



www.albertashowjumpers.com

Following the pulse of Alberta show jumpers.

Understanding Corking

Kaitlyn McAleese

A basic understanding of the mechanics of corking, paired with an ability to assess the conditions of a particular track and act accordingly, are skills grooms, riders and trainers should all have in their arsenal. The way you choose to cork your horse on a particular day can affect the way they carry themselves on course, how well they jump, and most importantly, their ability to go from start to finish safely.

However, before a groom or rider can start to develop a more sophisticated understanding of corking styles they must learn the fundamentals. To start, before an event in which you plan to use corks, or better yet, at the beginning of show season, you need to make sure to ask your farrier to tap your horse's shoes. The amount of holes, and the placement of the holes can vary a little based on personal preference, but typically he will drill two in each of the front shoes, one hole per outside corner, and the same in the hind shoes often with a third hole placed below the outside corner. Once this is complete, you will need to make sure you have the proper equipment and that you can use it comfortably and relatively efficiently.

In your kit, you should have a nail or a handled hole pick, a flat rubber tap, a magnetic dish to hold all your corks and tools, and an adjustable wrench. The flat rubber tap is preferable, because if the horse unexpectedly puts its foot down while you are using one of the T-shaped ones, the end will snap off in the hole and you will probably need to get a farrier to fix it for you. In your initial cork collection I would suggest making sure you have small, medium and large lengths to choose from, a set of flat road corks, a few sharp corks, and a few extra wide dull ones. One or two extras of each type is a good idea as well, because corks tend to go missing from time to time. It is also handy to have a bag of cotton hole plugs, for when you feel you need to prepare the holes ahead of time to make the job of corking your horse go faster when it is showtime.

When you are ready to begin corking your horse, he should either be on rubber matted crossies, or in his stall. The only disadvantage to doing it in the stall is that it is easy to lose a cork or a wrench in the shavings if you aren't careful, and sometimes the hind feet can be a little difficult to work on if it is a large horse that takes up a lot of room in the stall. Whenever a horse is in his stall with corks in, he should have boots on and he should be tied up, which means ideally, this shouldn't happen very long before you head to the ring. If there is a long walk to the ring with lots of concrete, it is much safer to cork them at the ring with someone holding them on either the grass or sand, as they can easily slip and cut themselves when they are corked on a hard surface. If this is the case, I would suggest picking out the holes with the nail and cleaning the holes with the rubber tap, by screwing it in the hole clockwise, and then stuffing the holes with the cotton plugs, using your nail to get them in far enough. You can dip the plugs in baby oil if you like, which seems to keep the hole cleaner, the plug in better, and helps the corks go in easier. This is a good plan if you are going to cork them as soon as you get to the ring, but perhaps if the warm-up ring is sand and the corks you chose are for very wet grass, it may be more appropriate to cork them only for your last few warm-up jumps. In this case, I would suggest putting flat, road corks in at the barn because the cotton plugs can come out if a lot of time is being spent on the damp sand. You will not have time to re-pick and tap your holes halfway through your horse's warm-up so it is much more efficient to simply swap the road corks for the corks you want to use in the ring.

Regardless of what your plan for corking is, you should always bring your corking tools to the ring with you. You should have extras of the corks your horse is wearing in case one is lost while you are at the ring, and always check at the in-gate that this isn't the case. Keep in mind, that if this does happen it is usually because they were not tightened enough with the wrench in the first place. I would also suggest having a couple different options that you can upgrade or downgrade to, should the conditions change or appear different after you have seen a few horses jump.

When actually choosing the type of corks to use, there are a couple things to consider. Wide, dull corks are typically used for very wet, loose footing because in those types of conditions you are trying to give your horse a better chance of grabbing onto what little footing he has to work with. You don't need any sharpness in this situation because the soft ground will be giving to the cork easily already, and you don't want to risk your horse cutting himself with a sharper cork when there is a higher risk of slipping. Alternatively, when the ground is hard or the grass is very long, a sharp cork is ideal because it will prevent the horse from sliding across the top of the footing. I would still be hesitant to put a sharp cork on the inside of any foot, because the risk of brushing the opposite foot is too great. Beyond the style of cork, one should also consider how long the corks should be based on how much the footing is giving to the horse's steps. Softer ground definitely may warrant more length, but too long on solid ground can put unnecessary stress on the horse's legs, and can leave them particularly at risk for a soft tissue injury. With that in mind, I tend to prefer corking conservatively in front, and will always leave the bigger corks for hind shoes only. Furthermore, the biggest corks should be the two corner holes in the hind shoes, and the third hole should be corked with something of the same or lesser length. If you were to put your longest cork in the third hole, your horse's ankles will be forced to turn in a little bit because the highest point will be on the outside. Your horse should have a flat base of support to jump from and I think corking unevenly inhibits this principle. Finally, perhaps most importantly, never should you have bigger corks in front than behind.

While most people only cork on grass, I have known riders who feel the horse should always have at least hind corks in, especially when jumping bigger classes. There are both pros and cons to this theory that should be discussed when deciding how to prepare your horse for each class, however, if you are using corks on sand, less is almost always more. Regardless of your reason for corking and how you choose to do it, as with everything, your number one concern should be the safety and comfort of the horse. Remove the corks as soon as possible, even if that means you need to do it at the ring before you go back to the barn. Always put away only corks that are clean and dry. If you rinse them with water every time you use them, and immediately dry them very thoroughly, scrubbing or soaking will never be necessary and you will never have to struggle to put in corks that have rusted. If you are already preparing your horse with the diligence, knowledge, and genuine concern for well-being that a good program insists upon, your approach to corking should be nothing more than a logical extension of your existing protocol.

