

Staying straight

PART 1: FLATWORK

Refine your aids and challenge your horse's straightness with Ros Canter's simple exercise

Horse&Rider EXPERT

Ros Canter is the reigning Individual and Team European Eventing Champion. She has multiple 5* wins to her name and helped Team GB secure gold at the Paris Olympics 2024.



Transferable skills

This exercise is so useful because it's suitable for any type of horse, at any level and in any discipline – I'll even run through it with Lordships Graffalo from time to time to check-in on our straightness and controls.

Riding a truly straight line is much harder than many people think, but this exercise isn't only about working on the horse's straightness. It's a great one for us as riders, too, as the poles are points to focus on but not look at directly. Our job in the saddle is to look one step ahead of what we're doing, so we can prepare and guide the horse. So, although we're training on the flat here, these skills are easily transferable to jumping.

Take Badminton, for example, where there might be four elements in a cross-country combination – each time I jump, I've already got my eyes locked on the next fence to encourage my horse to follow me. The idea with this exercise is to have something that's not going to overface your horse so you can practise the system you're going to implement when fences are involved.

Why is straightness important?

A straight horse will...

- have even weight distribution and develop muscles evenly
- stay in better balance
- have more impulsion
- be more supple
- have a reduced risk of injury

You need...

- Two short poles or dressage boards for this exercise. Position them down the long side or centre line, at least 20m apart.

TOP TIP

I really like using raised boards because they require the horse to lift. If you can, use skinny poles for straightness exercises, as they'll encourage you to be more accurate.

Ros's rider tips

Whatever stage you're at, remind yourself of the end goal – yes, you want your horse to be working straight, but it's about refining your skills to improve your controls and communication. So, as you come around the corner onto the line, look at your first board or pole. Once you're on the line, fix your eyes on the second board until you're riding over the first one, then look up and ahead towards the end of the arena. ▶

FLATWORK

In this feature

- Establish a straight horse
- ▼ Check your controls
- ▼ Test self-carriage



Self-carriage test

Riding with my reins in one hand is something I do quite a lot, especially on younger, less experienced horses or ones who tend to come onto their forehands. If you have a horse who tends to hold onto the bit, when you feel that he's light in your hand and carrying himself, put your reins into one hand, give him a pat and see how long he stays in self-carriage.

If he only stays there for a stride, he's not quite there yet, but if he maintains it for five strides, you'll know he's really starting to carry himself.

STEP 1

Ride straight

Starting in walk, ride straight down the line a few times, making sure you repeat it on both reins. As you turn onto the line, pay attention to where your horse's body is going – does he naturally drift to one side? Without the boards there, it's easy to overlook how straight (or not) he really is. And this is why the boards are so great – they clearly indicate when he's drifting in one direction. Take time to analyse this on both reins. Horses tend to have a preference, so you might find he drifts more on the right rein compared with the left rein, for example.

Before correcting your horse, consider your position and the impact it might be having on him – are you unintentionally causing him to drift? Ask someone to stand behind or in front of you to see whether you're lopsided, as well as to ensure you're sitting level and using your aids evenly when you repeat the exercise.

STEP 2

Add in a circle

Once you're happy and confident riding straight through, try adding a circle between the two boards. This will test your accuracy and ability to go from a straight line to a circle and then back onto the same straight line, without a fence line as your physical barrier.

As before, when you ride onto the circle, consider whether your horse has drifted. If he has, how difficult is it to bring him back onto a straight line? And how are you ensuring he does this? Are you crossing a hand over his neck or can you keep one hand either side? This exercise will help you recognise whether you're actually helping, or hindering.

If you're crossing your hand over the neck to stop his shoulders falling out, can you stop doing that and still have the same result? Or do you need to use your leg instead to support his body?

STEP 3

Try one-handed

The next part of this exercise is a real challenge but it's definitely worth practising – if you can perfect it, it shows that you have an independent seat and can communicate effectively with your horse without relying on your reins.

Revisit step one, riding straight through, but this time carefully put your reins into one hand and lower your free hand so it's resting behind your leg as you ride over the boards. Progress through the steps again, sticking to whatever pace you're most comfortable in. See whether you can maintain that straightness without your rein aids – can you get back onto the line using your eyes, body and legs alone?

TOP TIP

You can switch up which hand is free each time, but when circling, start by taking your inside hand away from the rein so you can still support your horse's shoulders.

SIMPLE CHANGES

If your horse starts to rush or becomes nervous when you put your reins into one hand, get him used to the feeling by lightly releasing your grip at first, then work up to moving your hand away completely.

“Before correcting your horse, consider your position and the impact it might be having on him”



Focus on the hindlegs following the forelegs

Next level

You can work through this exercise in all three paces, keeping the same principles in mind at every step. Remember, you want to use your eyes and seat to guide your horse, rather than relying on your reins. Achieve this and your horse will be better balanced and able to perform at his best. ■



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Part two Gridwork for straightness

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