

Finding the SWEET Spot

by Chris Delia

Anyone who has ever taken a horse over a jump quickly understands that the sport of show jumping is all about accuracy. The ability to accurately judge correct take-off distances is of paramount importance for any jumping discipline, as it positions the horse at the most comfortable location in front of the jump. When a horse arrives at this "sweet spot" he does not have to adjust his stride length or balance in front of the jump and is given the best chance of negotiating the obstacle with ease. Accurate riders have mastered the ability to see their take-off spots well before each jump and are easily recognized for their smoothness on course. These riders achieve accuracy by keeping a rhythmic stride when approaching an obstacle, which helps them make the jumping experience as pleasant as possible and instills confidence in their horses.

On the other hand, riders with poor eyes are even easier to recognize, as they often make drastic last-minute adjustments before the jump, often chipping or launching too far away. They land unbalanced and/or out of control making the next series of jumps even more awkward and sometimes dangerous. The ability to see distances from far away gives the rider a chance to think about what lies beyond the jump... perhaps how she wants to

approach the next turn or how she wants her horse to move up immediately after landing to get that long five stride line to the next jump. If a rider can use the time in front of each jump to set up the next, the rider will feel she has plenty of time to get the horse organized and find her distance to the next.

Establishing rhythm and finding the distance

The canter rhythm is probably the most important factor that influences the rider's ability to recognize take-off distances. In order to predict take-off distances, you have to establish a predictable canter. The important thing to realize is that there is a take-off distance in front of an obstacle no matter what the canter you are on it will either be deep, long or natural. The trick is to be able to predict which one of these three it will actually end up being. (See diagram - three scenarios)

1. Even rhythm (correct) - By establishing an even canter rhythm, where every stride is the same length and speed, the rider will have the best chance at predicting where the horse will end up in front of the jump.

2. Decreasing canter rhythm (incorrect) - Decelerating is a common problem in riders who tend to "pick" on their way to their jumps. They feel that since they haven't recognized their distance

soon enough, they need to "buy time" to find it by slowing their horse down. The result is usually that they slow down more and more until the horse has very little power to jump and they end up missing at the jump anyway. *Lesson - Finding a distance is a function of rhythm not a function of time - don't buy time to your jumps by slowing down!*

3. Increasing canter rhythm (incorrect) - Just like the "picking rider" this type of rider also becomes insecure when they don't recognize the take-off position soon enough. Instead of buying time to find a distance, they feel that by running at the jump the horse will have the power to clear it essentially forcing the horse over the jump. *Lesson - the horse's power to jump comes from the quality of its canter not the speed of its canter. Don't blast at your jumps!*

Exercise - Finding your rhythm

I find that riders with good eyes are not only well-practiced, but they tend to have a good sense of rhythm - they are often good dancers. If you struggle with finding your rhythm on your horse, try cantering around the arena to music. You could either play some music on a tape deck or simply think of an appropriate song and hum along with your horse's canter. As you go, try to keep the beats of the horse's canter rhythm in sync with the rhythm of the

