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For Albertans About Albertans

Joey Rycroft has been a senior EC FEI L1 course designer since 2011, having built and designed courses at horse shows all over North America. He is also the co-founder of Pacific Equine Sport along with fellow course designer Peter Grant and Caroline Weinger. Pacific Equine Sport is a comprehensive equestrian service company, providing property development consultation, footing installation, and jump equipment design and construction. In this article, the first in a series about course design for 'Alberta Show Jumpers,' Joey will discuss the importance of the course walk prior to competition.

Walking the Walk – Related Distances

Until April of 2013 I lived in Maple Ridge, BC. I was not born into equestrian sport. Far from it really, but since it found me at the age of 10 it has consumed my life ever since. A rider until the age of 16, I managed to compete up to the 1.15m level before stopping due to financial reasons. After selling my horse, I began working as a jump crew almost immediately just to be able to stay involved in the sport I love. The progression to design came naturally from jump crew over the years.

I began working in Alberta as a jump crew member starting in 2004, and over the years Calgary has become a second home. As a place I always looked forward to going to, my friend Peter Grant and I discussed the benefits of moving to Alberta. When the opportunity arose, it became reality fairly quickly. Being the home of Spruce Meadows made it logical for both of us to move to Calgary, as we work nearly all of the tournaments at that facility. Also with new farms popping up in addition to the many already in existence there, the need for equestrian products is certainly present.

As a course designer, I walk a lot of distances. We measure almost all distances in a course, but our walk is one of our most effective tools we have to gauge how a line will actually ride, or to estimate the success of future plans. For riders, the walk is the only tool available to judge how a related distance will ride, so having a correct walk can give an edge to a competitor with accurate knowledge on how to ride a particular line on course.

A lot of trainers may teach the importance of "sticking to the plan," and having specific knowledge of your course in competition is a great way to achieve that plan. A consistent walk is the foundation of a good walk. While most people believe the average horse stride is 12 feet in length, this has been proven to be false. Over the years, through breeding and development of horses, the sport has created horses with a step longer than that. But, for the purpose of walking a competition course, learning to take steps three feet at a time, such that four steps equals twelve feet, is a fairly easy and accurate method of honing your walk.

Knowing your horse's step is key as well. Knowing how your horse's stride will differ from the standard reference twelve foot stride is important.

To create a consistent walk step of three feet in length, use tape to mark off four three-foot sections in an area of your barn aisle that you walk by often. When passing these marks, look at how close to the evenly spaced pieces of tape you step. Make adjustments to your stride length to the reference length, and count your steps in your head at the same time. Soon enough you will develop a very consistent and repeatable walk.

If your facility has access to twelve foot jump rails, simply lay one down on the ground safely. Starting at one end of the rail, walk four steps and see if you arrive perfectly at the other end of the rail. This will test if your walk stride length is consistent and accurate over several steps in a row. If you don't reach the end of the rail in time, lengthen your stride, and if you reach the end too early, shorten your stride. While this is an effective test, it really takes considerable repetition. The tape marks in a barn aisle will be more accessible on a regular basis.

In a future article, we will further examine walking courses in relation to hills, fence placement, jump material and time allowed. Thank you for reading and good luck to all those heading to a winter circuit this season!