

Going Beyond “Drop Your Stirrups”

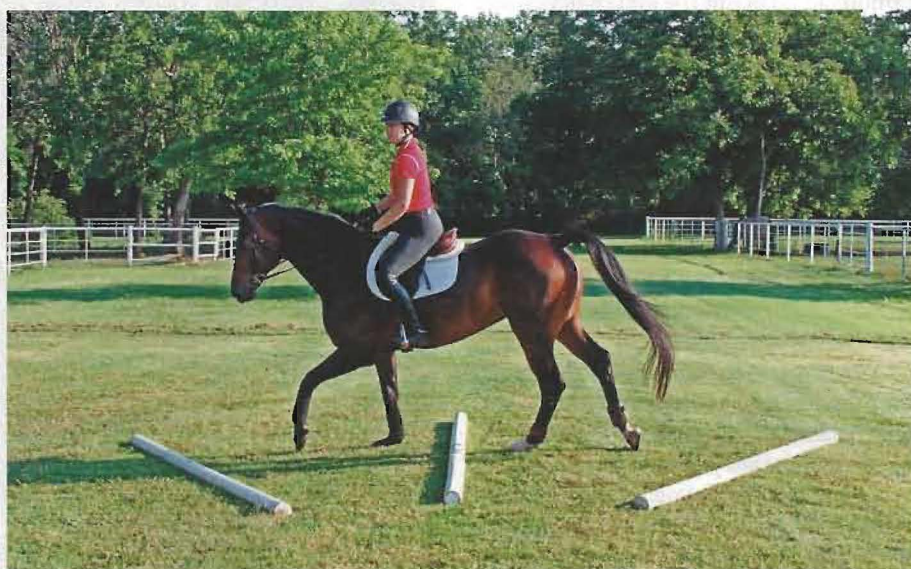
Top trainers weigh in with their favorite tough exercises.

BY MOLLIE BAILEY

Saddles tend to get a little lighter midsummer as trainers offer the dreaded but inevitable order: “Take those stirrups off.” The quest for a tight lower leg and strong base of support chases riders year round, but lessons beef up when equitation finals appear on the horizon, and irons are always the first casualties.

“We go through periods where they just go on at horse shows,” quipped Cara Anthony, who teaches out of Potcreek Meadow Farm in Redmond, Wash.

But good equitation isn’t just preparing for competition, and everyone can use new ideas for getting tight in the tack. We asked top coaches around the country for some of their favorite tough exercises that produce dramatic results—besides hiding the stirrups in the hayloft.



Some schooling exercises are deceptively simple, such as Joey Brumbaugh’s favorite task, demonstrated by Sarah Milliren. COURTENAY BILLINGS PHOTO



“I’m always trying to be creative in coming up with ways to make riders feel things,” said Stacia Klein Madden. PHELPS SPORTS PHOTO

Stacia Klein Madden: JOCKEY STIRRUPS

GOALS: Correct jumping ahead and improve balance.

WHO IS THIS FOR? Intermediate and advanced riders with average balance and solid jumping skills. “In every lesson—and especially for this exercise—safety comes first,” said Madden. “Make sure you’re in an enclosed arena on a horse that will allow you to do this exercise. I wouldn’t try it on a really spicy jumper, for example.”

THE SET-UP: Shorten your stirrups dramatically. Advanced riders should shorten their stirrups to 6-8 inches long. Intermediate riders should leave them 8-10 inches long.

THE EXERCISE: Start on the flat, practicing transitions to get a feel for the new center of balance. Once that’s comfortable, progress to small jumps. Practice single jumps or a line with a simple exercise, like attempting different striding between jumps.

WHAT TO EXPECT: “This is a position-fix

exercise that I use to make a point, not something to do for an entire lesson,” said Madden. “As soon as the rider starts to compensate correctly, go back to the correct stirrup length and try to replicate the feeling. To get a smaller effect, or when working with less seasoned riders, you don’t have to shorten up the stirrups as much. The shorter you go, the more it forces riders to anchor their seats and work on their hip angles.

“When you’re warming up on the flat with the shorter stirrups, don’t get too wrapped up in the quality of the transition. The riders will be getting used to the new balance. Once we start jumping, I always keep the jumps low, and even my most advanced riders will only go up to 3’. There the riders figure out that they really do have the ability to go with the horse without using their shoulders. Once you stabilize the top half of the body, the riders realize how much they’re

using it. Riders often can't fix things until you can show them the counter balance of what they're doing, and they realize how out of balance they are."

Stacia Klein Madden is the head trainer and owner of Beacon Hill Show Stables in Colts Neck, N.J. As a junior rider, Madden won the 1987 ASPCA Maclay Finals. Alongside Beacon Hill managers Mary Anne Minor and Missy Cohen are the assistant trainers: Krista Freundlich, Heather Senia, Jennifer Alessi and Stonehenge's Max Amaya. Madden has trained multiple riders to wins at the national equitation finals including Brianne Goutal, Jessica Springsteen, Maria Schaub, Chase Boggio, Elizabeth Benson, Nikko Ritter, Kristy McCormack, Sophie Benjamin and Sloane Coles. She serves as the U.S. Hunter Jumper Association Hunter Seat Equitation Joint Task Force co-chair, on the U.S. Equestrian Federation National Hunter Committee, the USHJA Hunter Working Group, and the Hampton Classic and Lake Placid Advisory Committees. She is a USHJA Mentor and USHJA Certified Trainer, as well as an R-rated judge in the hunter and equitation divisions.

Kip Rosenthal:

LENGTHENING AND SHORTENING OVER CANTER POLES

GOALS: Coordinating aids to help a horse elasticize his stride.

WHO IS THIS FOR? All riders. "Jumper riders, hunter riders, riders getting ready for equitation finals, 4-H and Pony Club riders, eventers—everyone gets a lot out of this," said Rosenthal.

THE SET-UP: Set up three poles, each 60' apart. You may adjust the poles to account for the size of the ring or a horse's stride, but they should be equidistant from each other.

THE EXERCISE: Start by cantering through in four strides to four strides, which should ride a little forward. Repeat several times off each lead. Then canter through in five strides to five strides. Repeat several times off each lead. Next, switch to five strides between the first two poles, then four between the second two. Once that's comfortable off both leads, switch to four strides between the first two poles and five between the second two, and repeat off each lead.

WHAT TO EXPECT: "This exercise starts simple and gets progressively more difficult," said Rosenthal. "The first time you do this exercise, just get it done. It doesn't have to be pretty. Once you get it done, then go back, smooth it out and make it pretty. Once you go from the five to four, you need to take the first rail off a short stride, and by the third stride you should be thinking about lengthening. The idea is that the second four doesn't get so long that you have to fly at it. The five to four isn't usually too hard, but once you switch from four to five it gets tougher. After the first rail, by stride three the rider should be starting to collect his horse. As he reaches the second pole his stride is short. Quite advanced riders might do this on a bending line or try doing four to six.

"The only thing a horse owes a rider is to be reactive to his aids. If a horse isn't reactive to a rider's aids you can't do this exercise. If a rider isn't in the correct position, the horse can't answer the question either."

Kip Rosenthal grew up training with the likes of George Morris, Bert de Némethy and Victor Hugo-Vidal. She placed in the top three at the AHSA Medal Finals and ASPCA Maclay Finals before becoming a professional rider and trainer. She coached riders like Cullen Latimer, Amy Betuker and Jamie Krauss to national equitation titles out of her Benchmark Farm in Bedford, N.Y. She's a clinician with the USHJA's Emerging Athletes Program and an R-rated hunter and equitation judge who has presided over all the major national equitation finals. She is also a psychologist with a Ph.D. in adolescent clinical counseling.

Joey Brumbaugh:

FAN POLES

GOALS: Coordinating aids to improve track, stride and the shape of the horse.

WHO IS THIS FOR? "This is something Sarah Milliren and I worked on before she won at Maclay Finals in 2011," said Brumbaugh. "This exercise is deceptively simple. It works for riders from the intermediate level on up."

THE SET-UP: Set up three poles on the ground in a fan formation. The poles should be 4-6' from middle to middle. At the widest, the poles should be 10' apart.



Joey Brumbaugh uses basic exercises to keep top riders like Sarah Milliren winning in the equitation ring. COURTENAY BILLINGS PHOTO

THE EXERCISE: Trot through the poles on a curve, over the middle of each pole. Repeat the exercise at the canter. Lower level riders can begin at the walk.

WHAT TO EXPECT: "The first time a rider canters up, she releases with her hand, the horse reaches out, and they make a mess of it," said Brumbaugh. "Once you work on it, you push the horse from the inside leg to the outside hand, holding the outside hip with your outside leg. The horse starts to get a nice pitter-pat canter as you're riding the poles from middle to middle. It starts out very frustrating, but once the rider starts using his aids correctly together it all comes together."

Joey Brumbaugh and his wife, Cristal, are both R-rated judges in hunters and equitation. They run Free Flight Farm in Tulsa, Okla., which trains students through the A-circuit level. "We try to stay pretty individualized for what each student needs, focusing on individual goals—I don't care whether it's going to indoors or being the adult amateur Oklahoma state champion," he said. His student Sarah Milliren won the ASPCA Maclay Finals in 2011.

Jim Hagman:

DRIVING REINS WHILE JUMPING

GOALS: Developing an independent hand and keeping weight back and in the heel.

WHO IS THIS FOR? Advanced beginner riders on up.

THE SET-UP: Flip the reins upside down in the rider's hand, with the rein running from the bit to between the