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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 2: Practice track-riding skills and finish each round on a good note.

### BY TOM BRENNAN PHOTOS BY AMY K. DRAGOO

ast month, I taught you how to ride forward on your courses, jump fences "out of stride" and use various focal points to make smooth, accurate turns. This month, you're going to build on those skills by practicing turning around a jump as you approach your next fence. This will help you stay focused and on track in the show ring when you have to

ride around other jumps, decorations or obstacles to another fence or line.

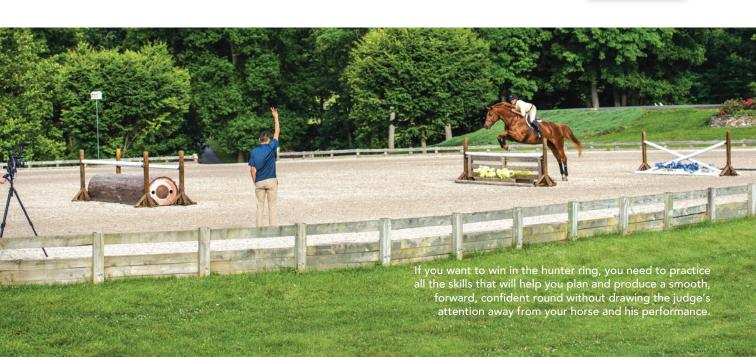
In this month's second two exercises, I will ask you to practice turning around a fence to jump another fence on a diagnonal and turning your head while jumping through a small grid. This will help improve your balance, timing,

muscle memory and ability to look ahead over fences. Plus, it's pretty fun! After that, I'll share some tips for maximizing one aspect of hunter performances that often receives too little attention: the jump recovery.

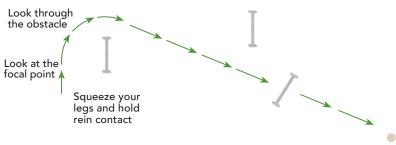
Then, to add final polish to your hunter round, we'll discuss how to end on a note that will impress the judge and leave you with a satisfied feeling of a job well done.

#### >>> TOM'S TIP

When turning around other obstacles, look through them toward your next jump. Focus on staying on track throughout the entire turn.

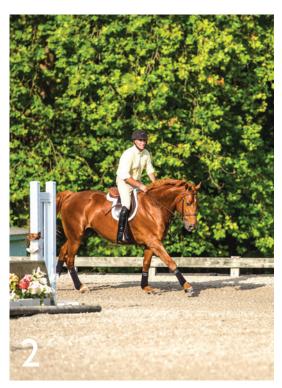


### **Turning Around Another Jump**









- 1. To practice finding my line to a single fence on a diagonal as I go around other potentially distracting fences, I place a cone at the far end of the ring beyond the diagonal jump. The cone is where I want my straight track to take me after the jump. Here you can see the standard of the jump I need to go around (in the foreground), the jump I'm headed to (blue with white flowers) and the cone beyond it.
- 2. Just as I did in last month's focal-point exercises, I begin this exercise by picking up a forward, confident canter. When we reach the end of the ring before the turn to the jump, I squeeze my legs down and around Lynn Ellen Rice's 9-year-old gelding, Callucci, to remind him to maintain his impulsion. Then I turn my head to look for the cone. As the other jumps pass through my field of vision, I pretend they are not even there. Instead, I look through them toward the cone. That helps me judge where to begin my nice smooth turn toward our jump. The straight line from my elbow to Callucci's bit quides him onto the correct track.

#### **Homework: Turning Around Another Jump**

To practice turning around another jump or obstacle to another fence, set up a single fence on the diagonal in such a way that you have to go around one of the jumps of an outside line to get to it. Then, place a cone, jump standard or other visual target at the far end of the diagonal where your straight track should take you after the jump.

Pick up the same forward, confident canter we practiced last month. When you reach the end of the ring before the turn to the jump, squeeze your legs to maintain your horse's impulsion. Turn your head to look for the cone. Pretend



#### From Groom to Co-Trainer

Hunter rider, trainer and U.S. Equestrian Federation 'R' judge Tom Brennan joined Tony Workman's training business, Winter Hill Farm, in Hillsboro, Virginia, in 2004 as a groom and worked his way up to his current co-trainer position. Tom also serves on the U.S. Hunter Jumper Association's Board of Directors, Hunter Working Group, International Hunter Derby Task Force and the Anti-Doping Task Force as well as the U.S. Equestrian Federation's National Hunter Committee

and National Breeds and Disciplines Council.

This year, Tom is excited to compete a talented string of horses, including Purple Heart who he has ridden to multiple major championships. Tom also plans to compete Buttoned Up and Canzonet in Green Hunter 3-foot-9, DJ in Green Conformation and Green Hunter 3-foot-6, Rappaport in Green Hunter 3-foot-3 as well as Callucci and Trump Card. Tom will also be riding new mounts Refined and Valentine. To learn more about Tom, go to www. PracticalHorsemanMag.com.





3. Then, as the center of the jump lines up with the cone, I can sit quietly and keep my eye on the cone.

4. In the air over the fence, I am still focused on the cone, guaranteeing we land on the track I want to ride for the rest of the diagonal, which will set us up for a smooth turn to the left when we reach the end of the ring. You can see that Callucci has already read the cues I gave him by looking in the correct place—and has figured out where we are headed next. We approached this jump on our right lead, but he is getting ready to land from this nice straight jumping effort on his left lead in preparation for our new direction. I have not sacrificed any straightness, style or height of my horse's jumping effort by twisting or ducking or pulling on my left rein to make him land on this lead. My body is not "telling a story" about wanting to go left after this jump.

the outside line jump isn't even there. As you approach and pass it, look through it toward your jump and, specifically, the cone beyond it. Ignore the outside line jump as it passes through your peripheral vision. You and your horse will be inherently aware of the obstacle you are going around. Keep your focus on the cone as you make a nice smooth turn onto the diagonal and canter over the jump.

Think about this exercise while planning your track in the show ring. Whenever you have to turn around an obstruction to get to your next jump, ask yourself, "If this wasn't here, where would I make my turn?" You'll see that there is a clear, straight track to the jump. When on course, rather than worry about getting around other jumps or decorations before finding your track, look through those objects and focus on staying on your track throughout the entire turn.

#### Homework: Grid Exercise

On the long side or the quarterline, build a simple trot-in gymnastic line that both you and your horse have done before confidently. For example, set up a crossrail to a vertical to an oxer with a trot-placement rail approximately 9 feet away from the crossrail. Build the vertical about 18 feet away from that (one stride) and the oxer another 36 to 38 feet (two strides) from the vertical. Adjust these distances to suit your horse's natural stride so he makes a steady one stride from the crossrail to the vertical and a steady two strides to the oxer.

With all gymnastic schooling, I like to start with a single

pole on the ground between each set of standards to check the distances. Then I add one jump at a time, starting with the crossrail, then the vertical and finally the oxer. When you and your horse are jumping through this gymnastic comfortably, ask a friend to stand in the middle of the arena perpendicular to the grid. As you enter the grid, have her hold up a certain number of fingers on one hand.

#### >>> TOM'S TIP

Maintain your rein release until your horse has all his "landing gear" down. Then stay quiet in the saddle rather than let your body "tell a story."

Without changing anything else about your ride, turn your head to focus on her hand and count how many fingers she's holding up. Keep your eyes focused on her hand until your horse lands from the final jump. By the last obstacle you will almost be looking behind yourself.

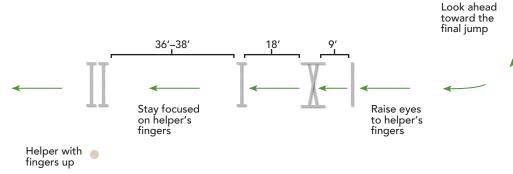
Throughout the grid, concentrate on being in the middle of your horse—from front to back *and* left to right. *Feel* your body opening and closing naturally over each jump, tuning in to what parts of your body are doing to stay with his motion.

This exercise packs a lot of punch—some riders are very uncomfortable with it at first and seem to lose control of their own eyes. Initially, they simply cannot get themselves to look at the helper. Over a short time, though, they master the exercise and, in doing so, gain great balance and confidence. This, in turn, gives their horses balance and confidence.

#### **Grid Exercise**

I set up a grid exercise to get comfortable moving my eyes around the ring. This helps me plan my track to the next fence and also identify and correct any problems in my own balance and timing. I build a placement rail about 9 feet away from a crossrail, followed by one stride to a vertical and two strides to an oxer. Then I ask my friend and co-worker, Erick Tolentino, to stand perpendicular to the final oxer, ready to hold up a number of fingers while I ride through the grid.

1. I approach the grid in a forward, rhythmic trot. As we come across the short side of the arena, I look ahead toward the final jump of the exercise, so I know when to begin a smooth turn to the grid. I don't look toward Erick yet.





#### >>> TOM'S TIP

Trust in your preparation and keep it simple in the show ring. Finish your round with the same confidence and polish you demonstrated in the beginning.

#### **No-Drama Recoveries**

In addition to forward, confident approaches, balanced, undisturbed jumping efforts and smooth, steady turns, another element that sets an exceptional hunter round apart from the rest of the class is the landing side, or back side, of jumps. Good riders pay attention to the approach to each jump. Great riders also work really hard on the ride *away* from the jump, focusing on their path, rhythm and pace while setting

up for their next turn. From a judging point of view, a horse who canters very comfortably, easily and forward away from a great jumping effort, staying on the path smoothly—without any drama—proves he is relaxed and broke. A top horse dosen't need to be managed by the rider the instant he lands from a jump.

You can make this more obvious to the judge by staying quiet in the saddle rather than letting your body "tell a story." Don't broadcast to the world, "There's my distance!" or "I *have* to get a lead change!" Remember, great hunter riders seem to melt away out of view.

An ideal recovery starts with a correct following rein release. Whether you are using a long release, short release or are jumping out of hand, maintain it until your horse has all his "landing gear" down. Give him the freedom to land and finish the jump smoothly. Meanwhile, keep your eye on your focal point beyond the end of the ring. Whatever size the ring is, act as if it goes on forever and you're going to keep riding for acres and acres in that direction. This will deter you from cutting the corner after your jump.

As you canter away on your track, avoid doing anything else that might distract the judge's eye from your horse. If you need a lead change, for example, try not to gyrate your body around in the saddle or throw your weight dramatically to one side. If you're landing from an in-and-out and need to slow your horse down afterward, try to do so as subtly as possible, perhaps even with just your voice or by sitting up. A rider who starts gathering up the reins when her horse has barely gotten his back feet down on the ground reveals that she's worried about something. The judge may wonder, "Does her horse bolt? Should I keep an eye out for it?" Suddenly he or she is assessing the story that the rider's body is telling instead of appreciating the horse's jumping style and way of going.

Keep in mind, that in the hunter ring there are no bonus points for making a difficult horse *look* difficult. Further, you really don't want to make an *easy* horse look difficult.









#### Finish the Way You Started

Don't take the end of your course for granted, either. If you need to change leads after the last jump or get past the in-gate, ride with the same confident, positive attitude you've demonstrated all along. Sometimes riders are so relieved to get over the last jump that they lose focus at the end of their rounds. Judges are often already marking their cards as you come down to trot, but it's still part of your presentation. For instance, resist the temptation to undo your helmet and let your ponytail fall out the back as you exit the ring. Take pride in your horse and yourself for getting up early and doing all the preparation to show him at his best that day. Show respect for the judge and the competition itself—and for the exceptional round you just put in.

Here is my final advice: *Keep it simple in the show ring!* Concentrate on all the minutiae in your work at home. When you get in the ring, trust in your preparation and focus on making this your best performance possible. If you believe things can go better next time, adjust your preparation and try again.



Go to www.PracticalHorsemanMag.com to watch Tom Brennan ride these exercises.

- 2. When we reach the ground pole and I know Callucci is focused on the crossrail, I raise my eyes to see how many fingers Erick is holding up. You can see that my horse is already doing his job: His ears are pricked, showing that he's assessing the jump in front of him.
- 3. I keep my eyes focused on Erick's fingers as we go over the crossrail and the vertical. Notice how Callucci is still focused on the exercise, staying centered over the fences and jumping in great form. This means I have accomplished the goal of moving my visual focus while staying with my horse's motion. Although I am right in the middle of Callucci, my lower leg has weakened by slipping back. This is a great exercise because you feel such a mistake immediately. I should probably do it without stirrups next time!
- 4. I continue watching Erick's fingers as I ride purely by feel. Notice my body self-correcting the weak base I had over the previous jump by dropping deep into my heel and lower leg. Meanwhile, I'm maintaining a light connection to Callucci's mouth through the reins in the approach to the oxer ...
- 5. ... and over it. In this photo, you can see that my weight is in the middle of my horse—both laterally (left to right) and longitudinally (back to front). Callucci is once again making a square, straight jump. I have not distracted him from his job; his face and ears have maintained a beautiful expression throughout the entire exercise.



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## Tips for Blanketing a

# TRACE-CLIPPED

HORSE

BY MAX CORCORAN



When deciding strategies for blanketing your trace-clipped horse, consider the type of clip he has, his internal thermostat and the climate.

ou've trace-clipped your horse and now you're trying to decide whether or not to blanket him. The answer depends on three factors: the type of trace clip he has, his internal thermostat and the climate.

#### Type of Trace Clip

My general rule of thumb is to replace the hair you've taken off with an equal amount of blanketing. If you've shaved a narrow strip across your horse's sides, you won't need to blanket as frequently or with as heavy a blanket as you would if you shaved a substantial amount of hair from his neck, shoulders, sides and belly.

In addition, when you blanket, try to cover areas that you have clipped. If you've clipped the

neck or face, buy an attachable hood or stocking-like Jammies  $^{\text{TM}}$  for him.

#### His Internal Thermostat

Although some people blanket according to exact temperatures, it's best to let your horse tell you his needs: Feel his ears to determine if he's cold (they'll be noticeably colder if his temperature drops); slide a hand under the front of his blanket to check that he's not hot and sweating. Do this frequently, especially when you first start blanketing him, and familiarize yourself with his internal thermostat. In cold weather, a sweaty horse can catch a chill easily, so it's safer to underblanket than overblanket.

#### Climate-Based Wardrobe

The basic wardrobe of a trace-clipped horse who is stabled indoors and lives in a moderate climate should include:

- a medium-weight stable blanket
- at least two inexpensive, lightweight sheets
- a lightweight, waterproof turnout blanket or rug.

If you live in a northern, colder climate, you may need even more sheets and blankets for layering. If you live in an especially cold climate and can afford it, consider buying an additional, heavyweight stable blanket and a heavier turnout rug for chillier days. The type of barn you have can also play a role in your blanketing strategy. If it's enclosed and draft-free, you may need to blanket less than if the stalls open to the outside.

#### Strategy

I always use a lightweight sheet under a horse's blanket, replacing it with a dry, clean one every week or so or whenever the horse gets damp. I layer over this sheet

according to the temperature and each horse's comfort level. For cool temperatures (below about 55 degrees F, again, depending on your horse), consider clothing him in just a sheet. If the temperature drops closer to freezing, add a layer—another sheet or a medium stable blanket. For extreme cold, you may want to add a heavier quilted blanket.

#### **Turnout**

When deciding how to blanket a horse who's outside, evaluate the weather conditions and the temperature. Wind, precipitation and general dampness all contribute to the toll on your horse's system. The damper and windier it is, the more heavily you should blanket your horse. If it's sunny and your horse has access to a windbreak, it's OK to turn him out briefly without a blanket. For longer or overnight turnout, colder temperatures and/or damper conditions, use a lightweight sheet and turnout rug. Layer under the rug as the temperature and weather conditions worsen.

Depending on the time of year you clip your horse, his blanketing needs may change as his hair grows. In general, he will need the heaviest blankets just after being clipped. As his hair grows, monitor his comfort level and adjust your blanketing routine accordingly. And, in most parts of the country, the spring temperatures should be warm enough that you won't need to blanket anymore.

Max Corcoran was the head groom for Karen and David O'Connor for over a decade, accompanying the O'Connor Event Team to many international and team competitions, including the Olympics and World Equestrian Games. She now enjoys doing freelance work for other riders and organizations.



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