



photos by Michelle Dunn

GREAT GRIDS

Gymnastic grids to improve your horse's jumping style

by Patrick Field

This article is the first in a series of five with grand prix rider and trainer Chris Pratt. The articles are designed to work together to help make you and your horse a more effective team. This particular article focuses on your horse's jumping style. Whether your horse jumps a bit flat or hangs a little long in the air, Pratt has some simple suggestions and exercises that are sure to help.

Before you start doing these gymnastic exercises, Pratt suggests a shorter flat session with an emphasis on ensuring

that the horse is comfortable and attentive to the rider's aids, without tension or anticipation. A few simple exercises that the horse is comfortable with will help set the tone and aid the horse in relaxing. These could involve simple transitions, circles and other exercises that encourage the horse to carry herself without depending on the rider for balance. The rider should be as smooth and quiet as possible so that the horse is in the right frame of mind to focus on the jumping exercise.



1978

EVENTERS WIN GOLD AT KENTUCKY WORLD THREE-DAY CHAMPIONSHIPS; JUMPERS FINISH FOURTH AT AACHEN WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS; JOKERS HILL HOSTS CCI; NEW OWNER FOR THE CORINTHIAN

training tips



1. *Jones and Martha start the exercise off with a crossrail and 11' to a second crossrail to familiarize the horse with the exercise.*

To begin the gymnastic exercise, Pratt built a single jump, (he prefers to use crossrails) and allowed the horse and rider to jump it several times in order to become comfortable. The idea is for the horse and rider to be relaxed but to add elements to the exercise before either get bored. Pratt then added an oxer 11' from the first jump that rides as a bounce. At the same time, he added two rails in front of the first crossrail to help slow the horse

down as she left the ground. This, he said, will help promote a more relaxed neck and topline, while forcing the horse to be a little thoughtful about just what her four legs are doing.

When the horse has relaxed through the exercise, modify the crossrail to be a vertical (about 2' is all you need) with a bounce to a 2'6" ramped (the back rail is higher than the front) oxer. This will help keep the body of the horse slow, the bounce forcing her to back off the

2. *Once Martha has relaxed, two trot rails are added, the first jump is increased to a vertical and the second to a square oxer.*

obstacles, jumping up and over them as opposed to going flat across the jump. As a result, she spends a longer time in the air. Adding a 9' rail on the landing side after the oxer will further restrict the length of the horse's arc, forcing a rounder jump and regulate the stride needed in hunter performance. By the time you add the final oxer to the gymnastic line, the grid pattern will have set the horse up for a lovely, relaxed final effort. (See diagram pg. 45 for grid distances).



3. *A 9' rail has been added on the landing stride after the oxer to contain Martha's stride which helps to balance her and to improve her jumping form over the final element.*

4. *The end result is a beautiful effort with Martha using her shoulders instead of jumping flat across the oxer.*



1979

BRONZE FOR MILLAR AND TEAM SILVER AT PUERTO RICO PAN AM GAMES; SYMPATICO SUCCEDES TO VIRAL PNEUMONIA; CEF REQUIRES PASSPORTS FOR ALL DISCIPLINES; INAUGURAL TALENT SQUAD SERIES SPONSORED BY COCA COLA™

training tips



1. *The trot rail helps to set Pratt and Reno up perfectly for the crossrail.*



2. *You can see at the beginning that Reno is jumping a little flat. But, as the exercise progresses, he learns the lesson.*



3. *By the end of the lesson, the oxer has been increased and is now ramped to help Reno really use his knees and shoulders over the jump.*

Our second "student" Reno is a jumper who is a little stiff through the back and tends to jump more vertically. This causes him to hang in the air instead of making a nice arc through his back.

So, in the warm-up, Pratt really tries to emphasize bending and stretching of muscles. He does this by doing a lot of transitions, lengthening and shortening of stride and circles and serpentines. The key is to get the horse relaxed, but not dull.

These gymnastic exercises will help to slow the horse down so that he can learn to rock back onto his haunches and use his back and shoulders over the jump.

Once again, the exercise begins with a basic crossrail with an 8' trot rail in front of it to ease the horse into jumping without being threatening. Once the horse settles into the jumps and is relaxed, it is time to move on, adding elements to the grid depending on the horse's maturity and how well he handles new things.

Adding a small oxer 19' from the crossrail with a 9' rail on the landing side will help discourage the horse from over-jumping the oxer, thereby controlling the arc. This becomes important on course when lines are short or you are faced with a technical combination.


As you progress and build the oxer up, add a second oxer 21' from the second jump. Try to start with the oxer ramped again which will get wider to encourage the horse to stretch across

the jump. This will force your horse to lengthen his body in the air and the 9' rail on the landing side will get him to stretch down and lengthen his neck. This will create a rounder bascule while getting her across the jump.

The key ideas of this exercise are to get the horse using his neck and back muscles rather than staying tense and tight in the air as well as getting him to back off the jumps and push off with his hind end engaged, rather than springing straight up into the air.

Pratt said to finish the grid by squaring up the oxers which help tighten up the front end of the horse while making the take-off crisp.

The distances used in the grid are not rigid, but will change depending on the horse. Pratt prefers to use rails without any filler, such as a brush box or flowers, so that the horse will focus on the rails. He also finds that a better result is achieved if you take care of the landing first and then the take-off, thus teaching the lesson first and finishing it by refining the horse's form.

It is also important to remember, as the grid progresses in difficulty, that horses will learn from their mistakes in the grid and that the rider should keep a patient attitude. 

Heads-Up!

Watch for the next article in the Chris Pratt series: **Strengthening exercises for horses with weak front and/or hind ends.**



1980

CANADA WINS SHOW JUMPING GOLD AT ALTERNATE OLYMPICS IN ROTTERDAM, FIELDS TEAMS AT THREE-DAY EVENT FESTIVAL IN FONTAINEBLEU AND GOODWOOD DRESSAGE FESTIVAL; CET FOUNDER DENNY WHITAKER RETIRES; POSTAL STRIKE DISRUPTS CORINTHIAN DELIVERY