



## EXCELLENCE IN EQUINE NUTRITION

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Horse Sense, in association with



# Develop cross country skills at home



BHSI performance coach **Brendán Bergin** has advice for riders on improving their cross country skills from home

**T**HE cross country phase of eventing is the ultimate test of the training of the horse and skill of the rider.

Throughout this series we have focused on how each phase – dressage, show jumping and cross country – are co-dependent rather than independent. In each phase you have to carry your skills from dressage to show jumping to cross country.

The key to successful collective approach is to first look after the rider responsibilities: look and plan (know where you are going), speed (including rhythm and impulsion), direction (including suppleness and straightness) and balance (including rider position, contact and collection).

In this article we are going to look at how you can use show jumping equipment to practice some cross country skills in an arena environment.

### 1. Running the clean honest line

The cross country phase of modern horse trials is the quintessential test of accuracy and commitment to a line. Legendary cross country rider, trainer and Olympian Lucinda Green constantly highlights the importance of training young horses or green horses over small approachable fences. “Do a little bit in mini-version of all the things you will expect him to do in later life, even as a four-year-old, but don’t over-face him.”

In the early training of the event horse or in tuning up for the season ahead, short poles and small blocks are ideal for skinny fences and to sharpen the rider up to cleave to a line. First ride the initial line of three fences. One of the main objectives is to strictly ride over specific colours on each pole. Begin by riding in trot ensuring that you can ride an unwavering accurate line. Once you can ride your line accurately in both directions move up into canter and start growing the height towards competition level.

Then ride the full exercise in canter to test your training, you should be able to ride each these lines the same as the first.

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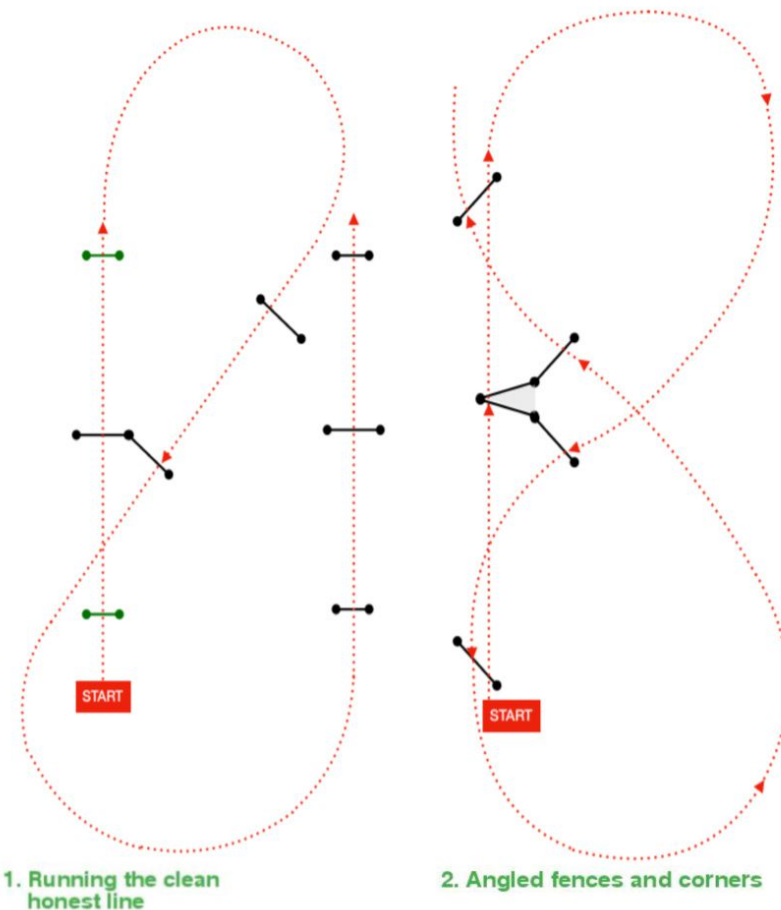
### 2. Angled fences and corners

Riding angled fences and corners builds on the skills developed in training a “clean honest line”. For many horse and rider combinations these questions are never fully answered resulting in a somewhat hit and miss approach making a clear round cross country an exception rather than a rule which can be solved with good training.

When I started out working in England with Tim Downes FBHS, I believed in a lucky shot to a fence. Tim told me on nearly my first day that luck is the result of good training “the more you train the luckier you get!” It gives you much more control of your success to rely on your training rather than your luck.

Riding corners safely at speed is an essential trained skill especially as they become more technical at higher levels. Riding an angled pole like the ones shown in the exercise below requires you to ride a line independent of the fence. Most horses will naturally try to square up to a fence. However, it takes time, training and trust in the rider to allow the horse to trust the rider’s line and jump across an angled fence.

Similar to the first exercise, start in trot riding poles on the ground to evaluate the training carried forward from the previous exercise. If the first exercise is well installed you should be able to place your horse at any colour along the pole and place the horse exactly where you want at take-off and landing. Riding the first part of



1. Running the clean honest line

2. Angled fences and corners

Each phase of an event (dressage, show jumping and cross country) are co-dependent on each other

the exercise you need to ensure that the horse is committed to the whole line running all the way pole-corner-pole. By riding it first over small fences in trot and then working on into canter you can shift the odds in your favour. The second and third parts of the exercise are revision of exercise one; offset doubles.

### 3. Ditches to prepare for scary obstacles

In the previous few exercises we have tackled the importance of accuracy and lines. Another one of the key aspects of the training of the horse is ditch training. This is not necessarily for its own sake but instead as a model for riding unknowns or rider/horse frighteners. It is worth remembering that when horses stop, run out or refuse it is usually because we have not presented the question in a way that makes our correct answer enticing.

They don’t stand in stables thinking “when we get to the scary ditch I’m going to stop and run away!” With a bit of innovation you can create a ditch in your arena with two poles and tarpaulin which will have a very similar effect to a real ditch, when you then

get to the real deal you will have laid the groundwork for it. Start by riding across the diagonals to give the horse a chance to see the “ditch” out of each eye without directly facing it. Make it all about the diagonal fences and don’t get distracted by the ditch itself.

Then start with the ditch very narrow and gradually grow the width to lead the horse to the right answer. If your horse cannot understand the problem it can help to put a pole over the top which will give them a hint as to what you asking. The two “skinny” fences can initially be kept as very small fences or as secured poles on the ground. When the horse has become more comfortable with the “ditch” you can grow the skinny fences to make the exercise more realistic to the questions asked at horse trials.

The exercise can then be developed further into bending line to offer further added value. As you develop your training constant skills development is required to develop accuracy and make clear rounds cross country the rule rather than the exception. Just like learning a musical piece you first need to practice lines slowly and deliberately step by step before you move up to full cross country speed.