

training tips

HOW TO SEE THE SPOT



solving the mystery of the perfect distance

Part three in a five-part series with Chris Pratt

*text by Patrick Field
photos by Michelle Dunn*

When riders and trainers speak about a distance, what do they mean?

As many of us know, having experienced the good, the bad and the ugly distances, it can sometimes be a daunting task to get our horses to help us find "the perfect distance". First let's try and decide what exactly a distance is, and then, through some simple exercises

and thought processes, help horse and rider consistently achieve the optimum take-off spot.

The ideal distance may be defined as the best place or spot for the horse to leave the ground in order to jump a fence efficiently and effectively. A general rule is that the height of the jump is the distance for take-off (picture taking the

jump and laying it down on its side - if your jump were 3' high, the point of take-off would be 3' in front). The distance may vary slightly with the speed at which one approaches the obstacle, the type of jump, the discipline and the horse itself. Ideally, we are trying to ensure that the centre of the horse's arc is over the highest point of the jump.

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Jennifer Jones is demonstrating how the take-off distance affects your horse's travel over a jump as outlined in graph #1. In picture #1, Jones has used the SLR basics to arrive at the correct distance so that her horse can take the jump in stride. In picture #2, the horse is too far away from the jump so the horse's bascule will peak before having cleared the jump. In picture #3, the horse is too close to the jump and doesn't have enough time to fold his front legs and may have the rail as a result.



According to Chris Pratt, there is far too much emphasis placed on “seeing” the distance and not enough thought is put toward exactly what is happening beneath them. Perhaps, instead of continually trying to “see” the distance, it is wiser to think of the obstacle as just another stride in an extension of flatwork. Thus, the emphasis should be on the ability to achieve consistency in self-carriage, line and rhythm, (SLR).

The act of seeing a distance is actually a feeling one gets from the use of their depth perception. We must be travelling directly towards an object at a consistent rate of speed for us to feel the horse's rhythm and feel where they are going to take-off. Only from here, we can make the necessary adjustments through lengthening or shortening to get to the optimal distance.

By simplifying the steps necessary to finding the right distances it's important to see how any mistake, refusal, chocolate chip or flyer can be traced back to not carrying out SLR basics correctly.

Whether you are a hunter, jumper or event rider, here are some exercises to help you and your horse get to; over; and away from any jump in the most effective and efficient manner – creating more smooth, clean rounds in the process.

Pratt advocates starting small and then progressing, as the steps are mastered confidently by both horse and rider before moving up. This way, with the homework properly done at each level, new situations and jump configurations can be handled without difficulty.

It is best to start with a single rail on the ground. Teaching the horse and rider to walk, trot and canter over the rail using the SLR basics will develop skills needed to move on. Don't even think of progressing to the trot until the walk rail is mastered. The horse must carry itself on a perfectly straight line at a consistent rhythm for the rail to fall evenly in its steps. If the horse steps on the rail, trips over it, or has to make a major adjustment on its own not to hit

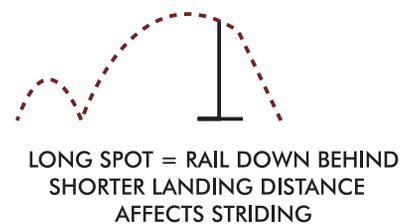
SLR

Self-carriage – is the result of correctly executed flatwork, in which the horse is holding its own balance without the constant help of the rider. It must be “in front” of the leg and light in the hand.

Line – is the path the horse travels in. It must always be in a forward moving direction (not sideways) to jump.

Rhythm – must remain consistent without constant help from the rider. Ideally, you should be able to set your horse's rhythm and have it not change until you wish it to.

Graph#1



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the rail then one of your SLR basics has not been executed properly.

Go back and find out which basic has gone wrong. Is your horse behind your leg? Are you approaching the rail drifting left or right? Is it speeding up just before the rail? Once the walk rail has been mastered consistently then progress to the trot and the canter, using the SLR basics to meet the rail in stride.

When this is achieved, add another rail (this can be done on a circle or in a straight line – whichever is easier for the level of rider). When horse and rider can consistently travel over the rails in different gaits with confidence, it is a simple matter to replace one of the rails with a cavaletti or low jump.

Even horses that are already jumping courses can do with a relaxing refresher every now and then and can be schooled on higher levels of stride maintenance and self-carriage in this manner without the physical and psychological rigors of competitive jumping.

Begin with a rail on the ground, approximately 80 feet in front of a small vertical. If building in an arena, try using 55 feet realizing that the size and dimensions of the arena will affect

the stride of the horse. One should begin at the trot both over the rail and the vertical, being sure to implement each SLR basic along the way and progress to cantering rail to vertical and vertical to rail. It doesn't really matter how many strides your horse actually does between the rail and jump as long as they are the same lengths. The basis of the exercise is to force the rider to focus on what is happening beneath them and not so much on the obstacle or the "distance". The key is to get from the rail on the ground to the jump with self-carriage, rhythm and pace without having to make major adjustments to the stride. You must start with the necessary stride length that will carry you down the line efficiently so you will not feel the need to make any adjustments between the two and will just "get there" with a minimum of effort. The size of the jump will become immaterial and as horse and rider gain confidence and begin to "see" or "feel" the distance to the jump sooner and sooner.

The next step to the exercise is to merely put a pole on the landing side of the jump the same distance as the rail on the take-off side. After cantering the jump, the rider must once again regain the SLR basics in order to meet this pole in a set



Refine your SLR basics using ground poles to encourage horse and rider to pay attention to what is beneath them. As horse and rider travel over the pole the length of the stride should not change. If the horse has met the pole in stride then the highest point of the horses step will match the pole's placement. Start this exercise at a walk and progress through the trot and canter. When you horse can travel over the rails consistently and confidently at all three gaits, add a cavaletti or small jump.

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number of strides. Everything must remain consistent from start to finish as the horse passes over rail, jump and then rail for a smooth exercise. This exercise promotes rideability on both the arrivals and the departures part of a jump. Through practice and repetition you will begin to see and feel the distances more consistently and then be able to make the proper adjustments to perfect them.

So, next time you're watching that winning hunter trip or the fastest jump-off round, watch for the SLR basics in action. When you don't see a distance or experience a bad distance, take a moment to question exactly why it happened. Surely, it can be blamed on one of three things – lack of self-carriage, improper line, or inconsistent rhythm. 



Place a ground pole 80 feet from a small vertical; and practice trotting from rail to vertical, vertical to rail. Progress to a canter when your horse performs with confidence.

Trainer Bio

As the summer horse show season came to a close Chris Pratt continued his winning ways at several of Ontario's major equestrian events. Fresh from his victory in the grand prix at Collingwood Pratt travelled to the Hendervale Equestrian Complex where he was victorious in the Open Welcome with Sue Grange's Markant and also piloted Nero and Rivendell to third and fourth place finishes, respectively. After a short break, Pratt travelled to Tournament of Champions where he won the Mercedes Ride 'n' Drive class. Pratt was fourth in the Canada Cup with Rivendell and rode Markant to a ninth place ribbon in the \$75,000 World Cup qualifier. With the show season over Pratt now turns his attention to preparing horses and students for the Florida tour and working with a busy sales barn.



Chris Pratt and Jennifer Jones (mounted).