak their coats. If he must be turned out, consider the “feels like” temperature and make sure he has some sort of protection, whether it’s a shed, grove of trees or a blanket.

Too Hot or Too Cold?

“Just because you’re cold, it doesn’t necessarily mean your horse is cold,” Corcoran said. Fair enough, but how can you tell if your horse is cold?

If he is shivering, he’s chilled and is trying to warm himself. A shivering horse also burns more calories so is at risk of weight loss. Another way to tell if your horse is cold is to feel his nose and ears with your bare hand. If they are cold to the touch, the rest of him probably is, too.

While we hate the idea of our horses being cold, it’s dangerous to overblanket. If your horse begins to sweat under his blanket, he can overheat or, if wet hair traps the moisture against his body for too long, he could get chilled. Thankfully, it’s easy to tell if a horse is

too hot under his blanket. Simply place your bare hand on his shoulder inside the blanket. If he is sweating, he’s too hot. Remove his blanket or give him one with a lighter weight—but only after he’s had time to dry completely.

What if it’s cold in the morning and warm in the afternoon, and no one will be there to change or remove your horse’s blanket? It’s better for him to be cold for a short while than to be too hot for any amount of time. Turn him out with the clothes he needs for the majority of the day.

A full clip removes all the hair off a horse’s body, eliminating any warmth and protection the coat could provide. A sheet, at minimum, is necessary when the temperatures dip below 55 degrees Fahrenheit.

TIP

If your horse is shivering, he’s chilled and trying to warm himself.



As a horse metabolizes forage, his digestive system generates heat and helps to keep him warm.

Type of Horse

Breed and type of horse may play a factor in blanketing decisions because some horses naturally run hot or cold. For in-

stance, Thoroughbreds often carry less body weight and grow less coat, so they tend to get cold more easily than heavier breeds. But there are exceptions.

“It goes back to the old adage of ‘know your horse,’” Corcoran said. “I’ve looked after Warmbloods who run cold and vice versa. Giltedge [a top event horse who won multiple medals with rider David O’Connor] was a thin-skinned mostly Thoroughbred who ran hot all the time. He always wore one less rug than everybody else. If he decided he was hot, he would take his clothes off in the middle of the night.

“If I have a horse who does run cold, I’ll use a therapeutic sheet [a sheet designed to reduce inflammation and increase circulation] underneath [as a base] because it uses body heat to increase heat in the muscles.”

Nutrition

“Hay fuels the fire,” Corcoran said. As a horse metabolizes forage, his digestive

system generates heat and helps keep him warm. During winter, when grass is scarce or there is frost or snow on the ground, provide plenty of good-quality hay, both inside the barn and out in the field, whether your horse is wearing a blanket or not.

Age and Health

Age can affect how well horses keep themselves warm. Older horses metabolize food less efficiently and may have a harder time keeping on weight. Some may also have less muscle and grow a thinner winter coat, although this varies from horse to horse. “It can be harder when they’re older to stay warm or warm back up again,” said Corcoran.

By the same token, a horse with health issues or a “difficult keeper” who has a hard time maintaining weight in winter may need help staying warm by remaining indoors at night or in inclement weather and wearing a blanket.

Again, Max says, the best practice is to know your horse. An 18-year-old horse might get cold more easily than one who is 25. It all depends on the individual and his overall health.

Monitor any older horse closely throughout the winter to check if he is losing weight, his body condition changes or he shows signs of being cold.

A Good Fit

An ill-fitting blanket is uncomfortable and alters how effective the blanket is at keeping a horse warm. A blanket that’s too

big can shift backward or slide sideways, exposing large parts of the body and risking entanglement. A blanket that’s too small can constrict movement, cause rubs or hair loss and probably won’t keep him all that warm.

“I like to be able to pull a blanket forward a little, so the horse can put his head down without restriction. But it should still cover the entire hindquarters and top of the tail bone,” Corcoran said.

Every brand of blanket is different, so follow each’s measuring guide. Some run large or small, and some are even built for different body types. Try different sizes and brands until you find one that works best for your horse. A shoulder guard (a lightweight, stretchy, fitted garment) can also help prevent rubs. 🐾

TIP

Monitor an older horse closely throughout winter to check if he is losing weight, his body condition changes or he shows signs of being cold.



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