



Course Design for young horses Part 1

Peter Grant

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As a course designer, setting courses for young horses is one of the most challenging but rewarding aspects of the job. With young horses we are working with trainers and riders to develop their cherished investment from a raw, inexperienced, and sometimes timid baby, into a confident young athlete with the skills and education to begin his or her Grand Prix career.

Educating the horse fully with positive experiences is easier said than done. The balance between developing youngsters for their Grand Prix career, while not over-facing them at any point, can be a fine line to walk. The Cardinal Sin of course designing for young horses is to take their confidence away, and this can happen in just a moment to any horse in any class. On the other hand if we are not asking enough of these horses, or, as I prefer to think of it, we are not 'showing them enough', we are not giving the riders and trainers an opportunity to develop their horses to their full potential.

We, as course designers, must ensure that by the time horses are graduating from the 8 year old division, they have not only been shown all aspects of their future job but have also been set up for success in doing so. I always like to think of it as trying to show them what they can do, as opposed to what they can't do, which really touches on the objective and philosophy of young horse course design.

The quality of a horse's jump is really an indicator of several other aspects of a given show round. If something is missing, the jump is often the first thing to suffer. In my view the bascule is a very good indicator of the quality of distances the horse is getting.

Compression of stride is the final stage of training for a young horse, and it requires a great deal of strength. As such, it is something that needs to be avoided entirely with the younger groups of horses (4, 5 and 6 years old), and must be shown in a sympathetic manner to the 7 and 8 year olds. When I see compression being demanded too early or incorrectly for young horses, it leads to inversion at take-off. What happens in this case is that the horse has neither the training nor the strength to properly collect on to the hind end to jump. The resulting jumping effort is less of a jump and more of a hop, as it does not allow the horse to use their body fully over the jump.

Through my experience as a course designer, I must recognize when a course, or any part of a course, is causing stress and tension. It's true that there will always be individual horses who come in with pre-existing issues, may be stressed and have problems on course, regardless of what the course designer sets. However, if it becomes a pattern, even if you see more than a couple horses having problems, we may assume that there is a fault in the course itself.

For young horse divisions the horses that come in with those pre-existing issues should not be shrugged off. Maybe the problems were not created by that course, but the course designer should ask him- or herself whether there is anything they can do to remedy the situation. While at the "Sporting" (i.e. top) levels of jumping we take little consideration, outside of safety, for the bottom end of the group, at the developmental and young horse levels the bottom of the group must always be considered. That is to say that a course that is challenging but appropriate for the best young horses will not be impossible for the



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slower developing youngsters. Provided that all the necessary educational elements are incorporated it won't harm a young horse to have too much confidence.

Occasionally there will be horses that are quite far behind in development, or that lack the talent of others. By setting an appropriate course for only this group, we will be doing a disservice to the rest of the group, so the balance must be sought by the course designer to look after all of the horses properly.