

# Preparing for indoor driving, the obstacles

UKCC Level 3 coach, *Sue Mart* gives her training tips and advice on negotiating obstacles

**T**he obstacles section is another test of suppleness, roundness, bend, skill, harmony and communication. It tests your dressage training with added dimensions of speed and energy, however it's not just about how fast you can go.

Forward-going energy is really important in this discipline. The horse's energy comes from you. I once had a training session with Amanda Saville who told me, 'You are sitting like you are having tea with the Queen. Energise your driving with your sitting position and get in racing mode.' I always remember this and her words have stuck. Sitting in a racing position and thinking

'forwards' is important to keep your horse moving through the obstacle.

Imagine a circle of energy coming up from the horse's front foot, round to his shoulder and flowing back down to the foot, and the same circle in his hind leg coming up through his haunches and back down. These circles of energy are like the wheels on the carriage. Just as you want to keep the wheels flowing smoothly forwards, you want that same free-flowing, forward energy flowing through the horse. You have to allow and encourage that to happen. If you are putting the brakes on in your head, or not thinking forwards consistently, your intermittent energy will go

down the reins and give mixed messages to your horse - 'what's in the brain goes down the reins'!

## Working in harmony

Another good memory jogger is 'energy flows where attention goes'. This is a good one to remind you to look towards where you want to go (ie through and beyond the obstacle, not at it). Your bodyweight follows your head, which follows the direction your eyes are looking and your weight in the carriage also directs your horse. Focus on those points in the arena that will ensure you clear the obstacle. If you look at the thing you are trying to avoid, you'll almost certainly hit it!

Your voice can also be a great energizing tool for your horse, so make sure your vocal commands are clear, precise and full of positive, encouraging energy. Use voice commands for right and left. The more you can train your horse to work from your voice in this section, the less you will need to work through his mouth. Remember to communicate with your horse, not shout at him. This is still about harmony not domination.

When you are using the reins, think of it in terms of balance and guidance not tugging or hauling. Balancing your horse into the outside rein controls the size of the turn or circle. Think about how you ride a bike with the handlebars to make a smooth turn, the outside hand goes gently forward to allow the turn to the inside. Same with the reins - allow the outside rein to go forwards, to turn into the inside rein.

## Practise makes perfect

You can also communicate with your backstepper in this discipline, and they can aid the movement of the carriage by leaning their weight on the turns for example. Practise with them at home if you can, so they can get a feel for keeping their weight forwards and low, and standing on the appropriate side of the carriage for the turns.

Try setting up obstacles at home for you both to learn and practise shapes, circles and arcs in a flowing route that allows you to drive in a constant rhythm. You can use trees,



*Top: Practising at home use natural obstacles if you can, with the permission of the farmer of course.  
Bottom: Looking towards where you want to go.*





logs and other natural obstacles. Barrels are also good. You don't have to splash out on expensive equipment.

## Go with the flow

At the event, if you can, get a map from the event organiser so you can plan your route. Walk the obstacle(s) with your back stepper and once you have your route try running it (if it's not too crowded). It will give you a feel for how tight the turns are – if you have to slow down a lot when running it, or it isn't as smooth as it could be, think about taking a wider more flowing route. Maintaining rhythm is more important than apparent speed, because ultimately it will be faster than speeding up and slowing down.

You could also try videoing the course while walking or running it and play it back to see how your route flows (or doesn't!). Watching YouTube videos of experienced drivers can also be a good way of picking up tips.

Plan your angle for driving through the start gate and position your turnout for the most direct route to the A gate, this can save seconds and will be your racing line. Again you can set up start gates and obstacles at home so you can practise this first entry.

## Smooth and sure

Make sure you know your way in and out of the obstacles. The gates are lettered in sequence and driving them in the wrong direction or out of sequence incurs penalties for an error of course; errors not corrected can mean elimination. This is a test of your memory and observation skills as much as

your driving. Discuss your route with your backstepper and devise a plan together to memorise it.

Know where the knockdown balls are located on the obstacle and plan how you will drive to avoid them - taking note of the comment above about focusing beyond the obstacle not at it. If you are looking at the ball, you are more likely to hit it than if you focus beyond it. The indoor obstacles are purposely flimsy and collapsible so the objective is to drive as cleanly and smoothly as possible.

Push on to the finish once you are clear of the obstacle but make sure you are straight before you put the power on and allow your horse to stretch out in his pace. A longer stride covering more ground is often better than a shorter, faster stride.

Canter work at home can help with getting a balanced energetic forward trot. You don't

have to gallop to the finish, keeping a smooth trot with a lengthened stride can be just as effective and just as fast.

Always give yourself time to warm-up before practise or an event and remember to cool down once you've finished. Your horse needs to get his energy flowing too and have a chance to stretch out after his efforts. Drive at the speed you are comfortable with for the stage you and your horse are at. This is about building confidence for you and your horse and having fun.

## And finally...

Indoor driving trials can be a great way to introduce junior or novice horses and drivers to competition. They are also ideal events for smaller ponies and Shetlands driven in mini carriages. When you take part, remember to thank the organisers. They are usually volunteers who give up their time for this labour of love and without them we wouldn't have these events to enjoy.

- Sue Mart is the principal trainer at Bennington Driving Academy. [www.benningtoncarriages.co.uk/driving-academy](http://www.benningtoncarriages.co.uk/driving-academy)

*Top left: Working together as a team. Top right: The role of the backstepper is to balance the vehicle. Left: Running the course to learn it can make it fun and more realistic. Below: Adopting the racing position*

