



The Importance of Planning Backwards

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The importance of planning backwards

At a competition in the jumper ring we are all afforded the opportunity to walk the course before attempting to ride it. We see the plan posted at the ingate, try desperately to remember the order of it (thankfully nowadays we can take a picture on our phones for future reference), and strike off into the ring and begin our assessment of what we are about to do.

Normally we, and the mass of other riders and trainers in the class, head to the first jump and meander our way about the course in an orderly manner, counting strides, checking out turns and other variables that might come into play depending on the situation. Then at the end of the course walk we discuss stride numbers before rushing to the warm up ring to get ready.

I think most people do it on some level (possibly subconsciously), but I am a proponent of purposefully going over the course plan in segments and in reverse. The goal here is to identify where each particular segment begins and ends, how the segments might connect together, and how within each segment the course will unfold in order to make a plan to successfully execute the tasks at hand.

For example, I consider any combination or line of jumps that you would normally consider walking the strides as part of a segment. As soon as you reach a part of the course where there is a long stretch around a corner that you don't need to walk strides (or a long straightaway that you wouldn't walk) then you have reached the end of one segment and are approaching the beginning of a new one; this is the zone that connects two segments of a course together.

In these connecting bits, a rider might choose to purposefully take a breath and regroup, maybe plan to shorten their reins and recompose, maybe find a place to duck in tighter with a slower horse to be mindful of time-allowed, or to redevelop their canter in some way after a particularly taxing segment of the course. There are a lot of ways that the connecting bits can be useful, and they should be part of the plan.

Within each segment of the course, which could be quite long if there are a lot of related distances, we shouldn't only walk strides, but also try to figure out how each jump of a segment fits together in order to think and plan the rideability questions in a way that best suits our particular horse. That is, a straight line of three jumps shouldn't be only read as "vertical, short 4 strides to skinny vertical, then long 5 strides to a wide oxer." There is enough information here that we should do better than just numbers.

Let's try to plan it in reverse. We finish this segment with a wide oxer – a test of our scope and power. In order to jump this jump well, we need to make sure our canter is powerful enough, and



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we mustn't be too far away from it (no sense making the oxer even wider than it already is). So, how can we help make sure we get up to that oxer with power?

We should jump the jump before it already with the intention of stepping up the line. Meaning, we don't want to get parked at the skinny vertical, as then we would land short and sloppy, making the 5 strides to the oxer tough. How do we arrive at the skinny vertical thinking forward already, when we have a short 4 strides to get there? We better come in to the first vertical very organized and on a gymnastic-type canter, in order to ensure we are fitting in the 4 strides so well that we can even put a bit extra power in by the time we get to the skinny, in order to step up to the oxer in 5 strides.

So the original plan of "short 4 to the skinny, big 5 to the oxer" has been replaced by "gymnastic canter to first vertical, power up at the skinny in 4, continuing power 5 strides to oxer." It's a small tweak in the verbiage, but it offers a much more thorough analysis of the test, and hopefully results in a ride in that segment of the course that looks effortless. In order to effectively ride this plan we just made for this segment of the course, we have already in mind how we enter the segment – that is, we have a plan for how to use the space that connects this segment with the one prior: we want to have a gymnastic style canter entering this segment.

We now backtrack further.

We have a plan to ride this segment of the course. We know we want to connect to this segment with a gymnastic canter, so when we leave the prior segment we know already what we want to do – shorten the stride while keeping power.

And we should work our way back through the course in a similar manner, figuring out how each segment works in reverse, and how to plan our entry into it, all the way to the very beginning of the course.

This ultimately boils down to a simple 3-step process:

1. Walk the course from start to finish and get a sense of the number of strides between related jumps and to identify the segments.
2. Work through the course in reverse through each segment individually to find tough spots that need extra planning for you and/or your horse; identify the work that needs to be done to connect segments together in reverse.
3. Remember that when you go in the ring to compete, ride the plan forwards, one jump at a time, with the analysis you have done operating in the back of your mind.

Give this a try at your next competition, and see if "Plan Backwards, Ride Forwards" makes for a more successful and effortless ride!



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Real World Example:

Here is an analysis of the last line of a CSI 5* 1.45m competition at the Spruce Meadows 'North American' tournament.

The last line was a triple combination, set vertical-vertical-oxer, and related distance to the final oxer in a straight line.

The measurements of the triple combination were roughly 35'6" A to B, making it quite short two strides at that height, followed by roughly 25'6" B to C, making it quite long to a very wide oxer. It then walked approximately 79' to the final oxer, or effectively 5.5 strides.

As discussed above, the simple way to describe this is "short 2, big 1, then 5 or 6 strides depending on your horse."

Using the reverse plan, I would suggest the following analysis. The last oxer is quite tall and wide and was the 13th jump on course. Power will be at a premium here, given that the horse will likely be getting tired. If you have a short-strided horse the 6 remains an option, but for a big-strided horse it should be 5, especially given that the one stride from B to C in the triple is quite long and C is a wide oxer out. With a big push out of the triple, the horse will land going already making the 5 strides to the last oxer a reality. Now, how do we make sure we are pushing (and making it) to the oxer out of the triple? It would be best if we didn't get parked at B in two strides from A. Rather, we would love to be pushing a bit already at B. But with such limited space for 2 strides from A to B, we must then come into the triple on a very short stride.

Now, re-worded forwards, our plan is: "extremely short stride coming into the triple, to get to push a bit a B, continuing big push at C, continuing big 5 strides to the last oxer."

In reality this is exactly how it rode. If a rider did not come into the triple on a short enough stride, they were slowed down excessively at B, making C a near impossibility to reach the back rail (this was the most frequently faulted jump in the course), and making the 5 strides to the last jump even longer, but knowing that 6 strides was simply too weak of a ride for such a big jump.

Thankfully, my horse was extremely receptive to this plan, he shortened his stride before the triple as much as possible, and he jumped out of the line perfectly and with ease!