

**MASTERCLASS****Shane Breen****Positive jumping rhythm**

Your horse will be more responsive over fences if you follow the advice of top show jumper **Shane Breen**

**The expert**

Show jumper Shane Breen, from County Tipperary in Ireland and now based in the UK, won Hickstead's Queen Elizabeth II Cup in 2008 in its first incarnation as a unisex event. He is a regular member of Ireland's Nations Cup team.

**The rider**

Saskia Lawrence from Dorset has owned five-year-old, Irish Sports Horse, Junior, for 16 months. She hopes to affiliate him this year in eventing.

"We are currently taking part in unaffiliated dressage, jumping and one-day events," Saskia explains. "However, Junior is not very careful over show jumping fences."



**A**t five years old, Saskia Lawrence's gelding, Junior, is progressing well and already has some competitive experience under his belt.

However, Saskia feels that he can get "bored very easily and become dead to the leg", and she is keen for Shane to teach

her some new exercises to keep the horse's interest.

"I'd also like to encourage him to be a bit more responsive, especially when shortening and lengthening his stride between fences," she explains.

So that Shane can get an impression of their current level and abilities, Saskia walks, trots

and canters Junior around one end of the school. She stays out of the saddle slightly in canter, to encourage the horse to loosen up through his back.

"Junior is showing some nice transitions, although he is a bit spooky at the moment," observes Shane. "Saskia has a very smart position."

## 1 Working long and low

It's time to get Junior working properly on the flat, before he starts jumping. Saskia usually begins her schooling sessions with stretching work in trot and canter, so she allows Junior to work in a deep outline.

Shane reminds her to keep him moving forwards, even though Junior is on a loose contact. "When he stretches down into your contact, put your leg on to keep his quarters active," Shane suggests.

Next, Shane tells Saskia to ask for some leg yield, which is good for suppleness and will help Junior's hindquarters to be more active. She leg yields from the three-quarter line back to

the track, first in trot and then canter, to get Junior moving away from her leg.

During the exercise, Junior is obedient to Saskia, if a little spooky, but Shane does not think this is a problem. "He is just having a good look around," he comments.

### Shane's top tip

**Working in a deep outline is a good way to start your schooling sessions, but don't let your horse become inactive and unresponsive.**



Saskia needs to keep Junior moving forwards, even when he's on a loose rein.

## 2 A useful exercise

Next, Shane puts down four poles on a circle, laid out like a clock face at 12, three, six and nine o'clock on a 15m circle. If cantered over accurately with a good, bouncy canter, the poles should be three strides apart.

Shane asks Saskia to choose two poles to begin with, and to canter over them on the left rein, going around the outside of the remaining two.

"This exercise will help you to achieve a canter that you can jump a course with," Shane explains. "It also encourages the horse to be active in his hocks and is great practice for riding corners in canter. With a more experienced horse, you can replace the ground poles with little jumps," Shane adds.

Saskia chooses to go over the poles at 12 o'clock and six o'clock, but is finding it tricky, because Junior hasn't yet established a consistent rhythm in canter. He keeps drifting out and going around the outside of the poles she is aiming for.

"If you apply pressure on the inside rein, you will need some on the outside rein too, in order to have a balanced contact," Shane comments.

"Make sure you are square in the shoulders, and don't worry about where the horse's head is. If you feel he is rushing, you

The pole exercise is designed to help Junior become more active in his hocks.



Right: Shane encourages Saskia to balance Junior using her shoulders.

should be able to use your shoulders to bring him back to you, by slightly sitting up and pulling them back," he says.

### Shane's top tip

**Use pole work to help you achieve the right show jumping canter.**



### 3 Improving the canter rhythm

Next, Shane asks Saskia to add the third and then fourth pole into the circle, which makes the exercise more difficult.

Junior initially misses out one or two of the new poles on each rotation, and when he does canter over them, he does it with anything from two to four strides between each pole.

"You won't be able to jump clear round a course if you can't canter over four poles!" Shane comments.

However, the young horse seems unfazed by the exercise. "He is working it out for himself, and doesn't seem bothered by the challenge," Shane says.

Saskia asks if she should change the rein yet, but Shane tells her to do two good circles over the poles before going onto the right rein. He also has the following advice for Saskia:

- Look up and ahead.
- If you can see he is getting 'deep' to the pole, put your shoulders back to slow him down a little.
- Aim for a particular stripe on the poles for accuracy.



Once Junior establishes a good canter rhythm, the exercise becomes easier.

- Think 'balance, control and contact'.

Saskia is still aiming for a sequence of three strides in between each pole, but at the moment, her average stride pattern is three strides, then three, four, and two.

"He's drifting away from the centre of the poles, getting fewer strides towards the centre of the circle, and more strides towards the outside," Shane observes. "Be more positive and accurate with your riding."

With repetition, Junior is now mostly getting three strides between each pole.

"Initially, you were a bit all over the place, but now you are sitting up with your shoulders back and maintaining a good contact," Shane praises.

### 4 Keeping an even contact



Saskia works on maintaining an even contact on the circle.

Saskia now tries the exercise on the right rein – her self-confessed worse rein.

Shane smiles when Saskia says this. "When people say they have a weaker rein, you often find it's the rider's problem, rather than the horse's," he says.

Saskia starts riding over two poles, before progressing to three. Junior is struggling to get even strides again. "You are blocking the contact and pulling with your hands. Which hand do you write with?" Shane asks. "My right," Saskia replies.

"You are using too much right hand. This didn't happen on the left rein, as your left hand isn't so strong," Shane explains.

"On the right rein, it is likely you will lose the left rein contact, and the left side of the horse will 'fall out' on the circle. Once you have lost his quarters, he can't possibly make it round over the poles."

Saskia now progresses to going over all four poles on the right rein. "Put your inside leg on, sit up and maintain your outside contact," says Shane.

Junior is quickly getting the hang of the exercise. "The right rein actually seems easier for him," Shane comments.

Junior is now getting three even strides between each pole. "Once the horse is finding it easy, try riding over the poles with two long strides on one rotation, then four short ones."

#### Shane's top tip

Use your body to influence your horse's speed and position – not just your hands.

## 5 Positive riding for an active canter



Junior jumps better when he approaches the fence in a more forward canter.



Saskia has a tendency to stand up in her stirrups after the fence.

Now Saskia has worked hard on improving Junior's athleticism, it's time for them to work over some fences.

"Don't start throwing yourself up his neck – ride as you have been over the poles, and think inside leg and outside hand for balance. Also aim for a good canter rhythm and a consistent contact when you are jumping," Shane reminds her.

Having put up a course, Shane asks Saskia and Junior to approach on the left rein, cantering over a ground pole then riding four positive, long strides to a low upright.

Junior initially takes seven strides between the pole and the jump. "Ride on – don't dawdle!" Shane reminds Saskia.

Her next try is five strides, but Shane says the canter is "dead". "It is too flat – you need to move him up a gear for jumping a course, and then collect him when necessary."

Saskia again arrives at the fence on five strides, but Shane is adamant this won't do. "Put your earlier training into practice," he says.

"You know how to keep him on the right line and ride him forward – your line to the pole was no good, as his back end was swinging to the outside and he was bent on the approach.

"Get him straight with a good, active canter," Shane commands firmly. "Think, 'one, two, three, four, boom!'"

Saskia comes again and achieves the 'magic' four strides, but Shane has more constructive advice to help her and Junior improve.

"Don't stand up in your stirrups after the jump and let it fall apart – get a nice active canter away from the fence," he says, while moving the first pole in a little to alter the distance.

### Shane's top tip

While the right approach is vital, don't forget about the 'get-away' – ride positively to the next fence.

## 6 Approaching from the weaker rein



Junior refuses at the filler on their first attempt.

Having put the placing pole a little closer to the jump, Shane now asks Saskia to approach from the right – her 'weaker' rein.

"Don't pull on your right rein – use your right leg and your left hand to place him correctly on the approach," he reminds her.

She must first jump a colourful filler fence, before making a change of rein to the right, coming over the ground pole and jumping the original upright from the other rein.

Junior puts in a surprise stop at the filler, but jumps the fence

on their next attempt, getting a perfect four strides between the pole and the jump.

When asked why that time was better, Saskia suggests it was her turn into the fence.

Shane explains it was also because she had "plenty of canter" – Junior was in her hand, yet she didn't let him gallop on.

"You landed in the same way, and didn't jump up his neck over the fence," he adds.

They finish the training session by completing a short course of fences – the perfect time to call it a day.



An inactive canter leads to an awkward jump from Junior.



## Conclusions

### Shane

"Saskia seems to get flustered easily, and she needs to trust her canter and eye for a stride more – if it is good, she needs to sit up and put the leg on when approaching a fence.

"She also needs to think about not throwing herself over the jump, and about sitting up on the get-away.

"Also, in a big arena, Saskia must not get in front of the horse's wither with her body position, or he will run on and get 'flat'. The horse takes it all in, so Saskia should trust

herself more to help improve his confidence."

### Saskia

"It has been useful working on striding – usually know I am not right within three strides of a fence, but I do nothing. I now realise I need to sit and wait if he's too deep, or push on if not.

"Shane told me my flatwork was extremely good, but that I left it at the arena gate when we moved on to jumping!

"Shane was really helpful and patient, and explained everything so simply."

## NEXT MONTH

A dressage Masterclass with leading rider **Peter Storr**

