

Some Thoughts on Free Jumping

by Volker Ehlers

Ever since people started riding horses, they have tried to jump them over obstacles. This was never easy because horses, by nature, do not like to jump. They will go around an object or fence, going over it only when they are very scared.

Show jumping has its roots in hunting on horseback to catch wild game. On these hunting trips there were always logs or bushes in the way that needed to be jumped in order to have a successful hunt. Hunting with horses became a social event called foxhunting. People enjoyed it so much that when the hunting season was over they continued the sport by putting natural jumps in a big riding arena, creating a large natural jumping course. This eventually turned into show jumping, a sport that is only about 100 years old, unlike dressage that began in the sixteenth century.

One hundred years ago the English and Irish bred the best jumpers. As the sport caught on, other countries tried to produce horses that could jump well. Free jumping developed as a way to evaluate young horses to determine if their training should be oriented toward dressage or jumping. Today free jumping is on one hand a tool to determine if your horse is a jumper prospect or, on the other hand, a gymnastic exercise and a change of routine for your dressage horse.

Now I come to the main part of this article: evaluating the potential of the horse by watching it free jump. I wish to point out from the beginning that the biggest mistake people make in free jumping is putting the fences up too high! Even a talented young jumper does not jump well in the beginning if you start putting the rails up higher and higher. The young horse does not have the experience and cannot accurately judge the distances that you are putting in front of him. It does not take high fences to see the talent, the technique, the scope, the balance, or the braveness of the young horse. Fences do not need to be higher than 3 to 3½ feet to judge all of these components. The higher you jump a young and inexperienced horse, the more you have to help him with the voice and the whip. This distracts him and makes him afraid of you. He is unable to pay enough attention to the fences you are putting in front of him. If a horse crashes through the jumps in the beginning of his training, it takes a lot of heart away from him.

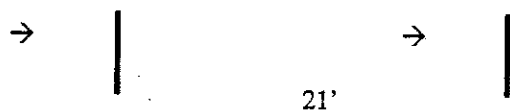
Many people think that horses must hurt themselves before you can see the real technique they have over a fence. This is very wrong. You want to see the natural way a young horse approaches a fence. You want to see how it manages distances and heights in a relaxed manner. You can only see this when you keep the fences low and simple. In fact, you can judge your young horses better over smaller fences than over big ones because you do not have to help the horse as much with the small fences. You can stand away from the fence and just watch how the horse handles things by himself.

The easiest way to start free jumping is by building a jumping chute in an indoor arena. From my experience I have found that horses started jumping on the left lead do best. This lead should be kept at least through the first year whenever you exercise free jumping. Even older horses do not do well free jumping one day on the left lead and the next day on the right.

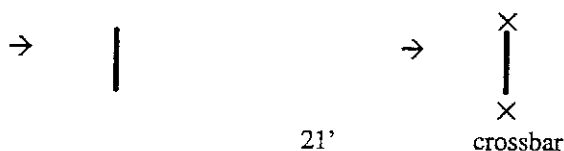
Once you have set up the chute, put a trot pole on the ground. You might lead the young horse through the chute the first time, but if you have good helpers and the horse behaves normally, you can just let it approach the chute and the ground pole on his own. Watching how the horse reacts can give you a good idea about how he will react in the future to new and difficult situations. Now trot or canter the horse through the chute and let him jump the single pole. In a 60 foot by 240 foot arena you will need at least three assistants to help the horse understand the system. The most important part is to make the horse feel comfortable trotting, cantering, or even walking over the ground pole. The people who help you must understand free jumping a young horse. They have to understand the reaction of a young horse going through a chute the first time. They need to know when to help the horse if it gets afraid. The assistants must be able to see if a light help with the whip is necessary or if helping by the voice or clucking will do. Cracking a whip does not help at all! Cracking a whip distracts the horse from concentrating on the fence or ground poles. Cracking a whip confuses every young horse. Whips are only meant to help guide the horse

through the chute. Once in a while a tap with the whip will encourage them to move forward and keep impulsion. It should not hurt! Another reason not to use whips as a force is that the horse pays too much attention to the person who runs after it with the whip. They have to trust the people who are working them so that they can concentrate totally on the new skill they are trying to learn.

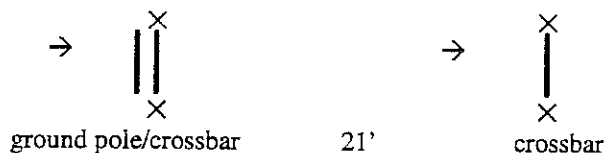
After the horse is comfortable with trotting or cantering the single pole, put a second pole in a one stride distance (21 feet) on the ground.



Let the horse canter over the two poles. Now build a small X-jump over the second ground pole and let the horse canter through this.



After this set up an X over the first ground pole with another ground pole immediately in front of it.



The more relaxed and harmonious the atmosphere, the better the horse starts to trust this new kind of work. The person who is in charge of the free jumping must have a good eye for determining how much of this work can be done on the first day. The trainer must see if the horse is bold enough to try a little more or if the horse is too sensitive and will require more time. If you can get a young horse to canter through a one stride combination with 2½ foot crossrails (measured at the standard), you have done enough for the first day. On the first day you should not expect the horse to jump with a perfect style or bascule. Too many new things are being presented for the young horse to stay relaxed or to stay in the correct speed or to find the right distance or manage the lengthening or shortening between the two small fences.

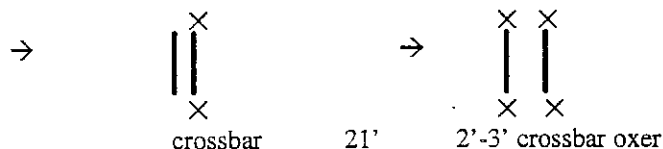
Even if the horse does extremely well the first day, do not try any more. Give him a chance to understand the whole system mentally and let him finish with a good experience. I cannot emphasize enough the necessity of teamwork between the trainer and his assistants. These three minds have to work as one team, just as the head has to know what the right and left hand are doing. Some helpers have no feeling for the situation at all. They cannot see if the horse has a problem and does not understand how to approach the fence. Some helpers simply do not understand how to lead a horse through the jumping chute just by placing their bodies at the correct angle next to or behind the horse, nor do they understand the necessity for being careful in the use of the whip. The trainer has to keep his eyes constantly on the horse while it is in the arena. It is always his decision whether to put more pressure on the horse or slow down his approach. If a young horse refuses a jump, there is no reason to scream at the horse or hit it. Every young horse can be confused about the distance or can hit the take off point in the wrong stride or decide to escape the chute altogether. It is in these instances that the trainer and his two helpers must act as one person to help the horse. The helpers act just as before, with only the trainer putting pressure on the horse as it approaches the fence. He must go closer to the fence and be very careful not to move quickly toward the front or the face of the approaching horse. He should move toward the horse from the side and slightly from behind so that he can use his body, voice, and the whip to support the forward movement of the horse. The trainer must let the horse know he is there helping the horse to manage this exercise, that he can stay relaxed, but there is no alternative but to jump.

It is more important in the beginning to get the little things done easily and to have fun than to do it over 15 or 20 times. It never gets better if it is overdone. Horses have a good memory. They remember the bad things as well as the good.

At the start of teaching free jumping, it is important to adjust the distance between the jumps according to the stride of the horse. At this point we do not try to teach the horse to adjust his stride to a difficult distance. Even though we have talked about 21 feet as being one stride length between fences, it is a little bit difficult to talk about the exact number of feet to put between the two poles. The length of stride depends upon the horse. If it is a yearling, the stride would be approximately 18 feet. If it is a two year old, the stride would be 18-20 feet. A three year old should have 21 feet as the distance between two small fences. Some people might raise their eyebrows at the free jumping of a yearling or two year old. If you keep the fences simple and low and the encouragement easy, nothing bad will happen to the young horse. If you are raising jumpers, it is important to evaluate the potential of your offspring. If they have no talent for jumping, you can see it early enough and decide that your horse is more suitable for dressage. Always think that free jumping is on one hand a tool to determine if your horse is a jumper prospect or, on the other hand, a gymnastic exercise and a change of routine for your dressage horse.

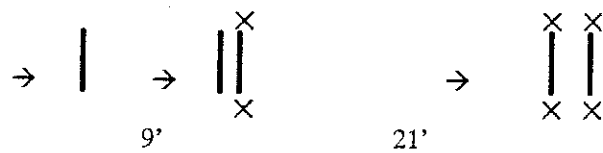
It is also very important to consider in which direction you have set up your chute. If it is set up toward the exit of your arena, add one to two feet between the jumps. If it is set up away from the exit, subtract one to two feet. The young horse always slows down when it moves away from the exit. Remember also not to use brightly colored fence materials in the beginning. It might scare the horse to death! Keep it natural. Brown or white will make the start easier. Set the two crossbars up in an inviting way so it looks smooth and friendly when the horse approaches the fence.

Now we come to the second day. For the horse to become comfortable with jumping, you must have a routine. Do not change anything. We do the same thing that we did on the first day. At the end, if the horse has shown progress from the first day, we try a small oxer as the second jump in the combination. The oxer should be set up over the second crossbar. The first pole is two feet high, the second pole is two and a half to three feet high, and the spread is two to three feet wide.

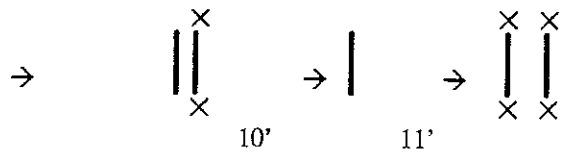


This helps the horse to judge the height and width more easily. Now it is important for the trainer to keep his eyes on the horse, for when new elements are added the horse may react to any little change. The trainer also has to react and help the youngster with either more or less pressure, remembering at all times that the whip is used for guidance and not for punishment.

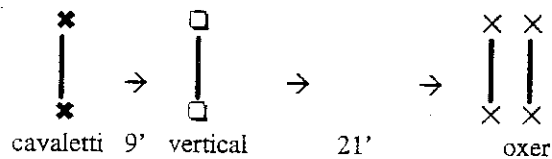
Having repeated this exercise for three or four days, give the horse a rest so that he has time for these lessons to "sink in." Check the horse carefully for soundness. You should always protect the horse with leg wraps, bell boots or splint boots during these exercises. To maintain and protect the soundness of the horse during jumping, you must pay particular attention to the warm-up time proceeding jumping or free running. If the horse has been turned out in a pasture or a large pen before starting the work, the warm-up time is short. Lounging five minutes in each direction would be sufficient. If the horse has not been out of his stall that day, more time must be taken with the warm-up. Like every other athlete, the horse's muscles and tendons need careful stretching and suppling before exercise. Most accidents and injuries occur when horses are worked without adequate warm-up. After the day off, start your jumping session again with all the exercises from the first day. By the fifth day of free jumping, the horse should be familiar with the simple fences. Now the horse will begin to show itself in a little different way. You should see a more balanced horse over the small fences. You can expect to see the horse showing his natural technique over the jumps. By now the horse is no longer afraid of the new exercises. Now you can start adding new elements to the jumping chute. Always keep in mind that the speed with which you progress depends entirely on your horse. You may start by adding a ground pole 9 to 10 in front of the first crossbar



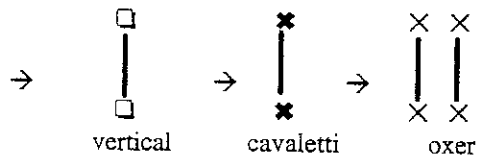
or you may add a ground pole in the middle of the first and second jumps.



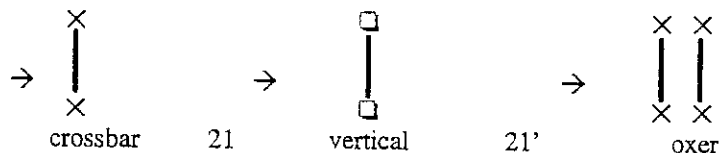
This is a good way to slow down a horse with a tendency to rush or one who jumps flat. If this does not help, you might change the first jump in the combination to a vertical about 2½ feet high. Instead of a ground pole, add a cavaletti 9 feet in front of the vertical.



This will make the horse pay more attention to the jump than just a vertical would. You can also take the ground pole in between the two fences of the combination and replace it with a cavaletti.

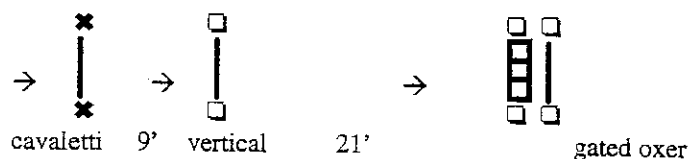


You need to be very careful in doing this as sometimes the result is the opposite of the desired effect. Most young horses slow down and start relaxing with the kind of exercise, but some become scared with so many obstacles in front of them and rush faster. If the horse becomes scared, you may try another method for preventing rushing. You may set up another crossbar 21 feet in front of the vertical so the horse does not see so many poles squeezed together in a short distance.

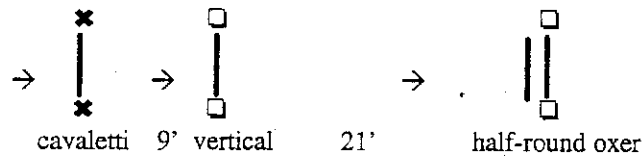


With this triple combination, the horse is able to take a little more time to study each jump.

After have the horse relaxed and jumping free through a triple combination for a couple of days, you may rest the horse again for a few days. Starting free jumping lessons again, you can add another kind of fence into your combination such as a small gate in the last oxer



or a little half-round



Changes should always depend on how the horse accepts new things in his training. You might lead your horse to the new fence, allowing him to see it before asking him to jump it, so that its newness will not come as a big surprise. It will be a big surprise when the horse runs free and is confronted with a new jump. The trainer should expect the horse to hesitate in front of any new fence and always should be prepared to support the forward movement and obedient jumping with his body, voice, and whip moving from behind the horse.

After two to three weeks of these exercises, the horse should be able to jump a combination of three fences in a jumping chute with heights of $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 feet including different colored poles, small gates, walls, or half-rounds. If your horse does this in a relaxed way after three weeks of training and he is still enjoying the work, you did a good job. Congratulations!