

Taking Turns

by Chris Delia

On any jumping course, whether in the hunter, jumper or equitation ring, you should treat your turns with as much respect as your jumps. If you fail to organize your horse correctly through the turns, you will come out of them with a disorganized and unbalanced horse and you will have a very difficult time finding your distance to the next jump after your turn.

Think of your course in segments, each segment being a jump or series of related jumps such as a line or a combination. Each turn gives you the opportunity to re-calibrate your horse's balance and rhythm and sets you up for the next segment on the course. If you master your turns, your horse will often finish the course with the same rhythm and level of control he began with.

A typical hunter course, for example, has four turns. If you haven't regained complete control throughout the first turn, that lack of control will carry over into the second turn, making it even more difficult to recover your horse's control and balance. This will result in an even more disorganized third turn and so on, resulting in a potential runaway situation by the time you have finished the course. This "snowball effect" can be broken up in each turn resulting in a smooth and controlled ride from beginning to end.

The anatomy of a turn

[Diagram 1] A typical turn can be broken up into three phases: the entry or balancing phase, the calibration phase and the emergence phase.

Phase 1 – Entry/balancing phase

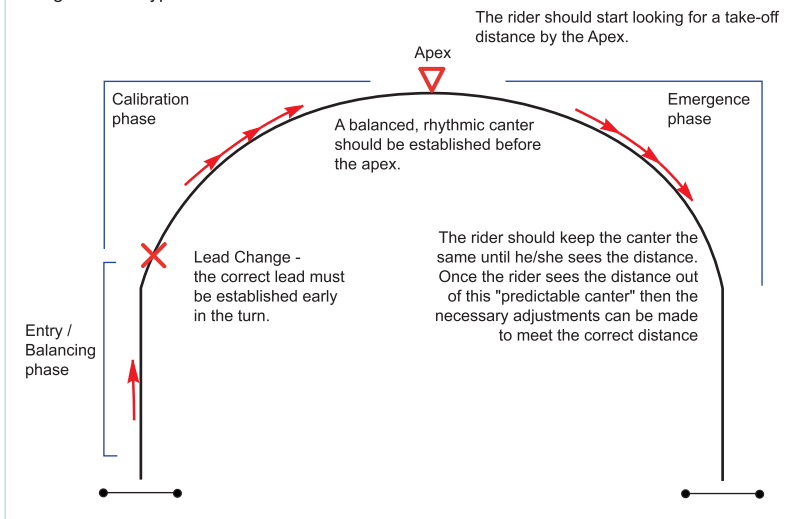
When your horse lands after a jump, most of his balance is on his forehead. This forward or "downhill" orientation causes most horses to run, just as we tend to want to run when we jog down a steep hill. It is the rider's responsibility to rebalance the horse before entering the turn, so as to have control



photo by Margie Forbes

Be careful not to look too far ahead to the next turn, because you risk tipping your balance in the direction you are looking.

Diagram 1 - A typical turn



through the turn. Compare this to driving a car in icy conditions. Imagine you are driving along a stretch of road at 80 km/hr and you are approaching a sharp bend in the road that has a speed limit of 20 km/hr. If you don't slow the car down well before entering the turn, you

will lose control over the vehicle and skid off the road. Similarly, if your horse is left alone after a jump and not balanced adequately, he would most likely run through the turn and lose his balance and control. You will be wrestling to regain control over your horse well



photo by Time Flies

(Above) Accuracy through turns will save seconds in a jump-off situation and give your horse the best opportunity to jump cleanly. (Below) Adjust your horse's canter rhythm through the turn in order to find the best take-off distance to the next jump.

after the turn when instead, you should be devoting most of your attention to finding a good take-off distance to your next jump.

Exercise – teaching your horse to balance into a turn

The goal here is to get your horse so well-practiced at balancing before turns, that he will actually help you balance himself every time you approach a turn after a jump.

Start out by placing a ground rail between two standards, simulating a jump. Make sure that it is located four to six strides before a turn. After cantering the ground rail, bring your horse to a full halt before the turn. This should not be too difficult as a ground rail, having no height, does not significantly force the

horse onto his forehand. Make sure you keep your horse in a straight line and that you are not rough with him. Be smooth and gradual with your aids, take your time, you don't have to bring him to a sliding stop like a reining horse!

If your horse is a little hot and likes to fight the bridle, simply steer him into the arena wall so that he will stop himself and not be concerned about fighting with you. You can also use your voice to help slow him down and sooth him through the process. The goal is to be as light and smooth with your rein aids as possible, so that your horse never becomes tense and he never learns to brace against you.

Once you have arrived at the halt, make your horse stand still for five seconds. This is important since you want to teach him to slow his mind down when entering a turn not just his body. Give him a pat, walk away and repeat the exercise. Repeat this exercise a number of times until you can execute it smoothly and consistently, with light aids and a relaxed, straight horse. If you practice enough, you will eventually feel your horse anticipate the halt and actually balance himself.

When you feel your horse is ready, replace the ground rail with a cross-rail or a small vertical and repeat the exercise. Now that you are actually jumping over a height element, your horse will land with more forward balance and momentum, making him have to try harder to balance before the halt. Keep repeating the exercise until he arrives at the halt as effortlessly as he did after the ground rail. You may increase the height of the jump more and more as you go, ensuring your horse stays relaxed and never fights you.

When you feel that he understands the exercise very well, you may increase the intensity even more by introducing an oxer or a line, which will force him to land with even more forward momen-

turn. He should never be given the opportunity to run into a turn and if you are strict enough with this exercise, he will learn to balance himself every time he approaches a turn.

Phase 2 – Calibrating the canter

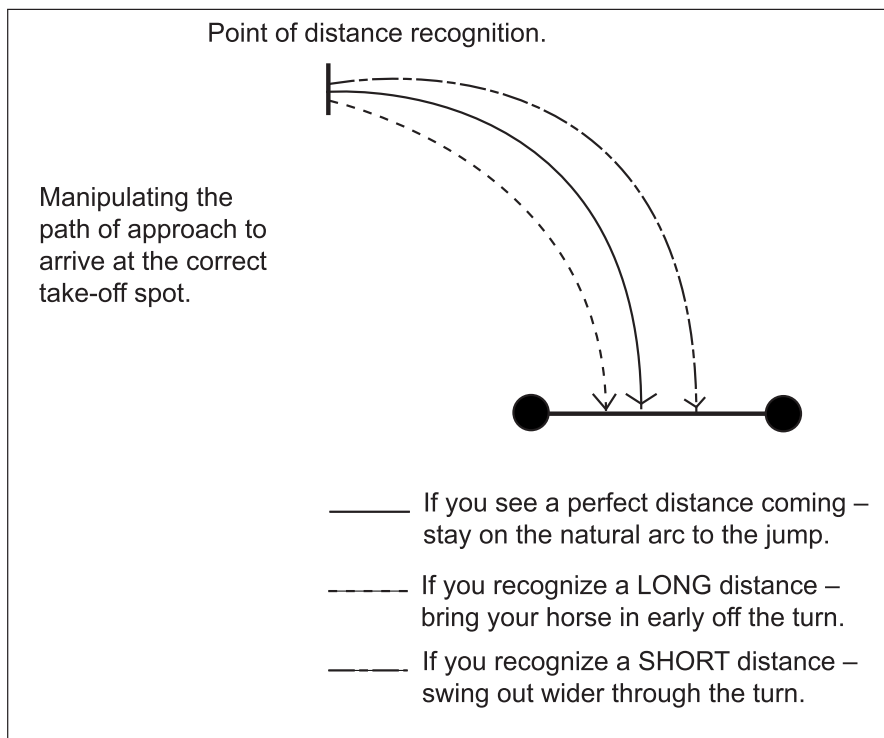
Your next job is to quickly "fix" your horse's canter through the turn so that you give yourself the best opportunity to find a good take-off distance to the next fence after the turn. The first step to calibrate your canter is to get a lead change by the beginning of the turn (if you landed on the correct lead after the jump, obviously you don't have to worry about this). After you switch to the correct lead, you must find your optimal canter rhythm before the apex of the turn (see diagram 1). If you remember in Part 1 – Finding the Sweet Spot (April Horse Sport), in order to find your take-off distances reliably, you must establish an even canter rhythm. The earlier you find this rhythm in the turn, the earlier you can start looking for a distance to your next jump.

Considerations when finding your rhythm through a turn:

1. Match the canter rhythm for the requirements of the next element on course. If you are approaching a quiet line, establish a canter rhythm that will allow you to jump into the line quietly. This will allow you to be more subtle when balancing your horse to the next jump. If the line is long, ask for a little stronger rhythm so that you land in the line with more momentum. You will then not have to work so hard to move your horse up to the next fence in the line.

2. Turns naturally slow down your horse's forward movement much the same way as your car tends to slow down through turns. When driving a car through a turn, you have to give it a little gas in order to maintain the same speed. This same phenomenon happens while turning a horse, so keep a

training tips



little leg on and soften on the reins to ensure you maintain your desired rhythm.

3. Be strict about re-establishing your rhythm no later than the midpoint of the turn. If you are still balancing your horse's canter after the midpoint of the turn, you will be on a decreasing stride on your way to the next jump and it will be difficult to find a distance.

Phase 3 – Emergence

The emergence phase begins at the apex of the turn and culminates at the line of approach to the next jump on course. During this phase, you are concerned with maintaining your canter rhythm and looking toward your next fence as early as possible to find a proper take-off distance.

Considerations for the emergence phase:

1. Start looking for a take-off distance to your next jump no later than the apex of the turn. In Part 1 – Finding the Sweet Spot, we learned that the earlier you look for a distance the earlier you will find one.

2. Many riders who look early through



This combination has achieved a smooth take-off and the rider is looking ahead through the turn the next jump.

their turns tend to let their horses fall in too early off the turn. This is caused by our natural tendency to tip our balance in the direction we are looking. By cutting the turn to the next jump, you will upset the horse's balance and find it difficult to find a distance. Make sure you keep your horse on the natural arc of the turn while looking toward the next fence. Keep your weight centered as you look and keep a little inside leg on

to prevent your horse from falling in too early.

3. Rider's who are insecure with their eye for take-off distances sometimes tend to swing too far out during the emergence phase in order to buy time to the next fence. Just as buying time by picking to your jumps causes your eye to fail, so will overshooting your turns. If your horse likes to drift out in his turns, block the drift with your outside leg. If he is not sensitive to leg yielding aids, you must incorporate them into your flatwork on a daily basis.

Finding distance through the turn

In Part 1 – Finding the Sweet Spot, we discussed how to develop your ability to see take-off distances on the straight approach to jumps. Here we will discuss how to develop your eye to see distances through a curved approach to a jump. When you see a distance through a turn, you are actually seeing

the distance assuming your horse will maintain his current rhythm and that he will follow the natural arc that leads him to the center of the jump.

How to get your horse to the distance you see

When you see a distance to a jump on a straight line, there are only two ways to adjust the horse to the distance you see. If you see it is coming long,