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JUMP AN S-CURVE LINE

Hunter rider Lexy Reed and trainer/rider Vanessa Brown show you how to navigate this track-riding exercise.

**BY LEXY REED AND VANESSA BROWN WITH
JOCELYN PIERCE • PHOTOS BY SANDRA OLIYNYK**

W

e have a favorite exercise that helps riders improve their skills to ride the correct track from jump to jump. The exercise is called the S-curve, and as the name suggests, it's made up of three jumps that create an

S-shaped pattern. As you work through the exercise, you'll practice adjusting your track and pace in different ways to change the number of strides between fences.

By changing the track and pace, your horse's adjustability will improve, and the frequent lead changes over the jumps will require him to use both leads equally, which will help him be

more ambidextrous and supple. Plus, it's a good exercise to practice and be comfortable with if you compete because you'll see variations in many handy hunter and equitation classes.

This exercise is also really customizable—you can make it very simple or difficult depending on your level and your horse's level. We'll explain how in this article.

▼ Lexy Reed rides Good Boy, a 13-year-old Dutch Warmblood owned by Macy Kate Young, through this track-riding exercise that improves adjustability and suppleness.





▲ 1. Lexy has ridden to the center of her first jump and is already looking at the second jump. Since she wants Good Boy to land on his left lead, she is using a slight opening left rein and has put more weight in her right stirrup.

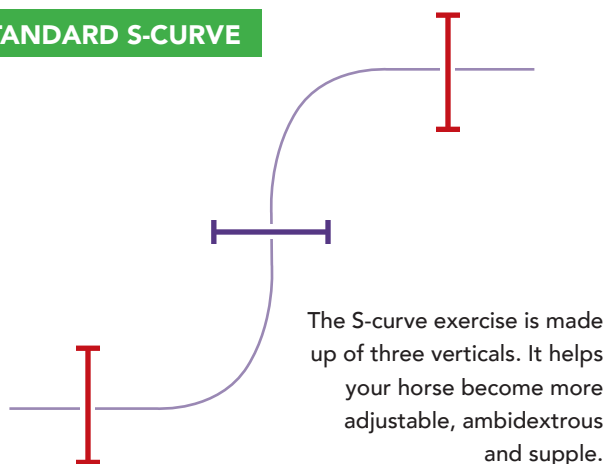
your horse to benefit from the exercise—you can even use poles, cavalletti or crossrails.

Start the setup by placing the middle fence of the exercise on the centerline of your arena. With your back facing that fence and centered on it, walk a curving line (for six strides, about 84 feet) to the right and set the second vertical. Place this jump so it's perpendicular to the middle vertical and so its center is where you finished walking the line. Next, return to the middle fence and stand on the opposite side

Setup

To set the three jumps for the S-curve exercise, check out the diagram (see right). We like to set the fences as verticals so the exercise can be jumped in both directions. But you don't need to make the jumps very big for you and

STANDARD S-CURVE



from the second fence. On this side of the fence, again with your back to it, walk a curving six strides to the right and set the third jump, perpendicular to the middle vertical.

The nice thing about this exercise is it can be easily modified. So if your ring isn't big enough to fit this striding, you can absolutely set it for different striding. Five strides (72 feet) or even three strides (48 feet) would work well. Keep in mind

ABOUT LEXY REED AND VANESSA BROWN



Lexy Reed grew up in Ocala, Florida, where she trained with Don Stewart Stables and Quiet Hill Farm. As a Junior, she was named Best Child Rider and Grand Junior Hunter Champion at the Devon Horse Show and later earned championship titles at The Capital Challenge, the Hampton Classic, the National Horse Show and the Washing-

ton International Horse Show. In her last two years as a Junior, she competed in jumpers, where she won several grands prix. After her Junior career, she moved to Holland where she competed internationally for 10 years. Now based in Wellington, Florida, she owns Two Goals Farm with business partner Keri Kampsen, where they specialize in the

import, training and sales of hunters, jumpers and equitation horses.

Vanessa Brown is based in Wellington, Florida, at Derby Lane LLC, where she specializes in the development, sales and leases of quality hunters and equitation horses. She also teaches and conducts clinics nationwide.



▲ 2. Lexy continues to the second jump by balancing Good Boy with her outside leg and guiding him with an opening inside rein.

if you are using poles or very small jumps, the striding will be slightly different. Poles set at 84 feet would be seven strides instead of six.

Ride the S-Curve

In this exercise, your goal is to jump the center of all three jumps while making the curve of your track the same on both sides of the middle jump. Your horse should change his shape and lead in the air over the middle jump. The first jump is at one end of the S-curve. The second jump is in the middle of the S-curve. And the third jump is at the other end of the S-curve.

Introduce your horse to the exercise one section at a time.

1. Canter the first and second jumps on a big circle to the left a few times. Focus on keeping your pace consistent. Stay in the middle of your horse and centered in the middle of the jumps. Control the turn from the first fence to the second by using your outside aids to balance your horse and inside aids to

guide him around the circle. Don't worry about the number of strides your horse gets.

2. Next jump the second and third jumps on a big circle off the right lead. Follow the same directions as when you jumped the first and second jumps.

Don't be afraid to really simplify things. Start over poles or really small crossrails if you need to. You can also start by trotting in and cantering out or cantering in and trotting out. Start as simply as you need to and try to master each level before making the exercise more difficult.

Once you and your horse are confident and doing the two sections well, put them together and ride the whole exercise.

Ride the entire line.

1. After you have introduced your horse to the exercise one section at a time, pick up your horse's stronger lead, and establish a good canter rhythm. Think about keeping your pace consistent and your horse balanced. In this example, we'll start with your horse on the left lead.

2. Stay in the middle of your horse and approach the first fence, looking at and riding to its center.

3. As your horse takes off to the first jump, look at the second jump.

4. Over the jump, control the turn by balancing with the outside aids and guiding with the inside aids. Use a slight

TIP

Don't be afraid to really simplify things. Start over poles or really small crossrails if you need to.



▲ 3. Here, Lexy has switched her aids—her inside (left) leg has now become her outside leg and she’s using a nice opening, guiding rein to let Good Boy know where he’s going next—to the third and final jump just out of the frame.

opening inside rein and put weight in your outside stirrup. This frees up your horse’s shoulder so he can land on the lead you’re asking. So if you want your horse to land on the left lead, use an opening left rein and put more weight in your right

stirrup. Make sure when you are using the opening rein that you are following the horse’s mouth softly and not pulling back or pulling his head to the side.

5. Continue your S-curve to the center of the second jump.

6. As your horse takes off to the second jump, look at the third jump. Try to map out a track so you keep the track the same on both sides of the second jump.

7. Over the second jump, again, control the turn by balancing with the new outside aids and guiding with the new inside aids. So if you jumped the first two fences on the left lead,

now you want your horse to land on the right lead. Use an opening right rein and put more weight in your left stirrup.

8. Allow your horse to jump the center of the third jump.

After you have ridden the exercise in one direction, reverse and do the exercise from the other direction. Depending on your level and your horse’s level, you can either ride the two separate sections before putting the S-curve together, or you can start by riding the whole S-curve. Remember to take your time, especially if your horse is inexperienced.

How many strides?

At first, the number of strides you get between the jumps is not important, but pay attention to what stride comes up naturally and keep track of that number. When you do the exercise from the other direction, take note on whether the number of strides stays the same.

It’s OK if you get a different number of strides between the first and second jumps and the second and third jumps—and if you get a different number of strides when you reverse direction. As you and your horse become more confident, it’s also normal for him to take bigger and bolder steps and take fewer strides between the jumps. For example, the first time through, you may get six and seven strides, then five and six.

TIP

To ride an S-curve successfully, you must be very centered, use precise aids and look where you’re going.

Troubleshooting

The biggest challenge with this exercise is getting your horse to land on the correct lead. One of the most common mistakes is that riders tend to lean toward the lead they want their horses to pick up, instead of leaning away from it. If you lean toward the lead you want, you're going to free up the opposite shoulder, which is actually asking the horse to land on the wrong lead.

Also, if you're looking down or not where you're heading next, the horse may not understand which direction he's headed. This could result in the incorrect lead. If your horse lands on the wrong lead, ask for a change and continue. If your horse doesn't have a flying lead change, you can do a simple change or hold the counter lead. Keep working to apply your aids correctly and clearly, and he will soon get the idea.

If you continue having difficulty getting your horse to land on the correct lead, simplify it. For example, if your horse doesn't want to land on the left lead, jump the first line on the circle to the left until you've mastered that. Then, try adding in the second part of the exercise again.

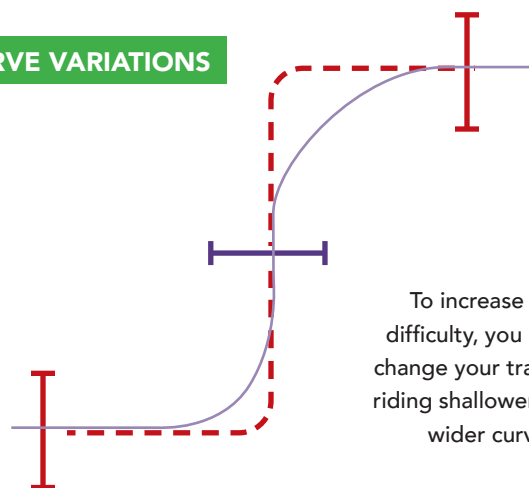
Once you are comfortable with the exercise, you can increase the difficulty by playing with your track and pace to affect the striding more precisely.

Change Your Track and Pace to Increase Difficulty

There are two ways to change the number of strides between the jumps: by changing the length of your horse's stride or by changing the track. You can practice both with this exercise. When you're jumping on a curve, changing your track by just a little can add or subtract a stride.

To change the track, continue to jump the center of each jump but alter the track on the bending lines.

S-CURVE VARIATIONS



To increase the difficulty, you can change your track, riding shallower or wider curves.

First, use a strong outside leg to ride a shallower curve and shorten the number of strides. Even by going slower and shaving the track a bit, you can still get the same number of strides. Then, change the track by pushing your horse off your inside leg and riding wider turns and straight lines to the jumps.

Once you have played with changing the track, you can also work on shortening and lengthening your horse's stride on the different tracks. By changing the number of strides, you're working on getting your horse completely adjustable. One thing to keep in mind is to always start with what is easier for your horse before working on what is more difficult for him. For instance, if your horse has a shorter stride, it's going to be easier to add strides. And if you have a big-strided horse who likes to take you forward, it's going to be easier to leave the strides out.

These are some variations you can try: Ride six strides to six strides in the regular S-curve track. Then try six to seven and six to five. Then you can start to mix up both lines and try a five to a five or a seven to a seven. To make it really difficult, you could do a five to a seven, where you'll be riding the five-to-five line on a very shallow curve, but you'll have to really shorten up your stride to get the seven. 🐾

TIP

When you're jumping on a curve, changing your track by just a little can add or subtract a stride.



TO WATCH A VIDEO of Lexy Reed demonstrating this exercise with Vanessa Brown's on-the-ground guidance, subscribe to EQUESTRIAN+ (equestrianplus.com). Use code LEXY15 for 15% off your first month's subscription.



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Debunking WINTER HORSE-CARE MYTHS

Experts respond to some common winter horse-care misconceptions.

Ah, winter: a season of refreshingly crisp days that are so short that it's almost impossible to leave work in time to arrive at the barn before darkness falls. Unless you're one of the lucky riders who gets to escape to Florida for several months, your priority now becomes figuring out how many layers you can possibly wear while still being able to pull on riding boots. But what about your horse—how can you also help him adapt to the frozen landscape that is now your farm? Dressage Today asked a few professionals to give us their advice when it comes to weathering the winter. Here's what they had to say:

"If I'm cold, my horse must be cold."

Not necessarily. Millions of years of evolution have provided horses with a digestive system that generates body heat as well

as a natural thermal blanket: their hair coat. As the fall season approaches, a horse's coat increases both in length and density and also has the ability to fluff out in cold weather, trapping a layer of air in the coat, which provides an extra layer of insulation.

Tim Strathman, DVM, knows cold. Prior to joining Equine Medical Associates in relatively temperate Lexington, Kentucky, three years ago, he practiced veterinary medicine in northern Illinois for three decades. "Horses have a tremendous ability to acclimate to their environment when given the opportunity," he said. "Unfortunately, many of the things people do with show and sport horses interfere with that opportunity to acclimate, such as locking them up in barns, clipping and blanketing, feed routines, etc. All of these things can contribute to potential health issues."

Strathman explained that for most horses, if the basic requirements for adequate food, water and a shelter option are provided, they are often happier and healthier outside even in harsh winter conditions. "Here in Kentucky, you will see bands



of broodmares outside in all weather and the horses are better for it. You'll occasionally see a blanket on one, but usually it's a special-needs case," he noted. "Even when they have access to large run-in sheds, more often than not they choose to stand outside, even when it's 20 degrees below zero. That's what they naturally choose as being best for them."

"To blanket or not to blanket"—that is the question.

Want to start a firestorm on Internet chat rooms? Ask whether or not you should blanket your horse. While opinions vary widely, the bottom line is to figure out what is best for your horse and his situation.

In the most general sense, several scenarios where blanketing should be considered include: if a horse is body-clipped; isn't acclimated to a cold environment (such as shipped north from a warmer climate); is underweight, unhealthy or a senior and/or if the weather will cause the horse to become wet and no shelter is available.

"If possible and if a horse is only ridden occasionally, I personally feel they're better off growing hair," said Strathman. "On the other hand, you're limited by your expectations for the horse. If the horse is regularly worked in cold weather, there is a distinct advantage to him having a short hair coat. It's not healthy for a hairy horse to be standing around wet with sweat in cold weather, taking hours to dry."

But Strathman emphasized that putting a blanket on a horse with the best of intentions can backfire. "By far the biggest mistake I see people make is not taking their horses' blankets off to look at them," he explained. "It's one thing if they're in a regular training program where the blankets are removed each day for riding. People may mean well, but when they put a blanket on the horse for weeks or even months at a time, yet don't ride that often due to the weather, bad things can happen. I've seen pressure sores from poor-fitting blankets, nasty skin conditions, even marked changes in body weight that go unnoticed because the caretaker doesn't see the horse—they only see the blanket."

With or without a blanket, skin conditions can be a painful annoyance for your horse in the wet winter months. "We

often see dermatitis issues, rainrot and scratches during that time of year, including on horses with long hair coats who are outside and aren't groomed regularly," Strathman added. "It's just something that needs to be monitored. I don't think it's something you can necessarily anticipate or prevent, but it illustrates the importance of regular grooming and careful observation of your horse regardless of season."

"It's really cold outside—I'd better give my horse an extra scoop of grain."

While digestion of food is a primary source of warmth for horses, increased caloric needs don't necessarily mean owners should blindly throw extra grain in the feed tub. "First of all, the amount of food a horse needs in winter depends in part on his housing situation," noted Strathman. "Horses who are left

outside in a cold environment will certainly benefit from carrying a little more weight and having more food, primarily in roughage form. One of the biggest mistakes I see people make is simply not providing enough hay when it's cold. But for many show horses kept inside, their environment doesn't change so much, so they don't necessarily need big dietary adjustments for winter."

Instead of blindly "up feeding" in winter, Eric Haydt, senior vice president of business development at Triple Crown Nutrition, Inc., explained that

careful monitoring of body condition and making corresponding feed adjustments is most important. "Depending on how far north you live, horses will need to expend more energy staying warm. Obviously, the colder it is, the more calories the horse will need, which is generally about 15 to 20 percent more calories below approximately 30 degrees Fahrenheit."

Haydt explained that while hard keepers may benefit from some alfalfa in the diet, most horses do well throughout the winter on a good grass hay, and added that even seemingly dead winter pasture provides some calories. "Generally, I think the best way to adjust for winter feeding is to adjust the amounts of what you are currently feeding in both hay and feed, but not necessarily change feeds," Haydt continued.



▲ While some owners choose to pull shoes during the winter months, there are horses who may need the support or protection of their regular shoeing regimen regardless of season.

“But if you are using a ration-balancer-type of feed in the summer and need more calories in the winter, then switching or adding another feed may be necessary.”

Adding a flaxseed-type oil to a horse’s diet, he noted, will provide calories and omega-3 fatty acids that are lost by not having access to green grass. But using more supplements just because it’s cold won’t necessarily serve a purpose. “You can often avoid supplements just by feeding more, often just in hay, which is usually also a less expensive option,” he said.

Haydt also advised that senior horses may have special dietary needs in winter. “Because of longer hair coats, horses can lose weight through the winter without the owner really noticing until they shed in spring, and this seems especially true with senior horses,” he explained. “Fall may be a good time to switch older horses to senior diets especially if you notice them starting to have trouble eating hay, and, as noted earlier, blanketing senior horses in winter to help conserve body heat and expend fewer calories keeping warm may be a good idea.”

“My horse will drink more if I give him warm water instead of cold.”

Some studies have shown that horses will drink more volume of water if it is a lukewarm temperature versus cold. “It’s all about what they are used to,” said Strathman. “When people have heated waterers in their barns, that’s what horses learn to like. It sounds like a no-brainer, but the single most important factor is don’t let water freeze. Horses must have ready access to ice-free water all the time.”

Strathman cautioned that horse owners may not realize the impact of the transition from summertime nutrition, where a horse will typically have regular access to grass (which has a high percentage of water), to winter’s dry forage-only diet. “This is where I sometimes see people underestimate their horses’ additional need for water consumption because literally everything they eat is now dry and it can cause major problems like impaction colic,” he explained.

But in the pursuit of maintaining a horse’s water supply in frigid temperatures, utmost caution must be taken with auxiliary heat sources. “It goes without saying that horses and

electricity don’t mix well,” Strathman noted. “Heated water buckets are a common sight around barns in winter, but people often don’t do enough to conceal the cord and horses can’t seem to resist chewing on them. Ground-fault circuit interrupter [GFCI] outlets are always a good idea.” (GFCI outlets protect people and animals from electrical shock. For instance, if a horse chews on the cord, hopefully the outlet will trip to stop electricity from flowing before it electrocutes the horse.)

“I don’t think my horse is drinking enough—I should give him bran mash.”

Hang on to that feed tub! While the thought of feeding your horse a nice, warm bran mash may seem like a great idea to help him stay hydrated, it probably won’t help much in getting any quantity of water into your horse’s gut. Nor

does it have any real nutritional benefits.

Since the amount of moisture even in a soupy bran mash is a drop in the bucket compared to your horse’s daily requirement, the only real benefit may be in making you feel better about doing something to help your horse cope with cold weather. “It will help to get some additional water in horses, but it doesn’t add much to the total volume of water intake a horse needs—most people who feed a bran mash typically don’t feed enough to make a difference either with water intake or nutritionally,” said Haydt. “In

fact, wheat bran has a reverse calcium to phosphorous ratio and in larger amounts can have a negative nutritional effect by unbalancing the horse’s diet. So in my opinion, concentrating on maintaining normal water consumption is more important than warm mashes.”

Strathman agreed. “I don’t think bran mashes have any value regarding water consumption. If you want to get more water in the horse, I’ve found the best way to deal with it is to soak the hay,” he explained. “Fill a hay bag, submerge it in a clean muck bucket of water and leave it for 30 minutes before hanging up. Then the horse is eating wet hay, and I’ve seen much better results with this than any bran mash.”



▲ U.S. dressage team rider Jennifer Hoffmann lives and trains in Germany, where winters can be cold and windy. But she stills rides out when she can, and she is sure to use a quarter sheet on the horses who are clipped.

"It's chilly in here—better close up the barn so the horses stay warm."

While keeping the barn doors and windows wide open may be unbearably drafty in the winter months, closing the barn up tight can be just as miserable for your horse as adequate ventilation and fresh air are critical to his health.

With a barn full of high-performance dressage horses in Dorsten, Germany, U.S. dressage team rider Jennifer Hoffmann noted that one of her bigger challenges in winter is keeping a balance of good airflow and climate control in the stable. "With a busy competition schedule, even through the winter on the indoor circuit, I have to try to make sure none of my horses catch a cold or start coughing," Hoffmann explained.

"Instead of closing up the barn and having the air get stagnant, I like to keep windows open at night and blanket the horses rather heavily with multiple blankets. This allows us to keep the stable temperature cooler and therefore the air is much better," she added. "But during the day when we are working, I do tend to close the windows after the stable has been bedded and all sweeping is finished, as it's more comfortable for people working inside and also to avoid drafts when horses are coming in sweaty from work."

"Winter's here—time to either pull my horse's shoes or break out the borium."

As with most aspects of equine health, making dramatic seasonal changes to your horse's hoof situation can be more detrimental than helpful.

As the days get colder and the athletic demands for horses often decrease, many owners recognize a time-honored tradition of pulling shoes for the winter. But Central Kentucky farrier Donny Brandenburg noted that this practice isn't a one-size-fits-all situation.

"It all depends on the individual horse," he said. "If they can be sound and comfortable without shoes for the appropriate level of activity during the winter, it never hurts to give them a break. But some horses may need the support or protection of their regular shoeing regimen regardless of season."

Strathman agreed. "I have had cases where people ride all summer and then ask their farrier to pull the shoes and trim them up to turn out for the winter, and then call me wondering why the horse is hobbling around," he said. "If you're going to pull shoes, I recommend not trimming them—leave the feet a little long for a while so the horse can adjust before having your farrier come back to trim. It's an easy way to avoid any possible problems."

Horses continuing their athletic endeavors in the winter may need additional traction and snow protection, but again Brandenburg advised owners to beware of too much of a good thing. "Adding borium to shoes is great for grip on ice and snow, but it can easily be too much traction and over time place unnecessary stress on soft tissues," he cautioned. "More often I recommend using small tungsten drive-in studs on the shoes. I also use snow pads—both the rim and full-coverage types—and have found that they do help keep snow from accumulating into balls inside the bottom of the hoof."


"Am I doomed to endless rounds in the indoor?"

Time to think outside the box. Having lived in Germany from 1989 to 2000 and then again for the last seven years, Hoffmann knows firsthand the challenges of trying to keep her USEF long-listed Grand Prix mounts, Florentinus V and Rubinio NRW, fit and fresh for competition during the wet and cold European winters. One of her secrets is simply braving the elements.

"We have an amazing facility here in Dorsten with super footing in multiple different types of arenas, so we always make sure to ride the horses outside as long as it's not pouring rain or the ground is frozen," Hoffmann explained. "We also have a huge jumping arena that has a roof but is open on the sides so you get the feeling of being outside. Even when it's cold we go out for walks in the forest and on the racetrack and all of our horses still get turned out, even in the snow. It is absolutely awful for me to be closed up in an indoor for all the winter months and I know my horses feel the same."

Hoffmann also utilizes some additional tools to keep her horses in peak form even when the weather outside is frightful. "If it's very cold or windy, we always put quarter sheets on our horses who are clipped and sometimes our warm-up routine will be a little longer than normal," she said. "I have an amazing magnetic blanket that I do use on some of my horses—some wear it before riding, some after. It all depends on each horse's individual needs."

"We also use our solarium [which includes a blow-dryer-like system] a lot in the winter," Hoffmann continued. "Some horses are put under it for 10 minutes before riding and almost all of them spend time there after riding. Last but not least, I make sure all my horses go back into their stalls completely dry and groomed with their stable blankets on."

In summary, winter horse care is mostly a matter of common sense and good horsemanship. "It's important to remember to try to treat horses like horses," Strathman concluded. "Within the limitations of athletic demands, allow them to live a little more naturally if possible, as this can prevent a lot of man-made problems that we unintentionally create." 

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