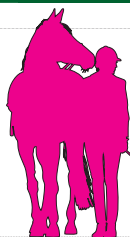




# EXCELLENCE IN EQUINE NUTRITION

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## Horse Sense

Practical advice for all horse owners

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# The bumpy road to self-progression

BHSI performance coach **Brendán Bergin** has advice for riders on paving their own path to achievement during lockdown

**T**HE road to progressive learning and development with horses is a lifelong multifactorial journey. In every aspect of the equine world it can be easy to get stuck on a plateau.

Regardless of your starting point everyone's goal should be to progress onwards developing your own success. The gift of this industry is the opportunity for life long development and involvement. In these difficult times where experiential "on the job" learning in competition is limited you need to be the architect of your own road to achievement.

On your riding journey there are a number of facets that can assist your advancement on your chosen path.

Equestrian sports require a significant level of mental development and commitment for both the horse and rider. Some of the key aspects involved in this progression include developing the rider as the horse's coach, understanding the horse, constant review of the basics and developing your own system.

### The rider as a coach

Coaching is the process of improving performance in the "here and now" rather than in the past or future.

A coach's role is to selflessly guide the participant towards short and long term goals, this can only be achieved by developing the present. It is worth remembering that we are always riding a different horse every day. As riders we have to identify the priority of the day both for horse and rider.

To this end every time you ride your session should include three steps:

➤ **Observation:** Assessing what your horse is offering today. What behav-



Riders must identify the priority of each session for both themselves and the horse

ours are being offered?

➤ **Analysis:** How does this fit in to the long- and short-term development of the horse? What opportunity for development is presented today?

➤ **Evaluation:** How well has the goal of that daily development been achieved? Riders often make huge investment in their own personal advancement working towards competition goals. This is often at the expense of the horse's development. When working out goals as riders, we need to marry these goals with realistic and fair horse development based on an understanding of how the horse learns (mental development) and equine biomechanics (how the horse moves).

### Understanding the horse

The training of our equine partners involves us understanding the horse rather than expecting the horse to understand the complexity of human inconsistency.

Riders at the apex of our sport have always understood the concept of the skilled use of congruous negative reinforcement (pressure and release) which is the foundation of most training systems. The consistency and use of the

aids is essential to facilitating the successful progression of the horse. Horses, like humans, are strong creatures of habit. Careful repetition and shaping of desirable responses along with the extinction of undesirable reactions are the cornerstones of successful consistent training.

Many trainers cling to doctrine and somewhat conflicting vocabulary of the previous 30 years without taking into account the greater modern understanding of how the horse learns.

Understanding the basic movement patterns of the horse and how they are influenced is the mainstay of all the equine Olympic disciplines.

There have been huge strides in understanding the horse in modern times through research and experiential learning. This needs to be embraced by the equine world to ensure our ongoing social license giving our sport a future.

### Constant review of the basics

The foundation skills of the rider are essential to afford us tools for competition success. Coaches at the highest level of the sport constantly reinforce the crucial need for constant review of the basics.

There are essentially four rider re-

sponsibilities which form a key quorum of skills; look and plan, speed, direction and balance. Of course as you develop onwards these skills broaden into sub factors and processes which should broadly fit under those headings.

Development of the horse's basic responses also requires constant review. The horse's basic responses include stop, go, turn and yield.

The sum of these responses can make up the majority of equine movement patterns. As partnerships ascend the levels, the gaps in these basics cannot be covered up.

These gaps in the basics will seriously hamper future progression. Especially with the opportunities afforded by the current lockdown riders and coaches have the opportunity to expose and develop these basics. This can only result in performance enhancement when we can all get out competing again.

### Developing your own system

Any training system must conform to a number of key parameters. All training systems should be fair to the horse, consistent and sustainable taking into account the horse's learning processes. Above all else the goal of each system should be to create "the happy athlete" as per the FEI dressage definition no matter the level.

You will fall back on your system during competition and equine challenges. It is always important to remember that practice makes permanent. What you do in training you will replicate in competition.

To develop your own training system over time you will need borrow and integrate new aspects from many different techniques. Critical analysis of each of these techniques is essential to ensure that you add to your learning process. How you integrate new knowledge and skills into your personal system will dictate the usefulness of the new information.

As you analyse new ideas you need to decide how they fit in with your personal philosophy of training.

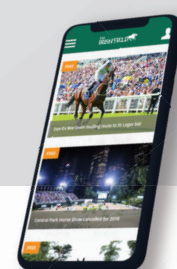
Constantly reviewing and developing your system and challenging your thoughts and knowledge will offer the opportunity for a lifetime of exponential growth and development.

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