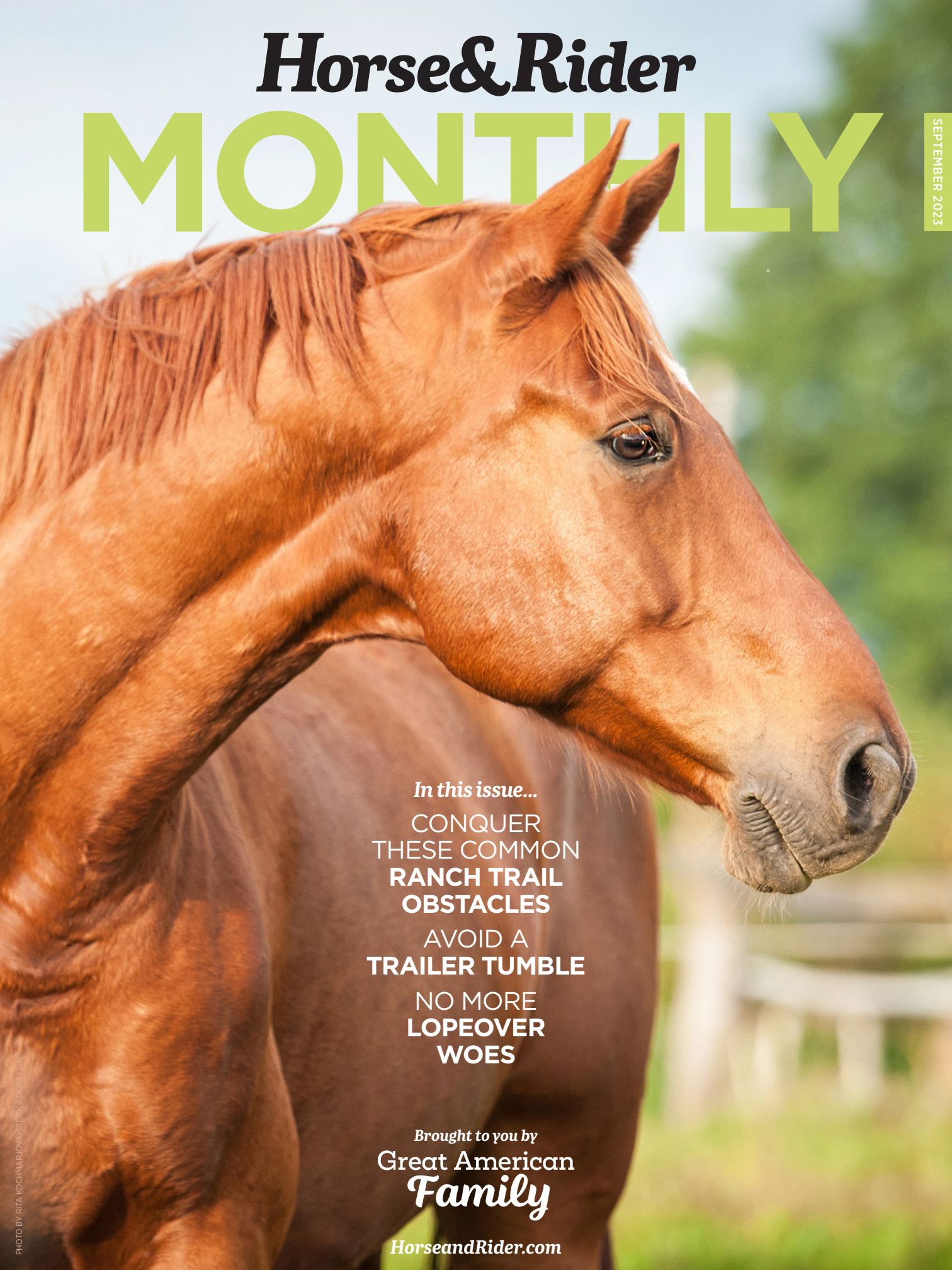


Horse & Rider

MONTHLY

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In this issue...

CONQUER
THESE COMMON
**RANCH TRAIL
OBSTACLES**

AVOID A
TRAILER TUMBLE

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**LOPEOVER
WOES**

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Horse Life



TRAIN / HEALTH

Master These Common Ranch Trail Obstacles

★ Check Out Our Breakdown Of Commonly Used Ranch Trail Obstacles—And Try Your Hand At This Fun And Engaging Class!



Crysta Brown and “Hootie” step onto the wooden bridge obstacle.

If you're itching to enter up in the ranch trail class, if you're itching to enter up in the ranch trail class, be prepared for the obstacles you'll face in the class. We turned to the AQHA rulebook to bring you some information about commonly found maneuvers and obstacles. Knowing what might await you in the ring, can help you prepare ahead of time to ready your horse for what might be novel challenges. These challenges are set up to mimic what one might find if they were out riding on a ranch. Crossing obstacles, riding over bridges, and opening gates are all usually daily tasks of a ranch horse.

Logs, Bridges, and Gates—Oh My!

The following obstacles are noted as “mandatory” to each pattern, in the AQHA rulebook. According to the rulebook, ride-over logs are an obstacle you are likely to encounter. If the pattern includes these, however, they must be natural logs. Be prepared to either walk, trot, or lope over these logs.

Another common maneuver will include opening and closing a gate. The rulebook states that it must be a hinged gate that you will operate and a rope gate. Be prepared to have to unlatch, ride through, and close the gate behind you.

Exhibitors often find themselves faced with a ride-over bridge in the ranch trail. This will be a wooden bridge. And it is noted in the rulebook that it must be sturdy and safe for horse and rider. Riding over a tarp or an obstacle with a slick bottom is prohibited in these classes, so rest easy there.

Backing and Sidepassing

A simple maneuver you can practice at home is the back. In the ranch trail you might be required to not only demonstrate the back, but show that your horse can back through a set of logs or around an obstacle. This showcases his ability to back out of a sticky situation that you might end up in on a working ranch.

Along the same vein is the sidepass. Prepare yourself to sidepass over a log, sidepass to open a gate, or sidepass to reach another obstacle. If you must sidepass over an obstacle, the rulebook ensures safety by stating that the obstacle cannot be more than 12 inches high.

The Drag or Pull Obstacle

A very common task on a ranch is the ability of a horse to drag an object. Ranch horses often have to drag calves, hold a cow for doctoring, or serve as horsepower to drag objects out of the way. This task will include some skill from you as well, as it will require you to dally. You can opt for a half or full dally. But, don't try to just hold the rope in your hand and pull the object with your strength alone.

This is definitely something that should be practiced beforehand. If your horse is not rope broke, don't set him up for failure by trying this obstacle for the first time, the day of the show. Work with him at home to get him accustomed to the rope. Letting him get used to it touching his hind end, and feeling the weight of dragging an object. If you are not comfortable introducing a rope to your horse, or you're unsure of how to dally safely, employ the help of a professional in your

area. Although you aren't dallying off to a running steer, things can still go awry quickly if you aren't careful.

Optional Obstacles

When it comes to optional obstacles, each show has the choice to include a variety of other challenges. These include things such as carrying an object from one side of the arena to another, removing and replacing objects in a mailbox, and walking through a water obstacle. Unsure horses often encounter a simple obstacle that can cause commotion: the rider having to put on and take off a slicker or raincoat.

A ranch trail class often includes ground-tying, as it showcases the common skill of a working ranch horse. Being able to drop your reins, and make a circle around your horse without touching him is what the judges are looking for. Miscellaneous optional challenges on foot that showcase how well your horse is broke include picking up feet, leading at the trot, and opening a gate from the ground.

You might also have to ride by a pen of cows, steers, or even longhorns.

Scoring Guidelines

Judges are looking for a horse that handles these obstacles with ease. However, they also want to see a horse that is paying attention. It's alright for your horse to pay attention as he steps over logs, as long as he is doing it willingly and following cues. In fact, hitting obstacles or rolling them out of place will result in a penalty. So, just as a ranch horse would, your horse should pay attention to where he puts his feet. He should look aware and be looking through the bridle.

Judges also look for quality of movement, as the ranch classes feature horses that would be enjoyable to ride on an actual ranch.

Practice these obstacles at home before the show. However, do so carefully and safely! If you're unsure of how to introduce your horse to these obstacles, seek out a professional or reputable trainer nearby. ★



Cody Crow is a master of the dally and drag obstacle in the ranch trail.



HEALTH

Avoid A Trailer Scramble

Here, I'll explain how your horse balances in your moving trailer. Then I'll give you eight ways to help keep him safe, secure, and on his feet. Finally, I'll provide pros and cons of four common trailer designs, in terms of how they affect equine balance.

Balancing Act

Since your horse's body weight is so high above his feet, he has to work hard to keep his weight stable when your trailer is randomly swaying, bumping, and moving down the road. He knows what to do to stay upright; his every instinct drives him to stand up and protect himself from falling over or down.

How does your horse balance? My colleague, Chris Riley, PhD — a professor of equine clinical studies at Massey University at the University of New Zealand — recently trained six GoPro video cameras on horses as they traveled in two-horse, forward-facing trailers.

Dr. Riley's documentation confirmed that when horses try to balance in a trailer, they spread their legs forward, backward, and to the side in a base-wide stance to help them increase the surface area of their weight in contact with the trailer floor.

This is basically the same thing you'd do if I tried to push you over while you were standing up, especially if I tied your hands behind your back. Horses are horizontal animals, while we're vertical animals, so our methods of aligning our spines might be different, but our concepts of gravity, momentum, and inertia are similar.

What You Can Do

Here are eight things you can do to help your horse balance inside the trailer as you go down the road.

- Drive carefully. Scramble marks in trailers attest to the efforts of horses to balance themselves and often point to poor driving skills. Good driving skills are crucial to helping your horse keep his balance. Turn and accelerate slowly, and brake gently. More than 65 percent of your horse's body weight is on his forequarters, so when you apply the brakes, it's difficult for him to keep his hind legs on the floor. He'll tend to tip forward, bracing with his front legs. When you brake hard, his hind legs will creep forward, under his body.
- Invest in the right size trailer. To balance correctly in your trailer, your horse must have free use of his head and neck. If your trailer is too short for him to be able to raise his head, he'll lack the ability to engage this critical balancing maneuver.
- Invest in a quality trailer. Quality structural materials in your trailer's walls, bulkheads, and flooring will provide balancing support for your traveling horse.
- Invest in quality, cushioned fittings. Invest in

★ As you haul your horse, he must constantly adjust his body weight to keep his balance, working his muscles hard. He may even have to scramble to stay on his feet.



REBECCA GIMENEZ, PHD

Good driving skills are crucial to helping your horse keep his balance. Turn and accelerate slowly, and brake gently.

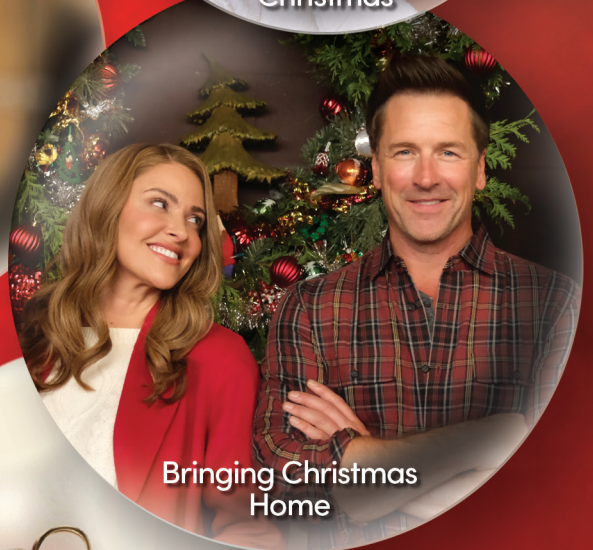
heavy-duty, cushioned fittings anywhere your horse will touch to lean and balance, including chest bars, butt bars, stall sides, and dividers. Note that in a forward-facing, two-horse trailer, he'll consistently use the chest bar for balance during braking. In a slant load, he'll lean against the side dividers or his travel buddies.

- Invest in stall mats. High-quality mats absorb shock and encourage grip.
- Keep your trailer clean. Keep your trailer floor free of urine and manure, which can cause slick conditions.
- Consider bedding. Bedding materials can provide traction, but can also cause respiratory problems if inhaled. Look for large, dust-free shavings. Mix in liquid absorbing pellets to control urine. I've used a small amount of damp sand or dirt in trailers without good mats or sufficient bedding.
- Tie him correctly. If you tie your horse in the trailer, leave enough slack so that he can balance by moving his head and neck, but not so loose that he can catch a leg in the tie rope. ★



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Ranch Riding Square Corners

Executing a square corner in a ranch riding pattern requires a different kind of finesse than a regular horsemanship pattern. Learn the nuances here.





You probably won't see a horse execute a square corner when doing ranch work in a pasture, but it is an element that judges can call for in a ranch riding pattern. A defined, 90-degree angle completed by a willing, soft horse is a showy maneuver that can earn credit. I see a lot of rounded corners that are functional and correct, but lack that crisp angle required to boost your score.

Here, I'll go over steps to practice a square corner at home. You'll see a cone in these images—this is only for practice and to reference where the 90-degree angle is made in the photos. Ranch riding patterns don't use cones; instead, you must lay out the pattern to best show your horse.

1 The rider's position for ranch riding is more a functional one than you might see in a traditional horsemanship class. You can see here that my shoulders are square with my hips aligned beneath them; my legs are in an effective position; and my toes turn out slightly, giving me closer contact with my calves on my horse. I like to call it "riding with a purpose." It's efficient, natural, and functionally useful.

2 A judged ranch riding pattern doesn't use cones, but I've included one in this demonstration for reference. When you practice at home, the cone can help you stay straight in your approach, as well as help you time your cues for the eventual 90-degree turn. But don't look at the cone; you must look where you're going.

As I approach the cone, I ride my horse forward with impulsion—he's driving from his hindquarters, he's looking ahead, and he's listening to me. My eyes look up and forward, which helps my body stay square to keep my horse on a straight path. As I get closer to the cone, I'll shorten my horse's stride slightly, just as if I were driving a car and slowing down for a turn. But I maintain my horse's impulsion to keep his hind end engaged. Without this impulsion, my horse could fishtail out of the corner or make too round a corner, two problems I'll discuss later.

3 To make the turn, I ride my horse just past the cone and then begin to guide him through the corner. As we start around the 90-degree angle, you can see that my horse is

4



steering well. His nose leads his directional path, his head and neck demonstrate collection, and his hindquarters are engaged to propel him forward with impulsion. You'll notice I don't have a long drape in my reins; I keep contact with my horse's mouth to facilitate his collection and propulsion and for better control. As we come around the corner, I use strong outside-leg pressure to keep his hindquarters engaged; I use less pressure from my inside leg to keep his body upright through the turn. I'm beginning to look through my turn, which slightly rotates my torso and helps guide my horse to the right.

5



4 We've come through the turn, and my horse is straight from his nose to his tail. Now that we're back on the straight line, I've released most of my leg pressure to keep him from veering to the left or right. My hands are relaxed, but in a working position—not too high or too low. My horse's straightness and my body position set us up to execute whatever the pattern calls for next. If it's another square corner, I'll set my horse up like I did for the first one. No matter what's next, we're prepared for it.

6



5 Here's an example of the first mistake I mentioned: fishtailing out of the corner. This means my horse loses his hind-end propulsion, and thus his straightness as he finishes the corner. In this example, I rode my horse too deep into the turn without enough impulsion or collection, so I have to push his shoulders over to the right into the turn. My horse is stiff and has to lean to compensate for my rigid body position. He's resisting me and leaning to the outside of the turn. You can see a distinct difference in his stride between Photo 5 and Photo 3. This all could've been avoided if I'd approached the corner with collection and impulsion.

6 The roundness of this corner is brought on by too much inside-leg pressure. My hand is centered, so I'm not steering him on the rounded-corner path, but my leg is pushing him on that track. This isn't necessarily a bad maneuver overall; it's just not right for square corners. In a square corner, a horse's body must be more upright. This horse is on more of an arc. He's reaching underneath himself nicely; he's just not completing a 90-degree turn. ★

A man with a beard, wearing a brown cowboy hat, a dark jacket, and blue jeans, is riding a brown horse. He is wearing yellow gloves and is in the process of jumping the horse over a large log on the ground. The horse is in mid-air, with its front legs tucked and its back legs pushing off. The background shows a field with a wooden fence and some bare trees under a clear sky.

Ace Your Ranch Riding Lopeover

Loping over a single log or several in a row is a standard maneuver in ranch riding classes. Here's how to set yourself and your horse up for success.



When adding poles to create a multi-pole sequence, be sure your horse has the ability to walk and trot over them in a collected manner before asking him to lope over them.

The lopeover, a standard component of ranch riding and ranchmanship classes, is typically less complex than traditional trail-class lopeovers. Still, it's a challenge that puts many riders in the penalty box.

The key to mastering the ranch riding lopeover is a cadenced stride on the approach to the pole. With a multi-pole lopeover, you might struggle with trying to correct your horse rather than letting him find his own stride. Your horse must be able to collect and round up, allowing you to pick the ideal path for a straight line that sets him up for success for the maneuver that comes next.

An uncoordinated hop, gait break, or tick of the pole looks disjointed and costs points on your scorecard. I'm going to share the secrets to acing the ranch riding lopeover so you look polished every time. I'll describe common mistakes and give you pointers to correct them.

Who Benefits?

The work I'll show you isn't useful only for ranch riding events. Riders competing in trail classes, reining, hunter under saddle, or over fences will benefit from developing an accurate feel of their horses' stride length. And, in any class that includes a single- or multiple-pole setup, knowing your horse's stride is essential to determining how best to navigate the pattern. Moreover, even if you're not competing, learning to understand how your horse lengthens and shortens his stride will improve your communication with him and enable him to be more responsive to your cues—great benefits even if all your riding is done out on the trails.

Know the Standards

Many ranch riding patterns call for loping over more than one pole in a row. The American Ranch Horse Association rulebook includes six different patterns, two of which include loping over poles. In each case, the horse and rider are required to lope across three poles in a row. The American Quarter Horse Association



Picking up your hands and trying to micromanage your horse as you approach the first pole is a common mistake. Picking up on his mouth interferes with his natural cadence.

and American Paint Horse Association ranch-riding patterns may also include multi-pole lopeovers.

At ARHA shows, the standard distance between lopeover poles is 6 to 7 feet. I start a green, less collected horse on poles set 6 1/2 to 7 feet apart. For horses I can keep collected, I move the poles closer together—5 1/2 to 6 feet apart.

Start With One Pole

The best method for mastering a sequence of poles is to start with a single pole in the middle of the arena. One pole centrally located is easy to approach from either direction and, if you can get your stride correct to that first pole, the additional poles you add later will come naturally.

To begin, warm your horse up as usual, crossing over the pole a few times at a walk, then a trot. Then turn down the center of the arena, and approach the pole at a lope. As you do, resist the temptation to pick up your hands and micromanage your horse—a common mistake. If you micromanage, you'll get in your horse's way rather than letting him set up on his own. Picking up on his mouth interferes with his natural cadence, increasing the likelihood he'll tick a pole or—later on—break stride in the middle of several poles.

It can be difficult to break a bad habit, so if you're used to picking up on your horse as you approach a pole, grab your horse's mane with your rein hand to keep yourself from getting into your horse's mouth. (As you improve, you'll be able to leave his mouth free without holding on to his mane.)

Find Focus, Sit Deep

Another common rider error is staring down at the ground, anticipating the upcoming pole or poles. Looking down influences your body position, and even the slightest shift in your posture and position can affect your horse's stride.

So, just as when you ride in a rail or pattern class without poles,



Look up and ahead as you approach the poles, rather than down at the ground, anticipating the obstacles to come. As you ride toward the first pole, pick a point 20 feet beyond it to focus on.

look up and well ahead as you ride toward the pole. Pick a point 20 or 30 feet beyond the pole to focus on. It could be a fence post, a sign, or a tree on the other side of the fence. Doing this consciously will begin to teach you not to look down in the approach.

As you're looking ahead and approaching the pole, sit deep in the saddle. Avoid the temptation to stand up in a slight two-point position as your horse crosses the pole. In jumping classes, this is appropriate as it frees up your horse's back to lift off the ground and clear a fence. In ranch classes, though, it's the exact opposite. The two-point position blocks your horse's shoulders, making it more difficult for him to cross the pole with a balanced stride.

I've had riders struggle with this concept of sitting deep in the saddle. As a teaching aid, I tell them to concentrate on squeezing their butt cheeks together as they approach and cross the pole. That makes getting up into a two-point position nearly impossible. That way, they avoid this error until they learn to remain sitting back and deep on their own.

Practice riding across the single pole in both directions, concentrating on my key points: Letting your horse find his striding, focusing on a point well beyond the pole, and keeping your weight deep in the saddle. Continue until crossing the pole becomes rhythmic and predictable for you, and your horse isn't hopping, breaking stride, or ticking the pole.

When you've achieved all that, you're ready to advance.

Add Poles, Same Approach

When the time is right, add two more poles for a total of three. Begin by walking and trotting over the three-pole set. (Note: Set the distance between poles at 15 to 24 inches for the walk and 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 feet for the trot, adjusting as need be for your horse's stride length and level of collection.)

When you've familiarized your horse with the three poles at the walk and trot, and he's negotiating them in a calm, collected manner, reset the pole distances as I described earlier (remem-



Once your horse is comfortable lopeing over ground-level poles, up the degree of difficulty. Raising the poles even a few inches reinforces to your horse that he must pick up his feet.

bering that 6 to 7 feet apart is standard for ARHA shows). Now resume work at a lope.

Approach the first pole of the three-pole set the same way you approached the single pole. If you do it correctly, letting your horse find his stride, he'll continue right over all three poles.

One caveat: Practicing the lopeover is like any other drill. It's important to school the maneuver regularly so your horse learns what's expected of him, but you want to avoid over-schooling, which teaches him to anticipate or even resent the obstacle.

With that caveat in mind, practice enough at home to make navigating the poles second nature, as this prepares your horse to do the same in the show pen.

Get Truly Show-Ready

Once you get to the show, there will be a lot of distractions that can impact your horse's performance. The activity of exhibitors and horses passing by the arena, unexpected sights or noises, and your own nerves can interfere with your and your horse's focus. To prepare for the unexpected, add an additional degree of difficulty at home so that when you get to the show pen, the plain lopeover is relatively easy by comparison.

For example, you can add a degree of difficulty to your lopeover practice by elevating the poles 4 to 6 inches using basic plastic jump standards set on their sides. Lifting the poles off the ground a few inches teaches your horse to pick up his feet to avoid ticking.

Practicing a higher height at home will make lopeing over ground-level poles in the show pen seem easy. The goal is to avoid ticking any of these raised poles while riding over in a cadenced stride.

Ultimately, the more prepared your horse is at home, the better he'll perform at the show. At the end of the day, that will keep you out of the penalty box and maybe even add a few points to your score. ★