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Mid Season Gymnastic
By Alexander Grayton



A mid-season gymnastic exercise for rhythm and technique

Gymnastic exercises are an essential part of both training horses and preparing horses for competition. They help reinforce a quality canter, ensure a consistent rhythm, encourage proper technique, and of course help to improve a horse's agility and strength.

It must be noted that gymnastic exercises aren't only for the horses! It is a great opportunity for a rider to work on proper position and to practice the continuous connection and feeling with their horse.

When in the middle of show season, it sometimes becomes a priority to limit the number of times or level of difficulty of schooling at home in between shows. Especially with older horses, it can be beneficial to save the jumps for the horse show! But of course there must still be some training, some brushing up, some practicing at home – gymnastic exercises are a great way to do that

One exercise in particular that I quite like will be described here. It makes use of placement poles as well as the jumps themselves. The measurements between the poles and jumps are very important – it is a key tool to reinforce technique, rhythm and overall jump.

Start by placing a pole on the ground. Use a measuring tape to set a small vertical 8 feet away. Continuing from the vertical, place a pole 9 feet further along. Add another small vertical 9 feet after this last pole. Finally, add one more pole 8 feet away from the vertical. So we have essentially an 18' one stride combination, with placement poles on the way in, in the middle, and on the way out of the combination.

On first inspection, this requires a fairly short stride. If we assume that a horse cantering in the show arena would have a 12' stride, our exercise is set on a 8-9' stride! It is clear that collection is part of what we will need.

The poles on the entry and exit of the exercise are set even shorter than the jumps themselves, meaning that we are stressing the importance of how we approach and leave the exercise. Often trainers will tell their students to remember to ride the landing side of a jump – not just the run up to it. This exercise emphasizes that point.

Before even beginning this exercise, be sure to warm your horse up properly. This means not only should the muscles be warm, but also you should work on rideability and connection. You should be able to lengthen and shorten your stride without changing the rhythm of the canter, and without losing the supple and soft connection to your horse's mouth as you do.

Pick up a normal canter for flatwork (which should be a 10-11' stride), and head on through the jumps. The rider's job at the jumps is to be clear to the horse of their expectations. If the horse locks on to the exercise and tries to change the rhythm or get away from the supple connection, work at regaining the rhythm and connection all the way up to the first pole (even at the expense of finding a great 'distance'). If you arrive to the first pole in a regulated rhythm and supple connection, the horse will be able to study the exercise and answer the questions that it poses. The horse will naturally assess the placement of the poles and react (i.e. land and take a stride) accordingly.

The important part of the exercise is to practice the rideability and rhythm – the jumps are really just another tool, and not the whole exercise. Given the short distances, I would recommend not exceeding 1.20-1.25m in height, depending on the experience level of horse and rider.

Remember the gymnastic exercise is used to reaffirm proper technique, style and rhythm, and isn't meant to be a high-jumping contest. You can easily prepare a grand prix horse for competition without exceeding 1.20m in height for this exercise!

Always wear a helmet, especially when jumping, and always jump under the supervision of a professional coach or trainer. Even the best riders in the world wouldn't jump on their own!