

## **LOOSE SCHOOLING – WHERE TO BEGIN by Maria Green.**

If I was asked to answer the Horse and Hound question about my “secret weapon”, loose schooling would rank fairly high. A week rarely goes by when I don't employ loose schooling either to educate or exercise one or two different horses – I even used it for a donkey once!. I think my first experiences of loose schooling were actually with a gerbil in my bedroom when I was about nine making jumps from twiglets and loo rolls.

Like everything to do with horses if it is done right the benefits are enormous. I have been privy to some interesting displays by horse owners – a favourite is the strategic positioning of personnel all around the school, often armed with lunge whips, tabards and ever increasing acoustic encouragement. On more than one occasion such a party have vastly underestimated the intelligence and indeed jumping ability of their ned as he trots to the five bar gate at the end of the school, pops over onto a steep concrete slope and clutters off with a big smile on his face to the nearest feed bin.

Whilst we are all impressed by the pictures of horses in magazines basculing over fences with their knees touching their chins I personally do not like to use it as a “chase me Charlie” exercise to test a horses ability, especially with a young horse. Normally this is used as a sales technique both here and overseas and the horse is normally being chased to the fence under duress – the inevitable will eventually occur – the horse at best will lose confidence – at worst land on a pole – ouch. Totally counter productive. I would normally prefer to see a horse jump under saddle when I am buying, even if it is over a small fence. An experienced person, I think, should be able to tell a lot more this way – about his character, attitude and technique. Actually I am giving you this advice from bitter sweet experience, having bought a three year old for a figure that would buy you a decent family holiday. A year of anticipation followed the purchase only to find that once I had broken him in his limit was a 1 metre course on a good day. (I blame it on the Irish blarney and the Guinness )

Loose schooling, which can be done with or without jumping involved can be used for all types but if you have a horse or pony that fits into the following category then definitely consider it:

- Unbroken three year olds – A great way to introduce them to school work, listening to commands and learning their own balance
- Four and five year olds. Can be used to introduce some pole work/simple grids without the hindrance of a rider. The horse is then familiar with the exercise when the rider gets on.

- Older horses – for suppleness and to sharpen their responses over a fence
- Competition horses – For some variety and to prevent stiffness-better than standing in especially on a “day off”.
- Dressage horses – Great for engagement and where the canter is still needing improvement.Gives them a different perspective on life. Especially good if their rider prefers keeping four legs on the ground!
- Horses having problems with their jumping – confidence and technique can often be improved.
- For those horses that have limited turnout, especially in winter and you are struggling to cope when they become a little “stir crazy”

I find loose schooling is the most time efficient form of exercise and would happily exchange ridden work for loose work by incorporating exercises that are helpful to that particular horse. Why not loose school for twenty minutes then allow your horse to have a roll and cool down while you muck out and have a cup of tea? I can exercise, brush, rug and muck out three horses in just over an hour in this way.

Ok so where to start. Although an indoor school is obviously advantageous, you can manage in a normal 20 x 40 arena with high fences. If your horse respects electric fence I would add a strip to the top rail to take it to 6 feet if possible and avoid doing any jumping towards home where they are most likely to attempt escaping. 4 boots and over-reach boots are the only kit the horse needs.



Simple lane set up for loose jumping.

Build a simple lane using wings and poles that allow you to build a jump or jumps with no gaps making a slight fan at the entrance to the lane to draw the horse in. I generally start on the left rein because I am right handed and my body language is more relaxed. The most important thing when loose schooling is your POSITION in relation to the horse. Try and imagine that you are lunging him on a 20 metre circle and think of how and where you would stand to keep him moving forward. I rarely use a lunge whip – if you are doing it correctly and you have an obedient horse it should not be necessary. Just use your right arm as if you were holding a whip, always bringing it behind the horses quarters. Don't get any closer to him than you would on that lunge circle because if the horse feels



Always be aware of your position to ensure the horse is moving away from you. Establish voice commands and a good even rythm in walk,trot and canter before you start jumping.

threatened he could get trapped in a corner or do a very sudden about turn because you have headed him off.

I always make sure that I can stop the session at any time in case I need to alter a fence or re-do a boot. A few nuts in your pocket normally does the trick. If you don't feel confident get somebody who is to show you.

The aim is to get the horse working in a rhythm that he sticks to – not galloping down one side and doing a western slide into the gate! If you find he is getting stuck in the corners place a 12' pole across each one to guide him round smoothly. Always get him trotting and cantering confidently through the lane before adding any fences. The rule of thumb for the jumping is to only build what he is ready for at that stage in his career. Generally I would start the jumping with two or three trot poles and make sure that he is coming through the middle of the poles in a straight line before progressing to canter poles which I would start at 7 yards apart. And then you can devise a myriad of exercises to achieve your end goal. If your exercise is mirrored on either rein then you do not have to change the poles for the work on the left or right. If your horse is fit then 25 minutes should suffice. If he is unfit then aim for 15 to 20 minutes. Either way do not wait for your horses sides to be heaving before calling it a day.



Sometimes you will notice that you establish "join up" with your horse. This shows you are really building a relationship of trust with him and enables you to stop the session at any time should you need to.



Start by moving the horse away from you as if you were starting him off on the lunge.

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Always end on a good note, don't get brave on his behalf and if he does jump out over a six foot fence then give me a call – I may well be interested!



Pole to cross pole exercise set at 9/10 ft distance for a horse to take a non jumping stride. I would like to see him jumping it a little straighter!