

The UGLY truth about Showhunter.

There is nothing pretty about Showhunter – training that is.

Looking at a lovely polished combination competing in the ring at Horse Of Year show does not mean they started out that way. Like any top athlete or performer or professional in any field, riding a horse accurately and smoothly around a course of jumps and making it look like you aren't doing anything takes a lot of hard work, effort, practice and moments of absolute warts and all ugliness as you work through a number of training issues to progress towards that ultimate vision.

Everybody talks about the importance of rhythm when riding a Showhunter class, but how do you actually achieve that? Even if you are blessed with a horse who naturally holds a fairly consistent canter rhythm, it is still vital to spend time in your training moving your horse in and out of that "ideal" canter so that you can ensure you truly have him responding correctly to your leg aid and working with you ready for making those subtle adjustments as your ride through the course and make your approach towards and away from the fence.

Many riders new to the sport make the mistake of watching the well-practised riders and try to emulate their lovely balanced light seat or 2 point position long before they are ready. A lot of rider balance coming from good core strength, still hands and a secure lower leg, as well as a horse that responds very well to your leg aid, is required to ride an entire course with a light seat out of the saddle.

Suddenly those riders whose horse "falls behind the leg" (does not maintain his rhythm or maybe even drops down into a trot) in front of the jump or coming around the corner struggle because they have got themselves out of the saddle and no longer have their seat aids to help keep the horse going forward.

Suddenly the lack of rider's seat in the saddle shows up the rider whose lower leg gets too far out behind them and they rely on their hands and reins for holding their balance. Or the horse who has not been taught and encouraged to carry himself in balance suddenly finds himself in trouble bowling along on the forehand because his rider has suddenly changed their position and come up over his wither.

Like anything it is essential to get your foundation training and basics well established before you can execute that polished and seemingly effortless performance that we all strive for. I say seemingly because, as all horse riders know, we do not just sit there and do nothing – it is actually the total opposite! One of the hardest things for us to learn as a rider is to just be still and allow our horse to do his job beneath us.

Sitting pretty on a horse definitely does not mean being ineffective. It takes a lot of time and training to be able to refine your aids and the responses from your horse down to the point where, to the outside observer, your actions are so subtle you might appear to be doing nothing.

We have to always remind ourselves that every rider at the top of their game or someone who we admire for their lovely position or ability to create a great performance from their horse has only got that way by going through some pretty ugly training moments, getting completely out of balance, totally losing their rhythm and stuffing up their distances before they could ever learn to get back to that sweet spot of balance, rhythm, control and focus that all combine to produce the performance you so admire.

Don't ever be afraid to have moments of training "ugliness" by trying new things and pushing yourself out of your comfort zone at times. We have to get out of balance, position, and rhythm to ever find our true balance, position and rhythm. Practise and persistence will help move you towards experiencing those amazing "effortless" moments when you and your horse are the ones out in the ring making it all look so easy.

Just remember, while you sit there all nice and pretty, to take a big breath, smile and enjoy it as you reflect on all you've been through that's made this special moment in time worthwhile.

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