

Preparing for indoor driving disciplines

UKcc Level 3 coach, *Sue Mart*, gives her training tips for the Paces and Precision Test in Indoor Horse Driving Trials

Although we often refer to the Precision and Paces test at an indoor driving event as the 'dressage phase', it is worth remembering that the judges are looking for correct paces and accurate figures rather than how expressive your horse is. So an accurately driven Shetland is going to score higher than a more showy type presenting wobbly circles and wavy lines. Precision makes up half of your marks so it is worth paying close attention to it and building accuracy into your training.

The Paces make up the other half of the marks and the judge will be looking for balance, rhythm and straightness, so plan some of your training to work on this too. You can do this by riding as well as driving so you can work on the paces in different ways without the horse always doing the same thing. Training for working trot, collected trot and extended trot (if you are training for the Open Test) can be done as part of an enjoyable hack out. I also use pleasure drives as an alternative to school work for training sessions on paces and transitions.

As long as it is safe to do so, you can pick a tree when driving around the lanes and use that as your marker for halts or transition changes. You can practise rein back and square halts at junctions; straight lines by using the road markings and bending on corners in the corner of a field or by making the most of open junctions (as long as there's plenty of visibility for other road-users).

Getting it spot on

It's a good idea to really familiarise yourself with the rules for Indoor Driving Trials which are very specific and comprehensive. The test must be driven from memory and no assistance from your groom is allowed.

Transitions must be completed 'as the nose of the horse arrives at the marker' and a halt made so that the 'leading horse's nose is at the marker', unless the test sheet says otherwise. A common mistake is to transition too early or too late, aiming for the marker (such as on diagonal lines) rather than just before the marker. You need to know the time and space your horse needs for forward movement and reaction time. You should be aiming for the



point about 3m before the marker, but you may need to adjust this for your horse and carriage. Work this out in training so you get it spot-on at the competition.

If you have the option of making an arena at home then do remember to be accurate in marking out, or you might come unstuck when you get to a competition.

In your home practice area you can place markers on your 20m or 15m circles or 5m deviations from the track to help you – just make sure you measure accurately when you place them. In the test arena, stride out or measure your data points and line them up

with fixed objects such as banners, posters on the wall, vertical beams or even fix an imaginary paint splodge or line in the sand to help you visualise where those points are.

Practice makes perfect

If you can get someone to video you during practice, watch the videos and see where

Top: Sue Mart UKCC level 3 coach in carriage driving. Bottom left: Using plastic training domes as markers for your key data points when practicing at home. Bottom right: You must be able to show straightness where required



you can improve. Smart phones and iPads are great tools for this. Videoing the test at a competition can be useful too. Don't use it as an opportunity to berate yourself for what went wrong (if it did); use it for feedback and learning.

Get friend to stand in for the judge at home and tell you what they see. Even if they aren't an experienced driver, they will still be able to see if your transition happened in the right place.

Don't keep practising the whole test over and over. Your horse will start to anticipate and unless you are practising accurately you will train in bad habits (both yours and the horse). Mix it up. Work on circles one day and then straight lines in another session. Make yourself a training plan which will cover all the movements, but only drive the whole test a couple of times before the competition.

Use your imagination

Use visualisation. This technique is widely used in all sports now and is excellent for training yourself without overtraining your pony. You can drive the test as many times as you like in your imagination, and you can do it in your

coffee break. However the same principle of accuracy applies. You need to be doing accurate practice in your visualisation too!

Here are some ideas to help you. For driving straight lines imagine a line on the floor and keep centred on the line. Imagine the perfect 20m circle drawn on the floor and drive the arc of the circle. Imagine you are in the test arena and the movements appear marked out on the floor as you progress through your test, helping you to remember it.

When using visualisation it is important that you are in the present moment, actually doing the driving in your mind not watching yourself drive. Feel the reins in your hands and the carriage under your feet, see the horse in front of you, and hear the rhythm of your horse's footfall and the carriage wheels. The more real you can make it in your imagination, with the richness of the sights, sounds, feelings and even smells, the stronger your visualisation will be.

Visualisation as a practice works because it gets the cells in your body firing off in the sequence that will produce memory for the next time you do it. 'Cells that fire together [repeating the sequence], wire together',

is a phrase (from neuroscientist Donald Hebb) worth remembering. It's why your visualisation practice must be accurate, and why you should not visualise going wrong unless you are also visualising how you would correct it. Imagining those 'what if' scenarios, such as what to do if you make an error of course, is useful preparation as long as you have visualised and prepared the positive solution to the 'what if' and not left yourself in a tangle.

Finally, remember to practise being relaxed so you don't send tension down the reins, and keep breathing and smiling. This is our fun and relaxation so enjoy it. If it wasn't a great outing or training session view it as a learning curve not a disaster.

- Sue Mart is the principal trainer at the Bennington Driving Academy. www.benningtoncarriages.co.uk/driving-academy

Above: Performing the manoeuvre when the horse's nose is on the marker. Below left: UKcc Level 3 coach Sue Mart. Below middle: Sue walking the course at Shuttleworth. Below right: You can practise while out driving

