

II. SAMPLE FLATWORK CONTENT

CREATING LESSON PLANS

The less the horse or rider knows, the more the lesson should be on the flat.

- In the beginning, lessons should be 100% on the flat.
- As the rider's proficiency increases, work over fences may take up a larger proportion of the lesson time.
- At the very advanced or expert level, the trainer might only watch the rider warm the horse up and offer a few thoughts or ideas, then help in a more formal way over fences.
- If in doubt, always err toward more flatwork and less jumping. Often, the temptation is to do too much jumping.

The art to good instruction is creating and executing interesting, effective flat lessons to accomplish as much as possible as **a base for jumping work.**

- The less you jump, the better. Jumping causes far more wear and tear on a horse than flatwork.
- In a sense, the less you jump a horse, the longer and more successful the horse's career.

Flatwork is often much more meaningful when riders **understand** how it fits into **solving their jumping problems.**

- Try to do exercises on the flat to help set riders up for solving problems they will encounter over fences.
- When riders *do* encounter problems over fences, often you can go back to flatwork solutions to help them.

Even accomplished riders and horses benefit from flatwork.

- The art of jumping is the art of riding a correct approach to an obstacle.

CORE CONTENT:

Flatwork allows for important time to focus on emphasizing both horse and rider's skills. The less the horse or rider knows, the more the lesson should be on the flat. Flatwork exercises should help set riders up for solving problems they will encounter over fences.

- A “good approach” means the horse arrives at the right spot, at the right pace, in the right balance to be able to clear the fence as easily as possible.
- Approaches take place entirely on the flat. They depend upon the horse’s ability to lengthen and shorten stride, turn, and balance.

Suggested Flatwork Exercises

- Get weight evenly into both stirrups. Make sure left and right leg position is the same.
- Keep the horse going in an **even rhythm** around the arena and through simple figures such as circles and across diagonals.
- Ride in **straight lines** approximately 10’ off the rail at all paces.
- Ride an **accurate** four-loop serpentine at the trot, keeping the **rhythm even and the hands off the horse’s neck**.
- Cross the diagonal at the canter, making smooth changes of lead (simple or flying, depending on the student’s level of ability). Hands must stay off the horse’s neck through the change, and the diagonal lines **must stay straight**.
- Get comfortable in the half-seat at the hand gallop.
- Teach the horse to work on **light contact at all gaits**: walk, trot, canter, and hand gallop.
- Ride rollbacks at various gaits, speeds, and in varying seats.
- Practice a mock Hunter Under Saddle or Hunter Seat Equitation on the flat class.
- Become familiar with the **speeds of each gait**. (Walk = 4 mph. Sitting trot = 6 mph. Posting trot = 8 mph. Canter = 10 - 12 mph. Hand gallop = 14 - 18 mph.)
- Work on improving various aspects of position.
- Practice **lengthening and shortening the gaits**. Work on the three “speeds” of each gait—shortened, ordinary, and lengthened.
- Practice improving both upward and downward **transitions**.
- Ride in **two-point** at all gaits with and without stirrups.
- Practice some riding hall movements: circles and half circles for directional control and finesse, turns on the forehand and haunches to isolate and control specific body parts.

SAMPLE LESSON PLANS

Beginner Rider: Straight Lines and Circles

As the students come into the arena, check each student's tack, stirrup length, and leg position. Have each student assume two-point and discuss even distribution of weight in stirrups.

Warm-Up

Stress the importance of warming up the horse.

Ask the students to take the rail at the posting trot. Tell them that at a show that tracking left first is typical.

Beginning during the warm-up, and continuing throughout the whole lesson, emphasize and discuss position. Good positions are safe positions.

Explanation (and Demonstration if Feasible) of Riding on a Straight Line

Discuss the importance of being able to ride in straight lines both on and off the rail. It is easier to keep the horse straight on the rail as horses (especially school horses) seek the rail.

Riding in straight lines off of the rail is the first step to being able to ride off of the turn to a line of jumps.

Introduction of Riding in a Straight Line—Both On and Off the Rail

Have students demonstrate riding in straight lines on the rail, first at the walk and trot, and then at the canter.

Practice

Once students have their horses traveling straight on the rail, they should try riding 10' off of the rail. Riding in straight lines off the rail should be done at the walk and trot before the canter.

After students can ride on a straight line on and off the rail, have them ride on a

straight line across the diagonal at all gaits, making sure to add in the changing of diagonal and the simple change of lead in the respective gait.

Explanation (and Demonstration if feasible) of Riding on a Circle

Teach from the very beginning that the bend comes from the leg and not the rein. Emphasize the roundness of the circle and pressing the horse “out” on the circle away from the inside leg.

Emphasize that riders need to learn to ride without balancing on their hands. This introduces the notion of independent hands.

Introduction of Riding on a Circle

If the rider has difficulty in keeping his/her balance, teach them to hold a little mane with their outside hand.

Emphasize consistency of size and “track” of the circle. Teach them the word “track”—it will come in handy later.

Practice

Ask the students to make a 20m circle. Teach them to “give” the inside rein for reward to the horse.

Confirmation

Have students demonstrate riding straight lines on and off the rail, and across the diagonal, riding at all gaits and demonstrating proper diagonals and simple changes of lead.

Have students demonstrate riding circles at the walk, trot and canter.

Additional Notes:

While practicing straight lines and circles, teach students correct position for the walk, rising trot, sitting trot, canter, two-point, half-seat, and light seat.

Beginner riders often need to rest a little during the lesson. Take the opportunity to teach them parts of the horse, parts of the tack, conformation, etc. while they are walking. Try to keep it simple, so they have retention of these important facts.

At the conclusion of the lesson, discuss the importance of grooming the horses properly and cleaning their tack. Send them back to the barn to demonstrate their understanding of the concepts.

Intermediate Rider: Riding with Lighter Aids

Warm-up

Teach this level of student that his/ her horse should have at least 5 minutes of light work to warm up prior to the lesson so they can immediately get to work when the lesson begins.

Explanation (and Demonstration if Feasible) of Riding with Light Aids

Horses should respond to an aid immediately.

The aid should not be strong. Since Intermediate riders often hear that very skilled riders are “strong” riders, they often fall prey to a common misconception of aid application and assume that the more advanced rider uses stronger aids, when in fact, the more advanced rider generally uses a much softer aid. A skilled rider’s use of a soft aid is usually more effective than a less skilled rider’s use of a strong aid.

Teach the riders not to mistake strong aids for a strong position. A strong position is one that is not compromised in any way.

Introduction of Getting the Horse More Responsive to Lighter Aids

Teach the rider how to use a stick to get the horse lighter to the aids. The rider applies the leg (ask). If the horse does not immediately respond, then the rider should apply spur (tell) and see if the horse responds.

If the horse does not respond, teach the student to half-halt the horse and start the process over but to a higher degree. That is: apply leg pressure (ask); if no response, apply spur pressure (tell), and immediately tap the horse behind the rider’s leg with the stick (demand) to reinforce the leg aid.

Practice

Have the students begin practicing lightening their aids immediately, and continuously apply the concept throughout the remainder of the lesson.

Teach students the notion of “in front of the leg” and “light contact.” Continue to work on keeping a light contact with both reins so as to keep the horse “in the tunnel” between the legs and hands.

Introduce different flatwork patterns and movements while focusing on deliberately lightening the aids. Teach them how to do serpentine of three and four loops. Teach them shoulder fore, shoulder in, half-turns, half-turns in reverse, and leg yielding.

Practice canter departs. Make sure the student is sitting in the saddle and not leaning ahead of the motion.

Always work on position. A good position is the cornerstone of a good rider. Work on “sitting at the vertical” at the walk, sitting trot, and canter. Practice canter departs without stirrups keeping the knees low and the toes up.

Work the riders in all the gaits and all positions. Stress the importance of independent hands and stress that the hands follow the motion of the horse. Work the half-seat in a regular and forward canter and only move to the hand gallop when the rider is able to do so without balancing on his hands.

Confirmation

When asking the rider to execute a maneuver or to make a transition, make sure that the rider applies an “aid.” For example, when a rider asks a horse to canter, the “aid” is: While keeping the inside leg at the girth, move the outside leg slightly behind the girth to ask a horse to canter. Don't let the riders “chase” the horse into the canter.

Additional Notes:

Teach the riders to work their horses when they are not having a lesson. Get them to think about riding with a plan, rather than mindlessly riding around. Remind the riders that watching as many good riders as possible will really help them to learn.

When the horses and riders need a rest, always use this time to teach them other things such as different rules and regulations, riding a course that has a “dotted line,” common ailments, conformation faults, ring etiquette, proper attire and the like. Teach them as much horsemanship as possible. Good horsemen are better riders!

Intermediate Rider: Introducing Contact

Warm-up

Checking the horses' stability and ascertaining that the riders' positions are functioning effectively.

Horse warm-up should include loose rein work at all three gaits with gradual transitions. Include 20 meter circles, half circles, half circles in reverse and large serpentines.

Riders' warm-up should include work at all gaits. Be sure their body alignment is securely over the stirrup and their hands are functioning independently of the rest of their bodies.

Explanation (and Demonstration if Feasible) of Contact

Contact is when riders use a correct rein length which allows them to create a constant and consistent feel of the horse's mouth and—through this connection—shape and direct the horse's energy that is stimulated through the use of the rider's leg. At this point we are just trying to establish a passive but consistent feel of the horse's mouth. To create trust on the part of the horse for the rider's hands.

We teach contact at the trot because in this gait the horse does not have a head and neck gesture, so it is much easier for the rider to learn to maintain a soft, constant, and consistent feel of both sides of the horse's mouth.

Introduction of the Driving Rein

To initially teach contact, have the riders utilize a “driving rein.” The reins are held so they pass over the top of the index finger and pass down over the rider's palm. The thumb secures the rein on the top of the rider's fingers. This rein position keeps the rider's hand in a position that keeps the elbow joint open and will allow the rider's arm to be more elastic.

Practice

Begin by establishing an energetic ordinary trot on loose reins holding the reins in the driving rein position.

Once the horse is moving forward in front of the rider's legs, then the rider should establish a steady, even feel on the horse's mouth with equal pressure on both reins. Bridging the reins in both hands is often used to teach this concept.

If the rider feels the horse begin to slow down or shorten its stride as the connection is established, then the rider should use an urging leg at that moment to explain to the horse that it is to continue at the same pace.

Practice doing large circles concentrating on keeping an even connection on both

sides of the mouth paying particular attention to the outside rein. Also practice doing transitions between the ordinary trot and the slow trot sitting.

After the rider can maintain a consistent connection to the horse's mouth in trot work, then allow the horse to return to the walk and let the rider begin to feel the elbows work as they follow the horse's head and neck gesture at the walk. During the walk, allow the horse to gently lengthen the reins and stretch out and down as the rider tries to maintain a soft following connection. Then allow the horse to return to a loose rein.

Practice in the trot primarily but take moments in the walk to help the rider begin to understand maintaining the connection when the horse is using a head and neck gesture for balance. This is the beginning of developing a following arm.

If students are able to establish and maintain contact with relative ease (and this will depend a great deal upon the horses you are teaching with), then have them begin to work at the trot on contact holding the reins in a normal position. Always have them return to the driving rein before returning to the walk.

During the breaks for walk, encourage your students to ask questions or for more information.

Confirmation

As a final lesson wrap-up ask the riders to return to the trot and—once they have a good ordinary trot—to establish contact and then tell you when they believe they have established good passive contact. This will give you a yardstick of their level of feel and will help you determine if this is something they are ready to practice independently or not.

FLATWORK

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