

CAVALLETTI EXERCISES AND GYMNASTICS

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History of Cavalletti

Captain Federico Caprilli (1868—1907) of the Italian cavalry developed the system of forward riding—position (seat)—controls, schooling. He introduced the use of “cavalletti” (small elevated sawhorses) to train horses to move in a more natural method. He believed that by teaching a horse where to put its feet you could develop its ability to find the right take-off point over jumps.

Col. Harry Chamberlin of the U.S. Cavalry (Fort Riley) was sent by the U.S. Army to Italy to study the new revolutionary “Caprilli System.” Based on these modern riding principles, the U.S. Army trained many enlisted men and officers in modern riding. Gordon Wright was among the many who went back to civilian life and rode, schooled, and taught the Ft. Riley forward riding system throughout the United States. This became the foundation for the American Hunter / Jumper System

In the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s, many U.S. instructors used “cavalletti” and “combinations” to teach jumping to young horses and civilian riders. One of the most influential was Vladimir Littauer. In Europe, the Caprilli revolution in riding was spread through many national military riding schools. Ideas were exchanged during competitions and in some cases there were student and instructor “exchanges.” Littauer was exposed to the Caprilli system in the Russian cavalry before and after emigrating to the U.S., where he established the Boots and Saddles Riding School in Manhattan, N.Y., where the Caprilli system was taught.

It is important to recognize that the Caprilli Revolution dramatically changed the approach to the mental and physical schooling of the horse, and changed the related concepts and application of the aids as well as the forward seat position of the rider.

Later, Bertalan de Nemethy emigrated after practicing the Caprilli system in the Hungarian cavalry. As coach of the U.S. Equestrian Team (1955 - 1980), de Nemethy further developed the use of cavalletti and gymnastic jumping exercises for advanced level horses and riders.

Cavalletti

The development of muscles used for jumping is dependent upon an exercise program that stimulates and strengthens those important muscles. Cavalletti work requires the horse to perform in a disciplined exercise system that aids in developing balance, rhythm, and physical strength. Of course, as in all schooling systems, it should not be overused as it may cause soreness and stiffness of muscles.

Cavalletti work is also very useful in teaching a rider proper weight distribution, balance, rhythm and spring, and in developing an independent hand. Trainers can make lessons for beginning riders fun and interesting with the infinite variety of uses of cavalletti at the walk, trot or canter. Even advanced riders can take advantage of work over cavalletti for strengthening position and use of aids.

For trot work the rails should be about 6" high and stabilized on a foot block or cross on the end of poles. They can be raised to about 20" for canter work. The correct distances between the poles are very important to maintain balance and relaxation. It is best to start a horse over one pole, and add poles as the horse understands the exercise and remains calm. In the beginning, two single poles can be set on a straight line as much as 50'—60' apart, and the rider can work on an even rhythm. Three poles can be set 40' apart each and a circle can be made to the right after the first and then to the left after the second, or vice versa. This teaches the horse to wait and be balanced in the turns and approaches.

The distance between trot cavalletti poles is dependent on the size of the horse and the length of stride. It is up to the trainer to determine which distance best suits each animal. Two poles can be set on a straight line or across the middle of the arena either 4'6" (trot) or 9' apart (trot or canter) and ridden on a circle or as a figure of eight.

A young horse can be started over cavalletti on the lunge line with comfortably adjusted side lines, and the weight of a rider can be added later. The advantage of riderless work on the lunge is that it allows the horse to relax its neck and back. Work over cavalletti should not start until the horse understands how to lunge properly. A useful pattern is to have a trot cavalletti at one end of the arena, a walk cavalletti at the other end, and the center area open for a circle on the lunge line. Both sets of cavalletti are flared on the circle, allowing the trainer to lengthen or shorten the strides as needed by simply adjusting the track through the cavalletti. By changing circles you can avoid monotony, calm the horse as needed, and use the muscles in different ways. Poles on the curve can also be ridden under saddle.

Riding over cavalletti mounted, the rider can work on straightness. One can start at the walk over a single cavalletti, and when the horse steps quietly over it another can be added, generally up to four. Walk cavalletti can be 2'8" to 3'3" apart. The reins should be free and the walk should be even. Again, the distance should be adjusted to accommodate each horse. Patterns can be arranged in the arena to mix up walk and trot cavalletti. Guide rails can be used for green horses as needed.

A rail can be removed between two of the trot rails creating a variation in number of steps so that the horse has to take two steps between some rails. The horse's concentration is thereby increased making it useful preparation for jumping. The key elements to look for in schooling horse and rider over cavalletti are:

1.) straightness, 2.) quiet, even rhythm, 3.) light contact that allows for a slightly lowered position of the horse's neck, 4.) the rider's upper body is able to "go with" the movements of the horse.

Cantering over cavalletti prepares the horse and rider for the forward seat position over fences. One can start by cantering over a single cavalletti set in the raised position of 20". A bounce rail can be placed 9' in front or in back to help regulate pace, and eventually the horse and rider can be worked up to jumping through three cavalletti that are 10'6" apart at the 20" height. This exercise helps the rider assume the correct jumping seat position, and maintain it. The beginner rider may need to grab mane initially to find the right balance. Distances can be varied to create a bounce to a one stride by doubling the distance to 21', as well as creating two and three stride lines. A single raised cavalletti across the center line on a circle, or as part of a figure of eight, will also help maintain the proper rhythm.

Four raised cavalletti can be placed on a large circle (inside ends of poles 70' to 80' apart—thinking of the poles as in a clock at 12:00, 3:00, 6:00 and 9:00) and the rider can practice riding from one to the next in a balanced canter, stepping out of the pattern when the rhythm falls apart, and back in once the canter is rebalanced. The poles can also be set closer in to the center and a four leaf clover pattern can be ridden, which will slow down and balance a keen horse.

A cavalletti can be placed one stride out from two that are stacked higher as a variation, and for strong horses, the cavalletti can be placed one stride after the higher element. Canter work over cavalletti should be done after proper preparation on the flat so that the horse is quiet and relaxed.

Gymnastics with Cavalletti

Cavalletti are very useful in controlling the take-off point for a jump which will improve the jumping technique of the horse, and also the riding style of the rider. When the horse is comfortably working at the trot through cavalletti poles, a fence can be added after the poles to teach the horse to jump a proper bascule, or arc. Generally, the distance to the fence is double that which is set between the cavalletti poles, but as the fence approaches a higher height of 4'0" it is necessary to increase the distance to the fence. The average cavalletti set up is 4'6" between the cavalletti and 9'0" - 9'6" to a small vertical.

Once the rider and horse are secure in the exercise, additional fences can be added to create gymnastic exercises using one, two, three, and four stride distances. This is very important for teaching the horse and rider to maintain an even and balanced stride.

Another canter exercise is to use a regulating 20" high cavalletti, or cross poles, one or two strides out from a fence to maintain a proper canter rhythm to the take-off point. A regulating pole can be used on the ground 10'—12' from the fence, in the middle of a one stride combination, or 10'—12' out behind a fence to help maintain the proper pace and balance. A pole in front of the take-off should be used with great care when dealing with a quick or strong horse, as it may make the situation worse.

Gymnastics

Gymnastics are exercises over rather low, related jumps that develop better strength and agility in the horse and rider. Once a horse is handling the cavalletti exercises, one can make a nice transition to cantering gymnastics. The distances should be set in the beginning to accommodate the normal stride for the horse. Later, distances can be shortened or lengthened, but one should avoid setting a trap that would cause a horse to lose confidence. The normal length of stride for a horse in gymnastics is between 10'—12'. For green horses or inexperienced riders, it is best to start with a single fence and gradually add fences.

Distance Chart / Number of Strides Between Jumps						
Pole Placement	No Stride (Bounce)	1 Stride	2 Strides	3 Strides	4 Strides	5 Strides
Trot Poles	4'3" - 4'9"	8'6"-9'6"				
Canter Poles	7' - 8'	14' - 16'				
Placing Pole / Trot	7' - 9'					
Placing Pole / Canter	8'6" - 10'					
From a Trot Jump	9'6" - 10'6"	18' - 20'	28' - 30'	39' - 43'		
From a Canter Jump (gymnastic)	10' - 11'6"	19' - 22'	30' - 33'	41' - 45'	52' - 57'	63' - 68'
Competition Distance at 12' Stride		24'	36'	48'	60'	72'

There are many variations of combinations one can build using one, two, and three stride combinations. Using small square oxers encourages a horse to jump in a proper bascule. For horses that drift, the front of the oxers can be cross poles, with a

single rail behind. The oxers can be ramped for hunters that need to be tighter and higher with their front legs. What is important is to determine what variations are going to be the most helpful for each horse. The trainer should set correct distances that allow the horse to jump freely through the gymnastics and give the horse the opportunity to figure out the correct take-off point. The rider's job is to approach the gymnastics keeping the horse straight, balanced, and maintaining the canter needed for the type of jump or combination of jumps.

When the horse is jumping well through the gymnastics, further variations in types of fences, mixing verticals and oxers, as well as changing heights can be introduced. Keep in mind that verticals tend to make a horse jump up, and spreads make them jump up and out. Generally, the exercises are kept relatively simple for the hunters focusing on form and rhythm through one or two stride combinations. The more challenging triple and multiple combinations are for the jumpers to improve the horse's concentration and athleticism. If a young horse is progressively introduced to higher jumps in gymnastic combinations and jumps them in good form, then it will probably be able to handle that height comfortably while on course.

Bending Lines and Turns

A bending line is a curve between two obstacles that can be anywhere from a 30 to 90 degree angle, to each other. There are generally three routes one can take:

- The normal line center to center,
- The shorter inside diagonal line that may allow a rider to leave out a stride, and
- The longer outside bending line that results in adding a stride.

A good practice exercise is to set two low fences, one out of the turn and the second at a moderate angle that are 70'—72' apart from center to center.

Start by practicing the diagonal line from center to center in five strides. To do this make the approach to the first fence a little wide and line up the straight line track between the two fences, jumping both fences at an angle (Line 1).

To make it a bending line with an added stride, turn straight to the first fence, land straight and then ride a bending line in six strides to the second fence (Line 2).

A more difficult variation for advanced riders is to jump three fences both as bending lines and as a straight line to all three.

Turns may be introduced over a single fence up the center line of the arena, and again one can practice three approaches: the normal straight approach, the short approach from the left lead with an angle from left to right (vice versa for the right lead approach), and the wider approach with an angle from right to left. Other turns to practice include turning inside another fence on the short approach, turning after jumping the fence using the pulley rein, and in the air using an opening rein. The

rider's eye control is important in all these exercises as the horse will go where the rider is looking.

Even today's equitation courses can be complicated and ask a lot of technical questions of the horse and rider. Proper and patient schooling through gymnastics gives the horse and rider the necessary foundation to solve the riding problems presented on course. There are some excellent patterns to address eye control and riding proper track that are illustrated in Linda Allen's book *101 Jumping Exercises for Horse and Rider*. Those include the Joe Fargis "X", Hap Hansen's Circle Back, and Missy Clark's Optional Distances.

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