

Move it like... Oliver Townend

The Shropshire-based eventer on his winning jumping exercise, treating each horse as an individual and his resilient work ethic

ONE of my favourite exercises helps a horse develop two important jumping qualities: shape and sharpness.

Build four oxers in a row, 7.5 yards apart. Then place two poles on the floor, midway between each oxer and at right angles to them, to make 6ft-wide "tramlines". Every time the horse jumps down the line you can widen each oxer, which tightens the distance between the fences and makes him work a little harder.

This exercise encourages the horse to make a nice, round shape over his fences and to throw the same jump each time. The tramlines not only keep him straight but also encourage him to look down and further develop his outline.

Don't build the fences too big — it's more about shape than height. It's quite a tiring exercise when repeated, though, so half a dozen times should be enough.

On the flat, I believe that happiness in a horse is important. Being on the bit should be natural and achieved through softness rather than force, so my horses spend more time stretching long and low than they do working in the outline I would present in a dressage test.

I use a lot of counter-canter with the wrong bend. So for example, with the horse in counter canter on the left leg, on the long side, I'll gently ask him to bend to the right a little and back again. When you can put a horse where you want him like this, you know that he has quietly let go through his back.

● NEXT WEEK: eventer Flora Harris

Weight-watching

- I love going out to different restaurants, but I'm naturally strong and quite heavy so I can't do that too often.
- I tend to get heavier over the winter, so before the three-day events I reduce my calorie intake to trim down a bit.
- Although I eat very little throughout the day, I'm never short of energy. I often skip breakfast — I've usually ridden four horses by the time most people are sitting down for that — but I always have a filling evening meal.



Work ethic

- My philosophy is simple — I try to get up earlier and work harder than most people, in the hope that that makes me more successful.
- Find a trainer you're happy with and then put in the work.

Fitness

- When you ride as many horses as I do, you're knackered by the end of the day. I've not yet started getting aches and pains — hopefully by that stage I'll have made enough money to retire!

Personal preferences

- We run a big, busy yard with a definite routine, but that doesn't mean that we can't treat each horse as an individual.
- Our horses can go out if they want, but they're welcome to stay indoors if they prefer.
- We have three separate areas with three very different types of stabling — a horse who likes company might be happier in the American barn, whereas another might prefer a quieter place, or even a solitary stable. **H&H**