

Poles apart

OUR EXPERT

Tom Searle



BHSI Tom is an event rider based in Wiltshire. He teaches riders of all levels and runs regular clinics. Visit: www.tomsearleequestrian.co.uk for more information.

Simple pole work exercises can make schooling more fun and develop your horse's jumping and flatwork skills, says trainer **Tom Searle**



A few poles will soon spice up any schooling session

Training Pole work exercises

Whether your passion is dressage, jumping or simply hacking out, pole work is a great way to have more fun in the saddle, and the benefits to both horse and rider are numerous.

Incorporating a few poles into your flatwork sessions can help to:

- Make your horse more sure-footed;
- Create a more obedient horse;

- Improve suppleness and elasticity;
- Develop straightness;
- Keep your horse interested and focused on his work;
- Increase the rider's ability to see a stride into fences and ride accurately.

You don't need to make pole work complicated for it to be effective, and trainer Tom Searle believes in keeping things as simple as possible for both horse and rider.

"Using just a few poles at a time means you can adapt the exercises according to your horse's level of training," he says.

"That way, you can introduce a young horse to the concept of pole work or develop an older horse's skills by increasing the challenges."

The following five exercises are suitable for any horse or rider combination. Try them next time you are schooling to discover how they can benefit you both.

Perform 'straighter' circles

Tom places two poles 22-yards/20-metres (he uses yards as they are equivalent to an average human stride) apart down one long side of the school. They can also be placed on the centre line.

He puts them on a slight inner track so there is room to ride around the outside of them.

"When ridden correctly, the exercise helps with straightness and suppleness so you can start the session as you mean to go on," he says.

Once you've warmed up, trot a few small circles around one of the poles, change the rein and do the same around the other pole.

The horse should remain straight through his body, without his outside shoulder falling out.

To help keep the horse straighter, the rider needs to think of turning the horse with their

outside aids, rather than only using the inside rein to turn.

"Keep control of the outside shoulder by using your outside leg aids and maintaining a contact on the outside rein," Tom advises.

"If your horse really tries to fall out, position him in slight counter (outside) bend as this will prevent his outside shoulder falling out.

"Also, make sure you don't ride this exercise too fast. Slow everything down a bit to give you time to work out where your horse needs to place his feet."

Once you and your horse can carry out this exercise in trot, Tom suggests trying the same thing in canter.

"With a young or green horse, you will probably find it more difficult to stay straight in canter than you did in trot," he says.

"Focus on your outside aids to help you and be ready to use your leg aids if your horse tries to break into trot."

Riding this exercise in canter should only be carried out a couple of times on each rein with a younger or greener horse.

It requires the horse to take more weight onto his hindlegs and lighten his forehead.

Therefore, it's important to build up these muscles slowly, without putting too much pressure on the horse too soon and making him stiff or sore.

TIP from the TOP

If you event, use pole work in the next session after a competition. This will help to regain control and engage his hind legs.



Ride a circle around the pole, using your outside aids to turn the horse

Words: Nicky Moffatt; photographs: Jon Stroud. Thanks to Charlton Park Estate for the use of their facilities for this feature.

Adjust the number of canter strides you ride between the poles



Practise shortening and lengthening

Use the same two poles as in exercise one, but this time the aim is to ride over the centre of each one.

If you have poles with coloured segments, like the ones pictured, it will be easier.

First, trot over the poles on both reins to allow your horse to get used to them. Keep equal weight in both stirrups and reins and sit centrally in the saddle, to avoid your horse wiggling off the straight line.

Next, progress to riding a walk transition between the poles, before trotting again and going over the second pole.

Once you are happy with this, you can start to canter over the poles.

"Most horses will take five strides in between the 22-yard distance," says Tom. "But it doesn't matter if your horse has a short stride and takes six or has a longer stride and takes four.

"The idea, to begin with, is to allow your horse to canter over the poles in a stride length he finds most comfortable."

Count the number of strides your horse takes between the poles – but remember not to start counting the strides until you have landed after the first pole.

Once you have ridden the exercise on both reins and found your horse's natural stride, ride more power into the canter and come over the poles again, aiming to ride one stride less. So if your horse naturally takes five strides, aim for four.

Then, shorten the canter and try for an extra stride between the poles – so six if your horse naturally takes five.

"Teaching your horse to adjust his canter stride in this way is essential for both jumping and dressage. It will also help the rider to get a better feel and eye for seeing a stride into fences," says Tom.

Aim to ride the same number of strides between each pole



Three in a row

Tom places a third pole in the middle of the two original ones, so the distances between the poles are 11-yards (10-metres).

He states this exercise is useful for horses that tend to speed up over poles, as the middle one encourages them to slow down and think about what they are doing.

Start by riding two strides in between each pole – again, the rider should count out loud to help them feel what's happening.

Tom says you should "sit up and stay seated in the saddle, rather than adopting a forward seat, as this helps to keep the horse working actively forward from his hindquarters."

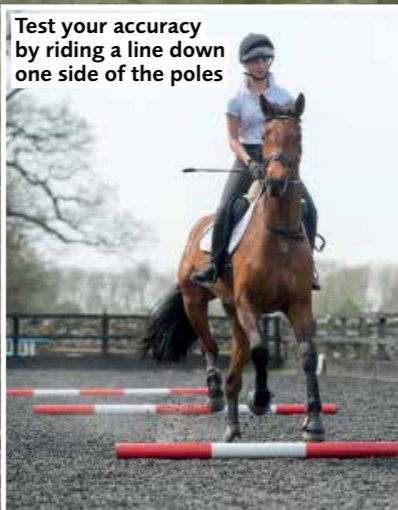
Once you can comfortably ride through the poles on both reins, with two strides between them, collect your horse's canter and aim for three shorter strides.

To really test your accuracy and straightness, Tom suggests riding a line down one side of the poles, aiming for two strides between each pole.

"Pick a segment to the left or right of the middle segment of the poles and ride your line over the same part of all three," he advises.

"Then make things harder by riding over the end segments of each pole.

"Be aware that your horse may try to run out to the side of the poles, so you will need to use your aids nearest the outside of the poles to prevent this happening."



Test your accuracy by riding a line down one side of the poles

Ride two and then three strides between the poles



Keep a good rhythm

Tom places two poles across the centre line, – one at A or C and the other at X (see above).

The exercise involves riding a 20-metre circle in canter on either rein, going over both of the poles.

It is useful for teaching the horse to maintain a good rhythm, as you should ride the same number of strides between each pole.

"This exercise is ideal for dressage riders who need to perfect their 20-metre circles," says Tom. "And, as with any pole work exercise, it can improve the quality of the horse's canter and help with straightness, providing the rider remembers to use their outside aids to turn, rather than pulling too much on the inside rein."

When riding through the middle of the poles, most horses will take nine strides around each half circle.

However, it doesn't matter if your horse takes eight or 10, as long as he does the same on both sides.

If you find you are not getting the same number of strides between the poles on each side, ask yourself whether your horse is straight and is working actively forward in a good rhythm.

Some horses will fall out in certain places on a circle – perhaps towards the gate of the arena – so make sure you prepare in advance to stop this happening and close up your outside aids before you get to that spot. ▶

TIP from the TOP

If possible, use poles that are the same colour. This will make it easier for you to visualise riding straight lines over them.

Training Pole work exercises

Poles on a curve

This exercise involves cantering over three poles set 10-yards (nine-metres) apart (from centre to centre) on a semi-circle at one end of the school.

"Pick a line to ride on, with the aim of riding two strides between the inner segments of the poles and three strides when riding towards the outside," he states.

"It is harder to keep the horse straight on a curve than it is in a straight line, so be aware of your outside aids and use them to turn the horse, as well as using your inside ones."

As Tom points out, the great thing about pole work is you don't need an instructor on the ground to tell you whether you are doing it right or wrong – the poles will do that.

"As long as you remember to count the strides out loud, you will know if you are on the correct stride or not," he says.

Next, Tom uses blocks to raise alternate ends of the poles. He raises the outside of the two end poles and the inside of the middle one.

Ride over the same coloured segment of each of the three poles



"This is a great suppling exercise as it gets the horse to lift one side of his body and then the other," Tom says.

"Canter over the poles as you did before (slightly to the outside, then slightly to the inside), aiming for straightness," he concludes. ■

Raising alternate ends of the poles is a good suppling exercise

