

Free Jumping: Technique, Ability and More

by Ludwig Christmann

Free jumping is an excellent tool to evaluate a horse's jumping ability. You can recognize especially well the inherited disposition, because environmental factors are negligible. The setting up of jumps can easily be standardized and the horse is without weight or influence of a rider. Additionally, these tests may be started at an age when the horse should not yet be worked under saddle.

Free jumping in the mare test includes one score for technique and one for ability.

The evaluation of technique: Ideally the horse's technique over the jump should be "round" with an arched back and a low nose. This is called a "good bascule". The lower forelegs should be angled toward the nose in order to inhibit faults from hanging legs. Uneven forelegs, folded under the body are not desirable. Similar things are to be said about the hind legs. Hind legs are scored low if the horse pulls them under its body or lets them hang. The horse should "open" itself over the fence. Other undesirable techniques over the jump are a high raised head and neck. That will cause a straight back instead of an arched one. Hind legs should be included in the arch.

The evaluation of ability: This is more difficult. No standardized heights exist that would enable a judge to say, for instance; if the horse jumps one meter it receives a score of 6; at 1.10 meters a score of 7; at 1.20 meters a score of 8, etc. However, decisive for the evaluation is the overall behavior a horse exhibits before, during and after the jumps and the carefulness it uses to handle the given test. It would be unthinkable to impose equal heights on all horses. If it is clear that a horse has difficulty jumping low fences, it should receive an adequate score after two or three rounds. On the other end, for the highest scores of 9 or 10, a horse has to convincingly jump an impressive fence.

Technique and scope are closely connected to each other. Most horses are able to jump high fences if they have good technique. It may happen that horses with outstanding scope do not take low fences seriously and only show their capability over higher jumps.

There are always exemptions to the rule. For instance the stylish jumper ("Manierspringer"). Over low jumps everything is excellent and harmonious and looks great, but the horse stops at higher fences. The opposite occurs too—a horse with less technique has enough power to jump everything. Recently, I experienced a mare in one of the mare performance tests. She jumped the highest fences with a high nose, a tense back (no bascule at all), but without any faults. That may be okay during free jumping, but may lead to difficulties under saddle. This horse's scores were three points apart for technique and scope.

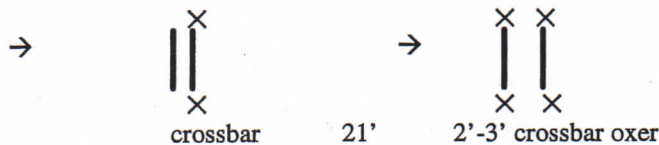
So far I have discussed the horse's quality over a fence, but that is not all that is taken into account. The willingness to jump, the aptitude over a fence and the behavior between the jumps are very important. Does the horse enjoy jumping and skillfully attack a jump or must it be pushed and driven to the jump? Can the horse find its spot at the jump and does it correct its striding in front of it? What is its reaction after an error? Is it able to comprehend the mistake and is it more careful the next time?

It is more important in the beginning to get the little things done easily and to have fun than to do it over 15 or 20 times. It never gets better if it is overdone. Horses have a good memory. They remember the bad things as well as the good.

At the start of teaching free jumping, it is important to adjust the distance between the jumps according to the stride of the horse. At this point we do not try to teach the horse to adjust his stride to a difficult distance. Even though we have talked about 21 feet as being one stride length between fences, it is a little bit difficult to talk about the exact number of feet to put between the two poles. The length of stride depends upon the horse. If it is a yearling, the stride would be approximately 18 feet. If it is a two year old, the stride would be 18-20 feet. A three year old should have 21 feet as the distance between two small fences. Some people might raise their eyebrows at the free jumping of a yearling or two year old. If you keep the fences simple and low and the encouragement easy, nothing bad will happen to the young horse. If you are raising jumpers, it is important to evaluate the potential of your offspring. If they have no talent for jumping, you can see it early enough and decide that your horse is more suitable for dressage. Always think that free jumping is on one hand a tool to determine if your horse is a jumper prospect or, on the other hand, a gymnastic exercise and a change of routine for your dressage horse.

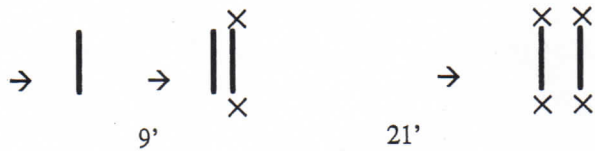
It is also very important to consider in which direction you have set up your chute. If it is set up toward the exit of your arena, add one to two feet between the jumps. If it is set up away from the exit, subtract one to two feet. The young horse always slows down when it moves away from the exit. Remember also not to use brightly colored fence materials in the beginning. It might scare the horse to death! Keep it natural. Brown or white will make the start easier. Set the two crossbars up in an inviting way so it looks smooth and friendly when the horse approaches the fence.

Now we come to the second day. For the horse to become comfortable with jumping, you must have a routine. Do not change anything. We do the same thing that we did on the first day. At the end, if the horse has shown progress from the first day, we try a small oxer as the second jump in the combination. The oxer should be set up over the second crossbar. The first pole is two feet high, the second pole is two and a half to three feet high, and the spread is two to three feet wide.

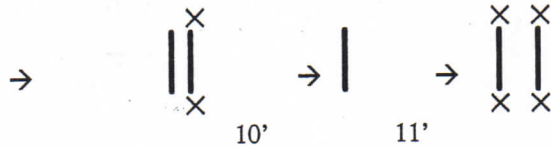


This helps the horse to judge the height and width more easily. Now it is important for the trainer to keep his eyes on the horse, for when new elements are added the horse may react to any little change. The trainer also has to react and help the youngster with either more or less pressure, remembering at all times that the whip is used for guidance and not for punishment.

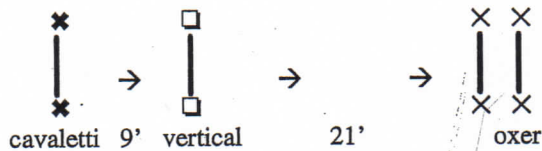
Having repeated this exercise for three or four days, give the horse a rest so that he has time for these lessons to "sink in." Check the horse carefully for soundness. You should always protect the horse with leg wraps, bell boots or splint boots during these exercises. To maintain and protect the soundness of the horse during jumping, you must pay particular attention to the warm-up time preceding jumping or free running. If the horse has been turned out in a pasture or a large pen before starting the work, the warm-up time is short. Lounging five minutes in each direction would be sufficient. If the horse has not been out of his stall that day, more time must be taken with the warm-up. Like every other athlete, the horse's muscles and tendons need careful stretching and suppling before exercise. Most accidents and injuries occur when horses are worked without adequate warm-up. After the day off, start your jumping session again with all the exercises from the first day. By the fifth day of free jumping, the horse should be familiar with the simple fences. Now the horse will begin to show itself in a little different way. You should see a more balanced horse over the small fences. You can expect to see the horse showing his natural technique over the jumps. By now the horse is no longer afraid of the new exercises. Now you can start adding new elements to the jumping chute. Always keep in mind that the speed with which you progress depends entirely on your horse. You may start by adding a ground pole 9 to 10 in front of the first crossbar



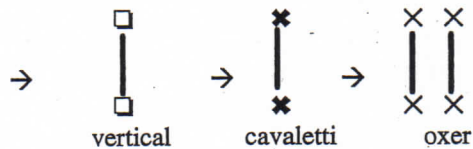
or you may add a ground pole in the middle of the first and second jumps.



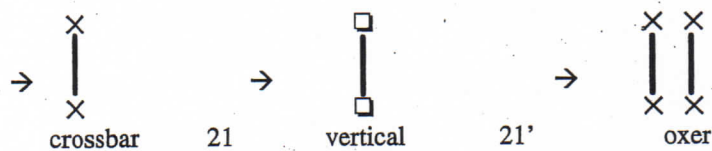
This is a good way to slow down a horse with a tendency to rush or one who jumps flat. If this does not help, you might change the first jump in the combination to a vertical about 2½ feet high. Instead of a ground pole, add a cavaletti 9 feet in front of the vertical.



This will make the horse pay more attention to the jump than just a vertical would. You can also take the ground pole in between the two fences of the combination and replace it with a cavaletti.



You need to be very careful in doing this as sometimes the result is the opposite of the desired effect. Most young horses slow down and start relaxing with the kind of exercise, but some become scared with so many obstacles in front of them and rush faster. If the horse becomes scared, you may try another method for preventing rushing. You may set up another crossbar 21 feet in front of the vertical so the horse does not see so many poles squeezed together in a short distance.



With this triple combination, the horse is able to take a little more time to study each jump.

After have the horse relaxed and jumping free through a triple combination for a couple of days, you may rest the horse again for a few days. Starting free jumping lessons again, you can add another kind of fence into your combination such as a small gate in the last oxer.

