

# EXTRA



Sharon White and  
Cooley On Show

## IDENTIFY XC SCHOOLING GOALS

### Strategies for the Senior Sporthorse

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**GREEN HORSE OR RIDER:** To feel comfortable on uneven terrain, I hack out in the open and on the trails. Then I test my brakes. First, I trot down a slope. You can tell by Millie's head carriage—not too high or low—and both of our relaxed expressions that she's traveling down this slope in a nice balance. Midway down, I'll ride a transition to the walk or halt. I'll continue testing my brakes by cantering uphill and then riding a transition to the walk or halt.

FROM THE ARCHIVES OF PRACTICAL HORSEMAN

# SCHOOL DAYS

Identify your goals to make the most of your cross-country school.

**By Sharon White ■ Photos by Stacey Nedrow-Wigmore**

**C**ross-country schooling is an essential element in every event horse's and rider's training program. Whatever level you are, before you enter the start box, you'll want to get a number of good schools under your belt. But what does a "good school" entail? That depends on your goal. And the better you can identify your specific goal, the more successful your

Once Millie is comfortable with making transitions on a hill, I trot over a small log with a loopy rein, which helps to keep her relaxed and focused on the new job she's learning. Here, she has broken into the canter in the last few strides before the jump. Instead of trying to slow her back down to trot—and risk distracting her with last-minute rein aids—I let her continue at her own pace over the log. After she lands, I gently bring her back to trot and give her lots of pats for her enthusiasm and bravery. When she's jumping comfortably, I'll trot or canter over the slightly bigger log to our left in the photo.



school will be. I'll explain why in this article and will offer a few examples to give you an idea of how to make a plan for your next cross-country practice.

## Why School?

Eventers practice cross country for a long list of reasons. First-time horses and riders need a good, safe introduction to the sport. Green horses and riders need to continue developing their skills. Schooling can also be used to solve specific

## Early-Season Refresher **SCHOOLING GOAL: To confirm your horse's and your own readiness for competition and give you both a confidence boost.**



**1. After trotting and cantering to warm up, focusing on staying in balance, I jump some inviting logs, roll-tops, etc. Then I move on to some more thinking questions appropriate for our level. For example, I'm jumping Millie over the first of two small roll-tops here. You can tell by my opening right rein that the jumps are set on a bending line. Her pricked ears and focused expression indicate she recognizes this question and is game to tackle it.**

**2. I gradually progress to more challenging fences until I'm finally incorporating the major questions we'll face on course at our level, such as a "pimple" jump—a small obstacle set on the top of a short, steep mound. To be sure Millie has a confidence-building experience over this jump, I'm giving her a really positive ride up the hill to it, keeping my seat in the saddle with my shoulders back and my lower legs firmly on her sides but with my rein contact still encouragingly soft. (My fingers have opened up here, which is a bad habit of mine. To maintain a good rein contact, it's important to keep your fingers wrapped around the reins and rely instead on the flexibility of your elbows to create softness in the connection.) You can tell from her cocked ear and wary expression that she's not as sure about this jump. However, she responds to my encouraging aids and ...**

problems, overcome setbacks or simply improve conditioning. Most importantly, it builds confidence—in both our horses and ourselves. And, let's not forget, it's fun!

To identify your specific schooling goal, first think about the basic questions this phase of the sport asks. The fundamental test is to ride over varying terrain in balance and—eventually, as you move up the levels—at speed, jumping fences along the way. As natural as it may seem, many horses simply don't understand this concept at first. It may take a great deal of time to teach them how to keep their balance up and down hills and jump up and down banks, over ditches and into and out of water.

For riders, cross country requires many skills similar to show jumping, but the sensation is different. You, too, have to learn to stay balanced in the saddle as the terrain changes underneath you.

So a big part of schooling is simply getting comfortable moving over the changing terrain. That's why trail riding, hacking in open fields and foxhunting are always good preparation for eventing. Even at the upper levels, we constantly practice trotting and cantering up and down hills, continually developing our horses' and our own strength and balance. Knowing that your horse can balance himself down the hills allows him to go really fast on course at the Advanced level.

In addition to working on balance, it's important to familiarize yourself and your horse with any new obstacles you might see at competitions, particularly if you're moving up a level. Any other problems that arise on cross country—straightness issues, rushing, etc.—can be addressed in a schooling session, too.

Even if you're not dealing with any problems on course and you're competing fairly frequently, cross-country schools are great fitness training for both you and your horse. Keeping yourself balanced in the saddle over uneven terrain for five minutes is challenging—especially when you forget to breathe! Occasional cross-country schools can help you build up the strength and stamina you need for successful competitions.

Whatever your goal, confidence is key. Rather than show your horse what he *can't* do, always try to show him what he *can* do. The intent of a cross-country school should never be to scare your horse. You have to establish braveness before testing it.

Give yourself the same respect. Cross country is inherently adrenaline-inducing, whether you're competing or schooling. It's fun and exhilarating, and it gets your heart pounding. That's good! But it can

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**3. ... neatly pops over the log. In the air, I stay soft in my hands and balanced over my feet.**

**4. When she lands, I immediately bring my shoulders back again, preparing for the steep downhill. Because we've practiced cantering up and down hills, I trust her to maintain her own balance down the slope, so I can leave her mouth alone. Her happy expression here shows that she's got this question figured out and will tackle it with even more confidence next time.**

also start a vicious cycle. As you get more excited, your horse picks up on it and gets keyed up as well, which may make you more nervous. It's impossible for either of you to be confident when you're nervous. Having a cross-country schooling plan before you start is a great way to stay on top of your nerves.

Also consider how your horse's behavior in the company of other horses might affect your experience. Being in a group/clinic setting can either increase or decrease the stress level, depending on the dynamic. For younger, less-experienced horses, the company can be reassuring. If your horse has trouble understanding a new obstacle, it's wonderful to have a more experienced horse lead him over it. Some horses get more excited in groups, though. Carry some mints or carrot chunks in your pocket to offer to your horse if he gets nervous. Even a handful of grass can help settle a worrier.

Before any school, take the following

steps to ensure that both you and your horse have a positive experience.

### Set Up for Success

#### 1. Select a safe, reputable location.

Well-built, professionally designed courses are popular for a reason. Designers put a lot of thought into the location, shape and construction of each jump to make it safe and inviting.

**2. Get expert supervision.** Whether you school with your coach, a clinician or another experienced rider, having knowl-

### Safety First

Whether I'm schooling or competing, I always ride cross-country in a safety vest and Point Two air jacket, an inflatable vest that I wear over my regular safety vest. I know these vests can seem expensive but, in the long run, they're well worth the investment—especially if it means saving on medical bills for a broken rib, collarbone or worse. The sport of eventing will always be inherently dangerous, but the safer we can make it—with protective measures like this—the better.

I also always jump cross-country with a neck strap, no matter how experienced the horse is that I'm riding. The great William Fox-Pitt doesn't ever ride cross-country without one, so I feel like I'm in good company! You can grab it whenever you feel as if you're losing balance, for example, if your horse takes an unexpectedly large jump or does something naughty. I like to use it now and then even when I am in balance just because it makes me feel extra secure. You can make a neck strap out of a stirrup leather or purchase a product designed specifically for this purpose. (The neck strap in the photos in this article was made by Nunn Finer.)

## Moving Up to a New Level *SCHOOLING GOAL: To introduce your horse to new types of jumps she hasn't seen before.*

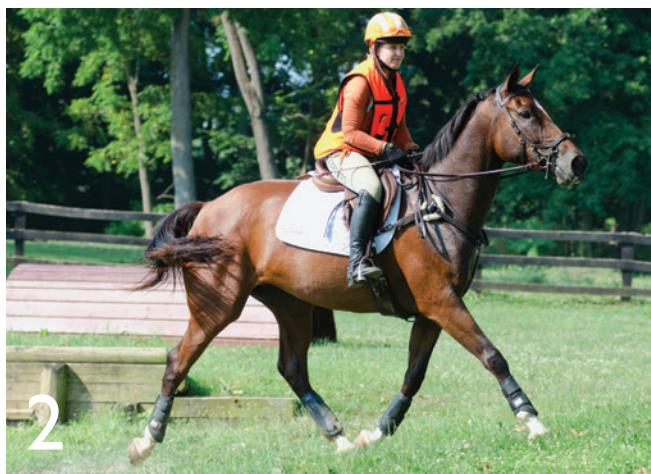
1. I always begin a water-jump school by walking quietly into the water complex from the easiest approach—even with seasoned competitors. Since horses have a natural aversion to jumping into water, it's essential to build their confidence in this hazard every time they encounter it. I then progress to trotting into and out of the water, again taking the easiest entrance and exit. (Unfortunately, the water had been drained from this jump at the time of this photo shoot. For a horse who hasn't been exposed to water jumps, this provides an even more gradual introduction. Familiarizing her with the complex's different questions now will make her even more confident tackling them—in the same gradual sequence—the next time it's filled with water.)



2. As we trot out of the water complex, you can tell by Millie's alert expression that this is new to her. My loopy reins encourage her to stay as relaxed as possible. Once she is comfortable entering/exiting the water complex without an obstacle, I'll ask her to jump a small bank out of it—then turn around and jump back down it.

3. When Millie feels ready, I combine the questions: jumping down a bank into the water complex, then cantering through it on a straight line to a slightly bigger bank out.

4. After landing from the drop, I focus my eyes on the jump ahead and keep a little more rein contact to be sure Millie stays straight.



edgeable guidance is invaluable. People become experts by making every mistake possible, so they know how to help you avoid making those mistakes.

One thing an expert can help with is deciding which obstacles to jump and in what order. This is where schooling can

actually be a little more challenging than competing. At an event, the designer has arranged the course in a logically progressive, flowing manner. As you look at a field full of jumps, it might not be so obvious where to start.

An expert can also help you decide

which jumps are a reasonable challenge for you and your horse and which ones might be beyond your current level. Jumping big fences is a great confidence booster, but you never want to risk overfacing your mount or yourself.

If you do choose to school in a clinic

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5. As you can see by her expression, Millie is trying to judge what's happening in this new question. To be sure she stays straight and forward to the jump, I sink my weight into the saddle and bring my shoulders back while maintaining a light connection with her mouth. I've also slipped my lower leg forward, with my heels well down, to

ensure my position doesn't come unglued should she swerve or hesitate at the last minute.

6. The result is a nice bold effort up the bank. Millie's beautiful expression says it all here: She's nailed this!



setting, be sure to choose a clinician with a reputation for boosting, rather than damaging, horses' and riders' confidence. A good clinician should challenge you just enough to make you feel terrific, but not so much that you ever feel uncomfortable or afraid.

**3. Make a plan.** Discuss your goal with your coach beforehand. It's always easier to address an issue in the beginning than to try to fix it later on. If you're on the same page, you'll know where the session is headed and won't have to worry about surprises.

Don't be greedy in your plan. If you have limited opportunities to school, don't be tempted to jump every jump you possibly can. Save your horse's legs and stick to your plan. When you've achieved your goal, give him a pat and call it a day. Whatever happens, always end your session on a good note.

If you have to travel a long way to a course, consider spending the night and schooling two days back-to-back in shorter sessions rather than one long ses-

sion. Your shorter rides will keep it fun for your horse, and the repetition can be highly effective.

**4. Check the footing.** There's no point in schooling if the footing is slippery or hard. Either instance can, at the least, make the experience uncomfortable for your horse and discourage him from jumping in the future. At worst, it can cause injury and lameness. A good rule of thumb: The ground should be soft enough for high-heeled shoes to sink in about an inch or so but not so soft that your shoe disappears in the mud. The turf should also have established-enough roots to give your horse purchase. Overgrazed turnout paddocks, on the other hand, provide less traction.

Even on good footing, I avoid making sharp turns when schooling cross country. This is a skill you'll need in competition, but it's safer to practice it in a ring with reliable footing, where there's less risk of an accidental slip or trip.

Consult your coach about whether or not studs might be worthwhile for your

particular scenario.

**5. Finally, and most importantly, be safe!** This should go without saying, but it never hurts to double-check one last time before you head out on course. A safety helmet and vest are a must. I also think that an inflatable vest is a valuable investment (see "Safety First," page 5).

Here are some example goals and suggested plans you might make to achieve them:

### **Green Horse or Rider**

**Goal:** A safe, positive introduction to the sport.

**Plan:** Before you school, do plenty of hacking out in the open and on trails. Both at home and at the beginning of your cross-country school, test your brakes on the hills. Practice trot-walk transitions midway down a slope and then try cantering up the slope and pulling up to a walk or halt at the top. Once you're comfortable with that, find a small log to trot over. Then try a slightly bigger log. Progress to a minicourse over a series of logs. If that



Four-star eventer **Sharon White** named her West Virginia training facility Last Frontier Farm after the state in which she grew up—Alaska. She competed her first self-made four-star horse, Ready About, at the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event in 2002. Since then, she's brought many young horses along to the upper levels. In 2011, she was short-listed for the Pan American Games and named the U.S. Eventing Association

Advanced Rider of the Year for the second year in a row. She is also a U.S. Eventing Association Level IV Certified Instructor.

Sharon's horsemanship was widely acknowledged at the 2012 Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event, where she decided to retire on cross country only a few jumps from home. Her mount, Rafferty's Rules (Reggie), had suffered an injury before the season began and, as Sharon realized toward the end of the course, had not had enough time to regain his four-star level of conditioning. Rather than push Reggie over the still very substantial remaining jumps and risk an accident, Sharon pulled up. "I take full responsibility for my decision," she says. "He was too tired to continue. Fortunately, he recovered fine and was better because of it."

goes well, give your horse a pat and call it a day.

I teach all of my Novice-level horses to approach cross-country jumps at the trot on loopy reins. Instead of forcing them to jump, I always think of *allowing* them. That way I know they're relaxed and learning the job. When I finally let them canter around courses, they have more control and confidence.

Don't worry if your horse is slow to figure out the different terrain and natural obstacles. Many fabulous event horses have awkward beginnings. The more time you take in the early stages, the fewer problems you'll have to fix later.

## Early-Season Refresher

**Goal:** Confirm your readiness for competition and give yourself and your horse a good boost of confidence.

**Plan:** Start with a trot and canter around the field, reminding yourself how it feels to stay in balance up and down hills. Then jump some inviting fences (round shapes like logs and roll-tops) and progress gradually to more challenging ones, incorporating the major questions you'll face on course at your level—banks, ditches, water, etc. It's OK to repeat some jumps once or twice, but don't drill.

## Moving Up to a New Level

**Goal:** Introduce new types of jumps that you haven't seen before. For example, when you move up to Training level, your horse needs to learn to jump into water for the first time (enter the water by dropping down a bank and/or over a log).

**Plan:** Start your school just as you would a normal refresher. When your horse is jumping confidently, walk him into the water by the easiest entrance. Give him a moment to relax and get his feet wet, then trot through the water a few times. Next, do all of the lower-level obstacles in the water complex—trot in and out of the water, jump a small bank out of the water. Finally, when all is going well, trot or canter to the Training-level drop-in.

I follow this technique *every* time I school horses of any level in the water. After such an easy, logical experience, they're more trusting and braver about water in their next competitions.

## Conditioning School

**Goal:** Improve fitness for both horse and rider. If you're riding at a level that requires regular gallops in your training program, this can count as one.

**Plan:** You don't need a full cross-country course for this purpose. Just a few, well-built, straightforward jumps (logs, roll-tops, coops, etc.) scattered around a field are great. Do your regular warm-up and then canter around the field at a steady pace for five minutes (or whatever your training program requires), jumping the fences as if you were on course.

## Address a Problem

**Goal:** Zero in on a particular problem you are having in competition. For example, I might notice that I'm riding backward to water jumps—holding too much rein contact, which might discourage my horse in the approach.

**Plan:** Instead of trying to fix my problem *and* practice all of the other questions available, I do a simple warm-up, jump a few easy fences and then go straight to the water jump. In this case, as I mentioned previously, I always let my horse get his feet wet first. Then I ride to a bigger jump into the water, focusing completely on keeping a light, soft feel on the reins and encouraging my horse all the way to takeoff. I repeat this a few times to ingrain that good feeling in my mind—and then quit while I'm ahead.

## Confidence Builder

**Goal:** Almost every rider loses confidence at some point, so it's important to know that you're not alone if this happens to you. Whether it's you or your horse who's lost confidence—or both—the goal is to have a positive experience.

**Plan:** One option in this situation is to drop down a level. If you're a Training-level eventer riding in a clinic, for example, sign up for the Novice-level class. You'll both feel like a million bucks by the end. There's no shame in doing this. Even top-level riders drop their horses down a level or two occasionally—and it always pays off in the end.

As always, discuss your goal with your coach before the session begins. With a solid plan in mind, you'll be able to relax—and *enjoy!* 🍷



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# Special Considerations for the Senior Performance Horse

*How to adapt your horse's management to better support his age*

**Q** *How can I keep my senior sporthorse healthy? How should I organize a fitness program with the goal of keeping him fit and interested?*

**A** The first step in maintaining the health of a senior horse is recognizing when your horse has reached senior status. This can be tricky since the definition is not simply based on age. Rather, horse owners and veterinarians must watch for the physical signs of aging and declines in body system function.

## Manage His Diet

One of the first facets of a horse's care that needs to be adapted for his age is diet. Through a combination of loss of dental integrity and the natural aging of the intestines, older horses lose their digestive efficiency. They can't absorb the nutrition released from the food they eat when it is processed in the colon, and if there is dental disease, they may not be able to properly chew the forage and begin the digestion process in the first place. As a result, aged horses have a higher daily protein requirement of 12 to 14 percent. This is especially important for aging athletes and supplementation with the specific amino acids lysine and threonine can help optimize muscle recovery. High-quality forage is important and a hay analysis can help determine whether you are choosing an appropriate product. As always, free choice water and salt is important.

If a horse is not able to chew his hay properly, then replacing the fiber through forage alternatives is a good option. These can include complete feeds, chopped forage,



It's important to consider your senior horse's diet, as older horses lose digestive efficiency.

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CRICKET RUSSILLO

*Christina "Cricket" Russillo, DVM, graduated from the Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine in 2001. After completing a large animal medicine and surgery internship at Texas A&M, she realized her desire was to work on elite sporthorses. Following 13 years of practice at Fairfield Equine Associates in Newtown, Connecticut, focused on high-level show-jumping and dressage horses, she joined Virginia Equine Imaging in 2015. Russillo relocates to Florida every winter to support her clients and patients. She has competed through Third Level in dressage and in February 2017 she was appointed the U.S. Dressage Team veterinarian. She is also a certified member of the International Society of Equine Locomotor Pathology.*

For the senior horse, a low-intensity warm up with lots of walking can ease stiffness and supple the joints. Doing this work outside the ring can keep things interesting and reduce boredom.



LINDSAY PAULSEN/ AIMMEDIA

hay cubes and beet pulp. The commercially available senior concentrate formulations take these concerns into account and offer horse owners a streamlined alternative that includes readily digestible fiber, added fat and reduced sugar. Senior foods are typically available in pelleted or extruded formulations to make them more easily digested compared to textured formulations, which contain whole grains that require the gut to work harder to break down and absorb nutrients.

There are additional supplement recommendations to consider for senior athletes. A probiotic formula that includes prebiotic ingredients will optimize the health of the bacteria that live in the horse's hindgut. Antioxidants like vitamin E and vitamin C support the immune system, which naturally declines with age. Omega-3 fatty acids can reduce inflammation and support a healthy weight in seniors who are prone to leanness when working hard. Lastly, include a joint supplement that contains ingredients such as glucosamine sulfate and avocado unsaponifiables, which can support joint health in any aged athlete.

### Be Proactive

Another way to keep your senior competition horse healthy is to proactively

screen for diseases that can undermine his well-being. A baseline cardiovascular workup can be lifesaving for a mature athlete, especially an event horse, for whom the risk of sudden death on cross country significantly increases after 15 years of age. Routine blood tests can identify a decline in kidney or liver function, the organ systems more commonly affected in old age. Long-term use of non-steroidal medications can also affect these body systems, and since many older athletes receive anti-inflammatory medications to support soundness and comfort, monitoring for changes once or twice a year becomes especially important. Endocrine diseases such as pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction (PPID or Equine Cushing's disease) are more prevalent in senior horses. Recognizing and initiating appropriate treatment early on can help avoid costly injury since the resulting hormone dysregulation from PPID exposes older athletes to weakness in their tendons and ligaments and reduces injury recovery. Daily medication can help normalize the hormone imbalances and prevent career-ending complications like laminitis. But, it should be noted that the most commonly prescribed medication for PPID, pergolide, is not permissible in FEI competition and requires a veterinarian-endorsed therapeutic use exemption to

show in USEF competitions.

Regular soundness exams become even more important for the senior athlete. Recovery from intense athletic activity can take longer, and the joints and soft tissues are naturally more at risk for injury and inflammation due to accumulated wear and tear. Managing joint pain due to osteoarthritis with targeted treatment directly into the joint is more successful now with the development of therapies that can be made from a horse's own blood (regenerative medicine). These biologic-based products can safely extend the careers of senior horses when corticosteroid injections into arthritic joints has become less effective or is riskier due to coexisting endocrine disease. Older athletes are more prone to soft-tissue injuries, and routine ultrasound imaging is a useful tool to monitor the integrity of tendons and ligaments.

### Consider Your Training

A low-intensity warm up with lots of walking can ease stiffness and supple the joints. When possible, perform this type of work outside the ring to reduce boredom. Before competition, a shorter warm up can avoid sending a fatigued horse into the ring. Older horses benefit the same as younger horses from alternating intense days with lighter days to allow recovery.

With the help of proper nutrition and attentive veterinary care, we are now able to keep our senior horses performing better than ever into their later teenage years. Although it might be necessary for an owner to gradually transition her equine partner away from the more rigorous aspects of training, there can still be many more happy and productive years ahead of a senior horse. The key is to keep a watchful eye for hints that your athletic partner is aging, and provide age-appropriate support to go that extra distance. 🐾

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