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# PACING YOURSELF

Having a sense of pace is an important consideration whether you're competing in the jumper ring or in the small pony hunters. We asked successful rider and trainer, Gary Young, how you can learn to pace yourself.

We've all heard about exercise riders at the racetrack who have 'clocks in their heads'. Seems they can gallop a quarter-mile and estimate down to a fifth of a second how fast their horse has been going -- without ever looking at a watch. But having a sense of pace isn't just a useful skill on the backstretch. It's also an essential part of competing in any sport in which the clock is ticking… or the judge is watching.

On course in the jumper ring, for example, you'll have a maximum time allowed, after which you incur time faults which add to your score. And in a jump-off situation, the fastest, cleanest performance wins. Having a sense of pace can make the difference between being first, and being nowhere.

"But I'm not a machine!," you cry. "I don't have a clock in my head! How can I tell how fast my horse is going? That's got to be next to impossible."

Fear not, gentle reader -- it's not as difficult as it sounds. And to help you develop your sense of pace, we've called in the experts.

## JUMPING WITH PACE

Jumper rider and trainer Gary Young, of Rogue Run Farms in South Carolina, sees learning a sense of pace as part of every jumper rider's homework. "It's not as complicated as people think," he says, "but it does require consistent practice. The way I do it is to set up a course, measure it with a measuring wheel (available from sporting-goods stores and catalogues for anywhere from $40 up to $200 or so), and calculate the time allowed for that course according to AHSA rules for the division I'm preparing my students for. Then I have my students ride the course while I time their performance with a stopwatch. We measure it, ride it, and see how long it takes.

"Then, depending on how far off from the maximum time allowed we were, we ride it again, either going more conservatively, or picking up the pace, until we can be five seconds under that ideal on a consistent basis." Five seconds, Gary says, provides a reasonable cushion against unnecessary time faults in the show ring, without making it necessary to run a horse off his feet.

Practicing many different courses under these same conditions is key to developing a consistent sense of pace. Gary will often take home course maps from horse shows and duplicate the

courses on-farm. "I find that very useful," he says.

Though developing this sense of pace comes more easily to some people than others, much of it stems from knowing your horse. "Every horse is different. Some naturally feel fast, others cover more ground than you realize," he says. "Knowing your pace comes from working at home and having a feel for the length of your horse's stride and the way he jumps. I spend a lot of time getting my students to do gymnastics to help them learn to feel their balance and the rhythm of their horses. By riding lots of different exercises, they get to know how their horses cover a certain distance."

One of Gary's favourite gymnastic exercises begins with three small verticals set at a 'bounce' distance (i.e. 10 feet to 12 feet between each rail), followed by a 21 foot one-stride distance to a vertical, and then 22 feet to an oxer. He'll have his riders school this grid several times to get the feeling of the slightly short distances, and then move the oxer out to a distance of 32 feet and repeat the exercise. "You play with the distances to help your riders develop their rhythm."

Gradually raising the fences, within the limits of what's reasonable for both the horse and the rider, increases the level of difficulty, because all of the striding becomes correspondingly shorter. "But of course you have to be careful with the heights you use," Gary cautions. "Keep them appropriate to the horse's level of experience."

Since being able to lengthen and shorten your horse's stride is an essential in the jumper ring, where 'odd' distances are common, it's important to practice these skills at home as well. Gary suggests setting a line of two fences at a distance of 66 feet (or about four and a half strides, based on a standard 12-foot stride distance). Such a line can be ridden in four strides, five strides, even six strides, to test your ability to 'package' your horse and then send him forward again.

Having a background in the hunter and/or equitation ring is a definite asset when it comes time to get the feel of a certain pace in the jumpers. "Riding equitation, in particular, gives a rider a real sense of keeping a steady pace, and I recommend that highly," says Gary. "Before you start lengthening and shortening the stride and making inside turns and advanced choices, you have to know how to keep your horse in a steady rhythm."

RHYTHM MAKERS, RHYTHM BREAKERS

Several factors can influence a rider's sense of pace and rhythm. "Where you arrive at the take-off can make a big difference," Gary notes. "For instance, if you're heading into a vertical-vertical-oxer combination, and the striding is a short 'one' to a long 'one' -- if you lose impulsion and get in 'dead' to the first fence, then by the time you get to the oxer that back rail is going to look very, very long! Keeping the rhythm and the pace coming down to a combination like this will help keep you out of that situation.

"A lot of horses will explode over an oxer and find themselves with a little extra 'hang time', which can also influence your sense of pace," he adds. "And of course as you move up the levels, you need a more accurate sense of rhythm because the fences are larger and everything

comes up a little faster. From about the preliminary jumper or high junior/amateur level (where the fences are 4'3" high or better), your reactions will need to be quicker, and you'll have to make shorter turns into bigger fences. You not only need pace to do this, you need accuracy."

Unusual fences, such as those on bending or off-stride lines, skinnies, and water jumps, can also throw off a rider's overall sense of pace. "When a course designer uses one of these questions, riders may get going too quickly and start making mistakes. Then a later fence on flat cups can really cost you, because your horse starts jumping flat when he's going too fast." Gymnastics, once again, are the key; if you've already solved a problem at home, solving it in the show ring is old hat.

The most common cause of a rider losing her sense of pace, however, is the tension and adrenaline that sets her nerves alight in the show ring. When riders get anxious, Gary says, they start making mistakes: over-riding and shooting past the distances they see, getting too long to oxers or arriving at combinations with no impulsion, taking out strides in a line, and generally losing their cool.

The cure? "Make a plan, set a goal for the class -- and then stick to the plan. Consistency, smoothness, and accuracy will earn you more ribbons, and more respect, in the long run, than forgetting your plan and running your horse off his feet in pursuit of a win. You can't let yourself be psyched out by the way someone else rides the course -- because her strategy may not work for you and your horse."

Your goals for a particular class may change, of course, depending on your level of experience and your horse's ability and training. "To begin with, you may plan just to make the time and go clear," Gary says. "Then, as you improve, you may want to start increasing the complexity -- adding some riskier inside turns, for example."

In a jump-off, it's easy for a rider to forget both her plan, and her sense of pace and rhythm. "It's really important to keep your focus and your discipline. Accidents happen when riders get tearing around the ring without a plan. When you're walking the course, estimate where you can save ground -- and be prepared to modify your plan if you have the advantage of seeing other riders go, and witness something that could work for you and your horse."

On the whole, Gary says, it's best to avoid riding 'by the seat of your pants'. Consistent homework is the key. With enough pacing practice locked into your brains and your muscles, you'll have a much better chance of keeping your cool and riding to your plan even in the charged atmosphere of the show ring.

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MEET GARY YOUNG

Becoming a professional trainer was a natural for the son of Roger and Judy Young, a husband-and-wife team who dominated the showrings of the eastern seaboard in the 1950s and 60s. Their business, Roger Young Stables, was based in Rochester, New York, and moved to Camden, South Carolina in 1982. Gary counts among his influences George Morris, Rodney

Jenkins, Ronnie Mutch, Ian Millar, Frank Madden, and Katie Monahan. A Maclay winner in 1979, he spent some time globe-trotting in the late '80s and early '90s, working as a professional horse trainer in Belgium, Turkey, and Mexico (where in 1988 he was National Champion). He was a member of the USET in 1989 on a Nations' Cup tour that took him to France, Luxembourg, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Germany. Returning to the United States, he and wife Michaela founded Rogue Run Farms in Franklin, Tennessee, relocating to South Carolina in 2001. Together, they concentrate on producing top jumpers.