**equi-ability** Hints and Tips

No.1

Putting a course together

We offer suggested patterns for the ridden and in hand expressions at Grey level, but we don’t suggest patterns above Grey, or for any level of the agility. This is because we recognise that all horses and partnerships are different, with various strengths and areas requiring development, and we want you to recognise and consider these and to be able adapt your patterns accordingly. For the agility, you will be choosing which obstacles to include as well as the order and spacing of the obstacles, and we don’t want to dictate that you should have any particular kit or space to be able to take part in equi-ability. We are passionate about inclusivity – we want everyone to be able to take part with us.

We do recognise, however, that course building or pattern designing is not something that everyone will have experience or skills in, and so we wanted to support you by giving you some hints and tips. A course or pattern which is designed with your horse in mind is more likely to be a positive experience for both of you and for your relationship.

There are a few things that it might be helpful to consider

1. Space
* Consider what size your space is and how you could mark it out.
* Where are the longest straight parts? These might be best used to demonstrate changes in energy with space and time to establish the pace, show the change and return to original pace whilst maintaining a straight line.
* Where might you be best filming from and how can you plan your course around that?
* Do you have fencing? Some elements of your pattern might be easier to show close to a fence or board. Sideways movements or ¼ turns are often easier for horses moving towards a barrier as they often find it more calming and supportive.
* Are there any obstacles that you might need to consider like a tree or low hanging branches? Or an electricity pylon etc? If you’re planning agility, you might even be able to use them as part of your course.
* Is it fairly flat or are there areas that you probably just need to avoid? Are there areas where the surface is not even? You could even consider covering that area with an obstacle in agility or using it for the simpler movements in the expressions.
* Are there likely to be other riders using the space at the same time?
* Are there any other distractions eg is his buddy in the field at the top end of the working area? You might need to do the things that need more of his focus at the near end instead.
* As you are thinking it through, draw out your ideas.
1. Your Horse
* What does your horse excel at or enjoy? Think how you can best demonstrate this within your pattern. You may want to think about setting it up well, giving time and space to see it clearly.
* What does your horse struggle with? If your horse finds a movement or obstacle less easy, give careful thought about how you can plan your course or pattern to help them with it. For example, if they are less flexible and so find corners hard, make sure that you don’t ask for anything challenging in or just before or after a corner. And plan so that anything which is more of a struggle is between two things which your horse finds a bit easier.
* Do they struggle with maintaining energy or get bored easily? Plan you pattern to offer more variety with more for them to think about, maybe even asking for more transitions that the level requires. You might also minimise the length of time that you are asking them, say, to walk around large, so that they don’t switch off making it harder when you do ask them for something different.
* Are they a higher energy horse? You may want to build in longer times of asking less of them and so do a little more walking large between obstacles or transitions.
* As well as considering what your horse finds harder or easier, think about times when you struggle. We don’t insist on leading from any particular side of the horse, but maybe you find it harder on one side than the other and you may want to plan that in. If you intend on swapping sides as you change rein for example, you should think about where and how you will do that. It might even be that you swap sides during another movement like a ¼ turn. And to give your horse the best chance of succeeding in what you are asking of them, make sure that you have time to come away from one movement or obstacle and to set them up well for the next ask.
1. The criteria
* For the expressions most of the criteria are even numbers which means that ideally you would show them on both reins. So you can plan your pattern in two halves – mirror imaged on each rein. Most horses find it easier to work on one rein than the other, and so you might want to start on their better rein – this can settle both horse and handler/rider into the pattern and very likely to improve the performance on the other rein.
* If an exercise is only due to be demonstrated once, then plan for this to be shown on the rein that the horse will find it easiest.
* In agility, remember that horses do view obstacles differently when approached from different sides. In our courses we only ask that you do any obstacle in one direction, but it is good practice to introduce all obstacles from as many different angles as you can. That way you have more flexibility about where to place your agility course obstacles when you’re planning. If you know that your horse struggles with, say flappy things to their right hand side, make sure that anything flappy is kept to their left, especially when doing other obstacles. This will minimise distractions.
1. The kit you have available (for agility)
* We have a wide variety of obstacles at all sorts of levels and we are aware that nobody wants to spend a more money than they need to for this. So many of our obstacles need very little or can be made with equipment that we might have in our yard or even our home, however some of them do need some kit. If you find that you are struggling without pieces if kit, let us know and we will be able to offer some cheap or free alternatives where we can.
1. Timing
* Think about when is the best day or time to do your filming and who do you have who might support you.
* Do you need to book your slot in a school or arena, or just warn other people that you will be filming at that time? Maybe you could get a group of you together to support the planning and the filming.
* And when you think you may have your pattern sorted, walk it through. This will doublecheck how long it might take as well as confirming that it will flow nicely and includes some set up time for each obstacle or transition. Also at this point go back to the list of criteria and make sure that you have included all that you need to.

The sort of spacing that you might consider is following a 20m circle at A with coming to a halt at E. By doing these at this sort of interval it means that you allow yourself and your horse time to have moved away from the circle, out of the corner and still have time to prepare for the halt. Also by leaving the halt to E, you have given yourselves time and space to straighten up after the circle and then the corner, and your halt is more likely to be straight and square. It also gives you space and time to prepare for the next transition, exercise or corner.

When demonstrating a change in energy, a rule of thumb is to allow 2-3 strides to build up the energy and the same to come back. Horses will differ but this is a rough guide.

Your course layout can be created to allow your horse to perform at their best and by planning it from your horse’s perspective means that you are truly seeking to understand their needs. The harmony mark given will at least in part be reflected in how well you have considered your horse’s needs in your pattern.