



▲ Max Amaya at Stonehenge Stables



# BUILD CONFIDENCE IN A JUMPER RIDER

*A jumper coach shares a series of exercises to challenge you at home and prepare you for the competition arena.*

**BY MAX AMAYA • PHOTOS BY NANCY JAFFER**

**T**o build riders' confidence, you have to make sure the exercises you set will develop the skills to handle any show-jumping questions they encounter. Success results in raising the riders' level of self-assurance to do what is required in competition.

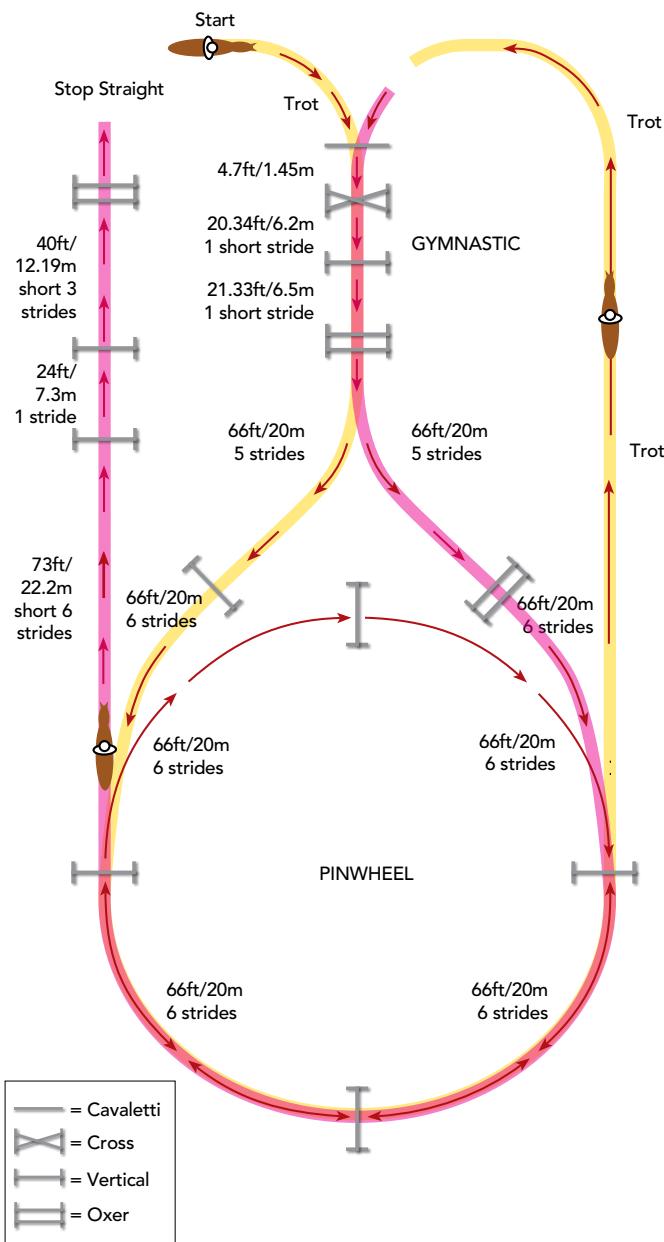
Improving confidence involves putting riders in a learning situation that is controlled but also offers a challenge. A controlled environment is conducive to ensuring they can manage whatever you set for them. That develops their ability to deal with a test when they leave their controlled environment to participate in a show.

I always tell these riders that at home at Stonehenge Stables, we have 90 percent control over what we do. The reason I say 90 percent is because when you're cantering to the jump, you're in control. When you leave the ground, however, you're not in control. There's 10 percent left to the sport.

At a show, however, a rider experiences less in the way of control. Once you get through the start timers, you have to go from the first jump to the last jump. Hopefully, you can achieve every feasible option along that track to make it successful with no rails down and within the time allowed. To do that, you require some skills, you need some confidence, and then the very little bit left is luck since a horse at any moment can drop a toe and a rail comes down.

▶▶▶ **TIP**

*Keep the size of the jumps small, so that an error easily can be forgiven by the horse.*



▲ In this exercise, I combine cavalletti, a pinwheel and gymnastics along with a few bending lines and some additional jumps. I have my students work on the individual exercises first, take a walk and then combine it all step-by-step.

So confidence is one of the keys in trying to make everything work the way you want it to, and the exercises we do at home are geared toward that goal.

For this piece, I put together cavalletti, a pinwheel and gymnastics along with a few bending lines and some additional jumps (see diagram, at left). They work at low heights with a lesson that tracks management of striding while emphasizing balance and 100 percent communication between horse and

rider. When training my students, I'll have them work on the individual exercises first, take a walk and then combine it all step-by-step. When you're working on these exercises, think of them as a smorgasbord effect, where you choose how to use the fences and in what combination.

All distances in this article can be adjusted according to the level and needs of the trainer, rider and horse. Also, keep the size of the jumps small—nothing over 3 feet and most far lower—so that an error easily can be forgiven by the horse.

### Cavalletti and Pinwheel

Before we start these exercises with our students, we always loosen up on the flat, enabling horse and rider to feel comfortable with each other. After that, we go over cavalletti, the pinwheel and then the gymnastic. When I work with a rider, I may explain, "OK, with your horse, you need to come in a little bit slowly and be patient. He might miss a step or two but let him figure things out.

You've just got to start going into jumping position and feel his mouth a little bit. You have to pay attention. If your horse is going to get anxious, you're going to have to use your voice. Is your horse a little lazy? You're going to have to use your leg. You need to apply the aid that's appropriate for your horse."

Doing these exercises enables me to take the mental temperature of the horse and rider all the way through and see what they're ready for that day.

Most riders are steady on a daily basis, but just like horses, we have better days and worse days. When you ride on the flat and over cavalletti before moving on to other exercises, I can judge whether there is a level of anxiety or not. When I'm working with a group of two or three riders, all are different; some are going too fast, some are going too slow, so I need to compensate and switch channels to make sure I am giving each what they need.

Sometimes, you have a horse who's really fresh, so you need to spend more time with the cavalletti before moving on. If you skip that step, this horse and rider are not ready to try something else.

Most of the time the cavalletti work we do with students is a canter exercise, whether it's a pole on the ground or a 12-inch raised cavalletti. The cavalletti represents a very minimal obstacle for the horse to perform the exercise.

Once we have completed this cavalletti work, we move on to a pinwheel exercise (see bottom of diagram, above left). This involves



**Be patient in the exercises. Your horse might miss a step but let him figure things out.**



▲ After loosening up on the flat, Caroline canters her 12-year-old Zangersheide Cisca VH Lindenhof Z over cavalletti. The cavalletti represent a minimal obstacle for the horse to perform the exercise.

four fences 10 to 12 inches high on a circle (imagine a clock with hands pointing to 12, 3, 6 and 9), each six strides apart, which gives you a little bit more room to work and adjust. It can also be set with rails on the ground for a less-experienced rider. We begin cantering two elements of the pinwheel, and when that's going well, I add the other two.

This exercise teaches you about riding your horse on curved lines. If he tends to go left, for instance, that means when riding the pinwheel to the left, you're going to have extra work to keep him in the middle of the fences so he's not patting the ground and turning that six strides into five and a half. The same applies if you're riding the pinwheel to the right and your horse drifts to the right. You should apply this principle to every tendency and direction of your horse.

This experience is useful when you are at the show, and your horse tends to go left while he's riding a six-stride bending line to the right. So you need to know how to open the inside rein to make the six more normal. If you don't do that, the six strides can turn into seven or be so long it's a little bit of a scary jump.

### Start on Gymnastics

After the pinwheel, we start on gymnastics. I like working at the trot going into the combinations because it gives the horses real balance and coordination by learning where their feet are. It offers the rider the comfort of coming into it without having to go at high speed. The distances are measured for the horses to achieve both collection and extension.

I believe in repetition. To me, it is one of the biggest recipes for improvement



▲ Caroline canters the pinwheel exercise, which teaches you about riding your horse on curved lines. If you're riding the pinwheel to the right and your horse tends to go right, you need to open your outside rein and use your right leg to keep him in the middle of the fence and do the correct six strides. If he tends to go left, you need to open your inside rein and use your left leg to stay centered.



## ABOUT MAX AMAYA

*Out of his Stonehenge Stables in Colts Neck, New Jersey, Amaya has trained such top-level show jumpers as FEI World Cup Finals competitors Brianne Goutal-Martreau and Charlie Jacobs. In conjunction with nearby Beacon Hill Show Stables and Stacia Madden, Amaya also has been part of the winning team at all the equitation finals. He competed in show jumping after being introduced to the sport in his native Argentina by his grandfather who served in the Argentine Cavalry. When Max came to North America, he went to work for FEI World Cup Jumping Champion Mario Deslauriers before going to Beacon Hill. Riding Church Road, he placed in more than 50 grands prix and rode in the 2006 FEI World Equestrian Games, competing the next year in the Pan American Games on the Argentine team. Now a U.S. citizen, Amaya focuses on training junior, amateur and international riders.*



▲ The gymnastic pattern involves trotting a cavalletti to a crossrail, then one canter stride to a vertical and one stride to an oxer, followed by an option to take one of two bending lines, one to a vertical or the other to an oxer. Trotting into the gymnastic gives the horses real balance and coordination by learning where their feet are. The distances are measured for horses to achieve both collection and extension.

because it gets you to work with the same pattern and analyze what you did right and wrong and how to correct it. If you keep changing the pattern, you will never have an opportunity to fix that question you couldn't answer before. If you answer the question wrong, you have a chance to answer it right when you repeat it, and that all goes toward building confidence.

So how are you going to do it right? By repeating the exercise until you can achieve it in a very comfortable manner. That will give you confidence as a rider that you can do this task in the future because know your horse, you know what the reaction is going to be and how to compensate, whether going to the right or left.

The gymnastic pattern illustrated here (page 70, top of diagram) involves trotting a cavalletti to a crossrail, then one canter stride to a vertical and one stride to an oxer, followed by an option to take one of two bending lines, one to a vertical or the other to an oxer.

Going to the right after the gymnastic, you ride five strides to the vertical and six strides to another vertical that is part of the pinwheel with six strides to the following two verticals of the pinwheel. Returning to the trot, you keep the horse straight down the long side toward the single cavalletti that is

part of the gymnastic and ride back over the gymnastic.

When riding both the five-stride and six-stride bending lines, you'll see in the diagram that the distance is the same measurement. This allows you to work on the adjustability of your horse by riding the same distance with different striding. In this case, you ride a smooth, open five strides to a nice collected six strides.



▲ After jumping through the gymnastic, going to the left over the oxer and over three pinwheel jumps, Caroline proceeds on six open strides to a vertical/vertical one-stride combination to a nice three strides to an oxer.

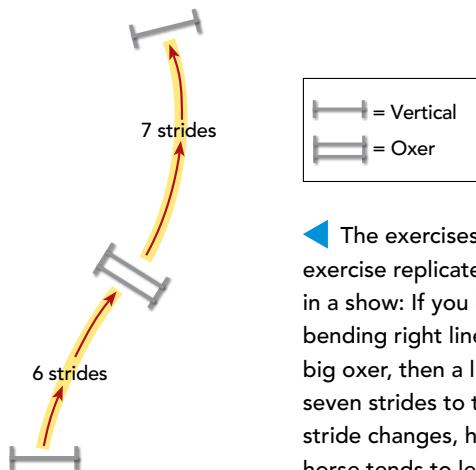
The next time through the gymnastic, you go to the left and ride five strides to the oxer, which then hooks up in six short strides to a pinwheel fence and then the next two pinwheel fences. Then you proceed on six open strides to a vertical/vertical one-stride combination to a nice three strides to an oxer. I ask riders to stop straight when they finish the exercise—never turn. Every time you land, horses are thinking about a turn, so when you finish, you let them know by pulling up straight. Straightness is key.

Another option involves going around the entire pinwheel again before heading to the vertical one-stride combination and the oxer.

These routes all replicate what happens in a show. Say you have a vertical on a bending right line six strides to a big oxer, then a line that bends left seven strides to the next fence



Max Amaya  
and Caroline  
Annarella



◀ The exercises in the main exercise replicate what happens in a show: If you have vertical on a bending right line six strides to a big oxer, then a line that bends left seven strides to the next fence. The stride changes, however, when your horse tends to lean right or left.

## Same Type of Mechanics

Moving up from the low and medium amateur-owner jumpers, where her last mare maxed out, Caroline Annarella, who is the demo rider in this article's photos, dreamed of riding in the high amateurs and small grands prix. She never thought that was a reachable goal until September 2019, when she bought the 12-year-old Zangersheide Cisca VH Lindenhof Z, who had been jumping at 1.45 meters in Europe.

"The horse being overqualified gives Caroline the chance to learn how to do this at a little bit more of an advanced level," says Max. "A horse of this caliber demands a different type of ride. A little more exigent, a little more complicated. When that becomes the task, that's when you start growing as a rider."

Caroline noted the exercises she demonstrated for the photos are designed to give her a boost. "They help because as hard as they are for me, they make everything else feel much easier because I'm applying the same type of mechanics when I go on course. It makes me better aware of what's going on."

A 25-year-old who majored in liberal arts at the New School, Caroline is from Rumson, New Jersey, about a half-hour from Stonehenge, where she has been riding for four years.

Caroline, who has worked with a sport psychologist, used to think: "Everyone's doing all this big stuff and I feel so bad about myself," so it was important for her to combat that attitude.

"The main thing is to stop comparing yourself to others, which is a real issue in the horse world. Remember that you are doing this because you love riding and love the horse. Everyone goes at their own pace. You just have to learn to be secure and happy in that," she learned.

"Once you start doing that, you start to see your path and where you could eventually go. That's very encouraging."

(see diagram above). The numbers change, however, when your horse leans right or leans left.

Let's say my horse tends to go to the left. So from Fences 1 to 2, I need the skills I learned in the pinwheel and gymnastic exercises to make the six ride normally—I have to open my right rein and ride a little bit of a direct line. If I don't, I will travel a longer distance than what the center-to-center of the exercise needs. I'll wind up with an extra half stride because my horse leaned left. Then from Fence 2 to 3, I need to make sure he doesn't go so far to the left that he rides the line in six-and-a-half strides.

Similarly, if my horse tends to go right, from Fences 1 to 2, I have to stay a little bit out so that I'm not doing five and a half strides. Then from Fence 2 to 3, I've got to make sure he doesn't go so much to the right that he does seven-and-a-half or eight strides. It's called tracking, and you can get a real feel for it, even over low fences.

Our weekly routine at Stonehenge involves stripping the ring on Sunday and Monday getting it ready for flatwork on Tuesday. On Wednesday, we do a regular course. We don't do gymnastic exercises every week. While it's very productive, it could get frustrating for horse or rider if you overdo it and keep changing the distances, the settings. I always like things in good measure. Too much of anything is too much.

For an entire week, we do these exercises two or three times with each course in each session, and that's plenty. The following week, I do a normal course, but something that is much more friendly. This pattern is a little bit aggressive, even though the fences are low.

### Tips for Success

- Never do gymnastics when your horse is wearing his show bridle. The show bridle gives you lots more control than the bridle you practice with at home. It's the ultimate tool you have when you go on course, where there's less control than at your home environment. At home, jumping smaller fences and in a controlled environment, we use a bridle that is less strong in terms of the bit and



*Repetition is one of the biggest recipes for improvement.*

noseband. That's important when doing those hard exercises on a bending line. If you by accident grab the horse's mouth when he is wearing the show bridle, you could have a very big effect that you don't want.

- Gear these exercises to the level of the rider in terms of fence heights. You do the same type of work for grand prix riders as you do for a rider who is not as advanced, just adjusting distances and the level of complication. For a rider with limited mileage, the pinwheel will probably be rails on the ground, which makes the perception a little bit easier for the rider. The outside line will be crossrails and a more-gentle distance. Don't hesitate to start everything with rails on the ground if that's what works for you.
- The distance and the measurements in our diagram are according to the size of the ring. Ours at Stonehenge is 350 by 280 feet. If you have a smaller ring, you have to shrink everything. I wouldn't suggest putting all these exercises in a small ring at the same time—you could find yourself dealing with a ping-pong effect.

You could do your exercises by section. I would definitely do a pinwheel, but if you don't have room for four rails, do a three-rail fan instead. For the gymnastic, you could do a trot crossrail one stride to a vertical, and one stride to an oxer, then three strides to a vertical. Add two fences beyond the gymnastic before going around and starting the gymnastic again. 🐾



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