

Interconnectivity

In order to master a jumping course, not only must you master your accuracy for take-off distances and your control over your horse, but you must become a great navigator. As riders, we often consider ourselves only as drivers, where we turn the horse when he needs to be turned or we direct the horse toward a jump when he needs to be jumped. However, to ride efficiently, smoothly and accurately through a complex course of jumps you need to also become a good navigator with the ability to anticipate each element of the course well in advance.

A navigator's responsibility is to direct the course of a vehicle, whether it is a ship, airplane, car, or even a horse. A good navigator has mastered the ability to not only plot a course but also to give the driver the next set of directions exactly when he needs it. Imagine you are driving a car and you have no idea how to get to a party for example. Your friend, in the passenger seat, knows the directions to the house and has agreed to navigate. If she is a good navigator and knows the directions well enough, she would tell you where each turn is well in advance, giving you ample time to gently slow the car down, put the turning indicator on and smoothly negotiate the turn. If she tells you to turn too late you will have to slam on the brakes and make abrupt maneuvers to get the car back on track or you may even miss the turn entirely.

I see this happening to inexperienced riders all the time in the ring. For example, the rider will land after a jump, have a moment of disorientation, then recognize where she is supposed to go next, then makes a rough maneuver to get the horse back on track toward the next jump. This process upsets the horse's balance and focus and the rider often does not have enough time to regain adequate control or a good take-off distance to the next fence. She arrives at the next jump with an inappropriate canter for that section of the course and at a bad take-off distance. Because all this mess is occurring, she lands even more disoriented and everything starts to fall apart. I call this kind of riding "riding jump-to-jump," where the rider only thinks of one jump at a time, rather than thinking ahead to the next series of jumps.

An experienced rider, on the other hand, who has mastered the art of navigation, will land after each jump already thinking about the approach to the next jump or even the next two jumps. This rider anticipates each turn or element of the course well before arriving there, leaving plenty of time to ride accurately and smoothly to each jump. This ability to think ahead and anticipate oncoming problems results in a drastic improvement in accuracy and overall smoothness on course. This is also true in other sports such as downhill skiing, where the skier must position himself through each turn in a way that optimizes his approach to the next set of 2 to 3 turns. In the same way, the 1st jump on a show jumping course can be related to the last jump. This relationship of all the obstacles on a course is called "interconnectivity" and mastering the ability to connect your jumps will take your riding to a whole new level of sophistication.

Connecting Two jumps

The simplest way to understand the concept of interconnectivity is to examine how to connect two jumps in a straight line. When jumping into a straight line of two jumps, the way the line actually ends up riding is influenced by four major factors:

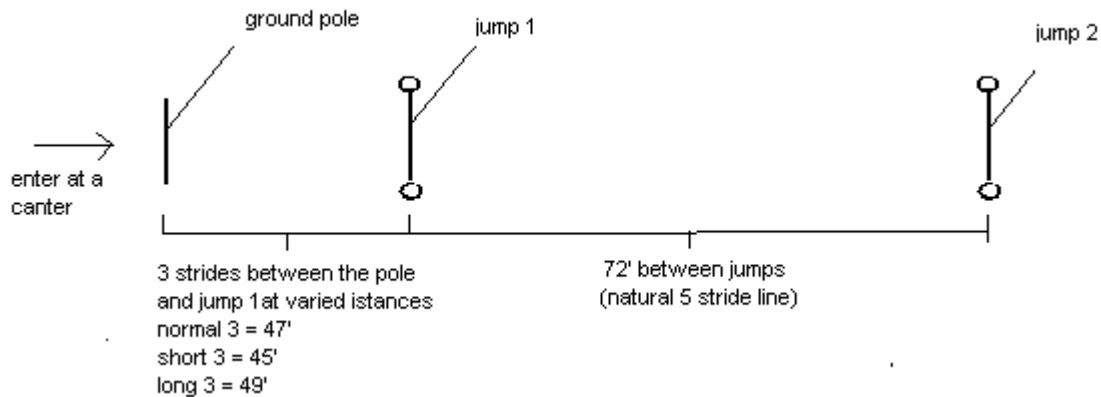
1. **The distance between the jumps.** For example if the line is set at 70' (assume your horse has an average stride length of 12'), it will work out quietly in five strides (since 72' is the ideal length for a 5 stride line). If it is set at 74', it will work out long.
2. **The speed and/or length of stride with which your horse jumps into the line.** If you have too much pace coming in, the line will end up riding a lot tighter than you originally expected. Likewise, if you are under the pace coming into the line, it will work out longer than planned.
3. **The take-off distance coming into the line.** If you find a long distance to the 1st fence in the line, it will cause your horse to make a big effort into the line with a lot of momentum. This may make the line work out short. If you are too deep to the first jump, this may interfere with your horse's forward momentum, causing him to land short, making the line work out long.
4. **The type of jump coming into the line.** Oxers, having width, tend to make a horse jump across the jump with a more horizontal effort than do verticals. As a result, the horse may land with more forward momentum making the line work out slightly tighter than expected.

Therefore, in order to arrive at the 2nd jump of the line perfectly, the rider must consider all the above factors and make the necessary adjustments as early as possible in the line so that the last 2 strides before the 2nd jump are smooth and balanced. In order to execute the appropriate adjustments as early as possible in the line, the rider must anticipate how her horse will land into the line BEFORE the first jump.

Looking early

Just as looking early for a take-off distance to a single jump improves your accuracy, looking early for a take-off distance to the 2nd jump in a line will help you find the distance early. It is very important that you focus your eye on the second jump of a line at least 2 strides before the 1st jump of the line. This ability yields the obvious advantage that you will not land disoriented and will know exactly how much to move your horse up or balance him (whichever the case may be) in order to arrive at the perfect take-off distance to the 2nd jump.

Exercise 1



In this exercise we place a ground rail 3 strides in front of a natural 5-stride line. We will alter the distance between the ground rail and the 1st jump of the line so that you can practice cantering into the line at different speeds. The goal is to utilize the time during the 3 strides before jump 1 to think about how you will ride the 5-stride line.

- Scenario 1 – natural entry

Set the distance between the ground rail and jump 1 so that the 3 strides will be natural. This will present you into the 5-stride line with the ideal stride length and momentum. You will not have to adjust your horse very much in order to arrive at jump 2 perfectly. Your goal here is to simply become acquainted with looking at jump 2 immediately after jumping the ground rail. You must not concentrate on jump 1, as the take-off distance is already set for you. After cantering the ground rail, look beyond jump 1 and focus on sensing a take-off distance to jump 2. If you practice this exercise enough you may begin to see a take-off distance to jump 2 in mid-air over jump 1. At the very least you will see the distance to jump 2 very early in the line.

- Scenario 2 – quiet entry

Set the distance between the ground rail and jump 1 so that the 3 strides will be short (approx. 45'). Approach the ground rail with a slightly collected canter so that you can fit the 3 strides in comfortably. This will present you into the 5-stride-line with a quiet canter and a shorter stride. You will have to move your horse up immediately after jump 1 in order to meet jump 2 with a good take-off distance and balanced canter.

- Scenario 3 – fast entry

Set the distance between the ground rail and jump 1 so that the 3 strides will be long (approx. 45'). Approach the ground rail with a strong canter so that the 3 strides are extended but comfortable. You will have to collect your horse immediately after jump 1 in order to meet jump 2 with a good take-off distance.

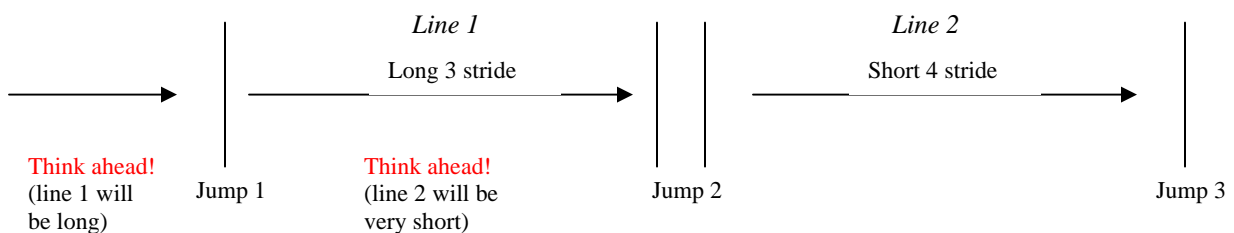
- Scenario 4 – variable entry

Now that you are familiar with the concept of thinking ahead, remove the 3-stride ground rail from the exercise. You will now be responsible for thinking ahead to the 2nd jump WHILE finding your own distance to the 1st jump in the line. If you find a long distance to jump 1 you will have to move your horse up to it and therefore anticipate balancing your horse in the line. If you find a quiet distance to jump 1 you will have to anticipate moving your horse up in the line. The point is, you must decide how you will ride your line well before you land into the line.

Examples of Connected Jumping

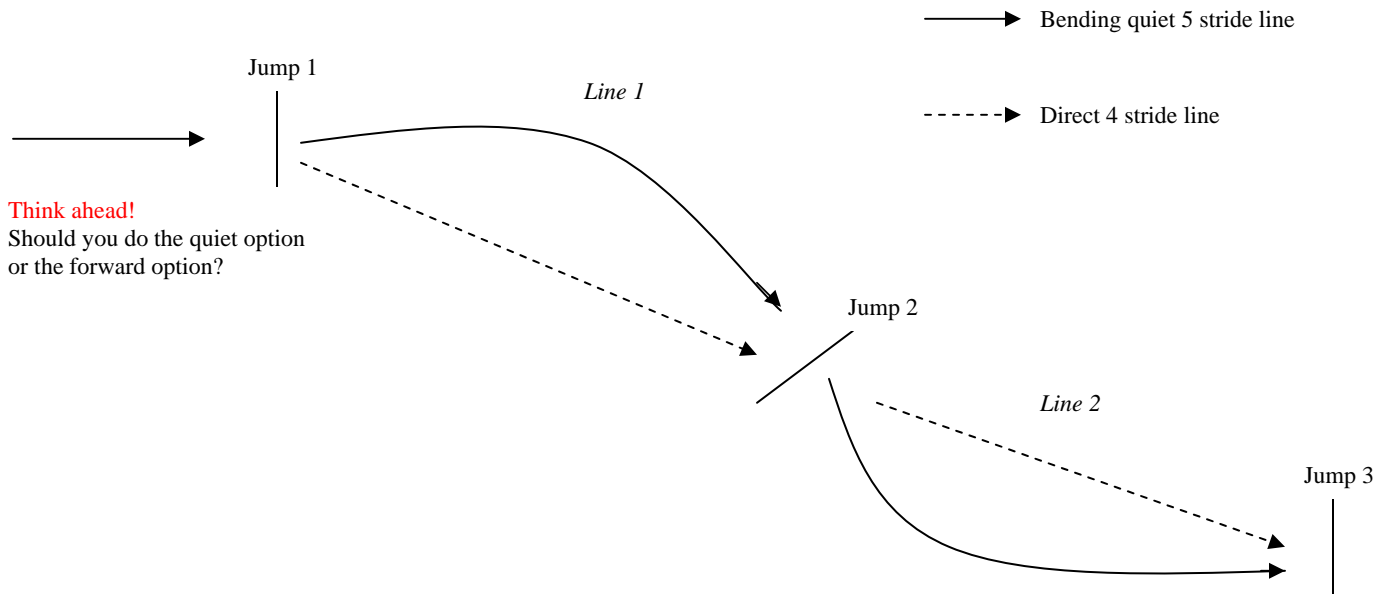
The concept of connecting 2 jumps on a simple straight line can be extended to a wide variety of scenarios. Practice the following exercises at home and you will get a good understanding of how and when to think ahead. Always focus on how to set your horse up for the next element of your course.

1. Two straight lines



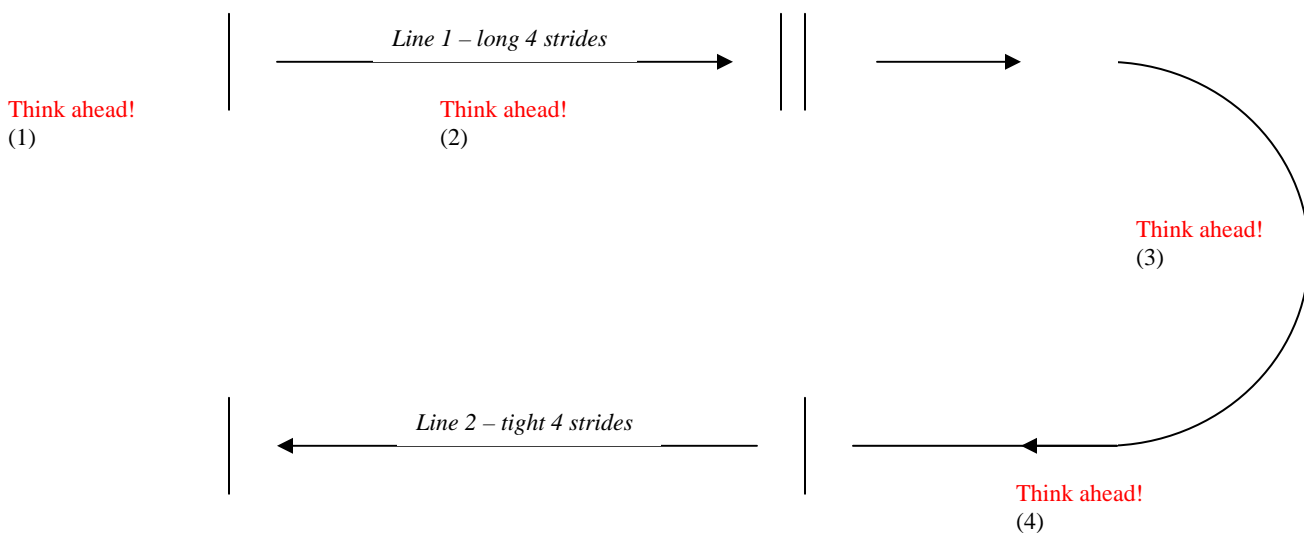
In this scenario when approaching jump 1 think ahead about how you need to land and move forward to jump 2 (long 3 stride). Between jumps 1 and 2 think ahead about line 2. Since you will be coming in with a forward canter over an oxer, line 2 will be very short. Think about how you will have to immediately balance your horse in line 2 while you are in line 1.

2. Bending lines



If you come into this set of 2 lines with a quiet canter it may make good sense to complete them in 5 quiet bending strides. If you find a long forward distance to jump 1 it may make sense to ride on a direct line from 1 to 2 and do 4 strides. This will set you up on a direct line to jump 3 and it will make sense to complete line 2 in a direct 4 as well.

3. Think of turns



- (1) Think about how you will land into line 1 to extend your horse forward for the long 4.
- (2) Think about how this long 4 will affect your next turn. Think about how much you want to balance your horse for this turn.
- (3) While looking for a distance think about quickly establishing the appropriate canter for the next line which will be short.
- (4) Think about the coming line and how it short it is... you will need to balance immediately upon landing in the line. If you balance too late, you will end up too deep at the final jump.

Muti-Tasking

The ability to connect your jumps on a course ultimately boils down to having an ability to multi-task. You must develop the ability to think ahead about your upcoming task while performing your current task. This is true in all sports. Think of a baseball player in the outfield that is catching a long ball. While he is maneuvering himself to negotiate a great catch he must also think about where he will throw the ball afterward. If he thinks about where to throw it after he made the catch the delay may cost his team the game. In the case of a rider you must learn how to think beyond each jump. And like any other advanced skill, this takes practice!