



Training MASTERCLASS

Jumping trainer **KIRSTIN KELLY** helps an event rider and her lovely paint horse develop the rhythm and consistency they need to make the step up to Novice horse trials

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OUR TRAINER



KIRSTIN KELLY

LEADING EVENTER TURNED SHOW JUMPER
Pukekohe-based Kirstin Kelly is a former event rider who has ridden for New Zealand and has produced several top international horses. Kirstin has switched to show jumping in recent years and has won the Amateur Show Jumper of the Year title at HOY for the past two years running. A popular trainer for riders of all levels, Kirstin says these days she is more focused on coaching than competing. "I'm show jumping purely for fun and to keep my eye in."

OUR RIDER



JESSICA AISLABIE

JESSICA (28) IS A STUDENT NURSE
For this lesson she rides her 10-year-old gelding Weiti Tiberius ('Patch'). Jessica has owned him since he was a baby and broke him in herself. Jessica and Patch compete at Pre-Novice eventing, but they struggle with show jumping as Patch likes to race off. "My goal is do a Novice horse trial, but at 1.10m everything seems to turn to custard, even though it is only 5cm higher." This is her first lesson with Kirstin.

1 WORKING LONG AND WHOA Developing reactions

Because Jessica has explained to Kirstin that her big issue is keeping the rhythm and control in her show jumping rounds, the lesson begins with riding changes of stride length. “With this horse, you’ve got to keep installing your accelerator and brakes,” says Kirstin. “You need to ride him forward for a couple of steps, just to see the reaction, and then bring him back.”

However, when Jessica goes to slow down, she should never just grab the bit, says Kirstin. “If you just pull with both hands, most horses will generally fight back. I want you to think about massaging his tongue by rolling the bit, so squeeze with your fingers left and right. This has to become second nature to you when you need to shorten the stride, so you’re softly telling him to regulate the pace, not pulling and stopping. Stay calm and roll the bit, so he stays relaxed and compresses his stride, rather than bracing his neck.”

At first, Jessica has a bit of trouble getting the lengthened strides in trot – Patch keeps breaking into canter, even though he normally has a lovely medium trot. “When he starts out, his tail is quite straight and swishes around a little bit,



which is just showing a little bit of tension in his back,” notes Kirstin. “The more you work him in, the softer he should become. I can see he has beautiful light steps in front.”

However, unlike in a dressage test,

she keeps that feeling of rolling the bit in his mouth with her fingertips, because if Patch hollows like this he will be harder to sit on and his jumping form is also likely to suffer. Kirstin gets Jessica to repeat the exercise of lengthening the stride and

‘Even when you are in two-point, you can actually slow the horse down just by squeezing your thighs.’

Kirstin is not looking for quality of the medium trot – she simply wants to see the reaction. “Because it’s got to be immediate, it can’t be softly developing in three or four strides.”

Moving into canter, Kirstin observes that Patch is quite short-coupled and when he gets tense has a tendency to lift his neck and brace against Jessica (inset left). It’s more important than ever that

then shortening it up again, with Patch demonstrating pretty good adjustability.

Another tip Kirstin has for Jessica is to squeeze with her thighs and hold through her core when she wants to slow down, instead of just pulling. “Even when you are in two-point, you can actually slow the horse down just by squeezing your thighs,” she explains.



2 HOW TO SEE A STRIDE Counting and poles on the ground

Kirstin has set up a couple of ground poles a few strides apart for Jessica to ride over. Kirstin says her best piece of advice that she gives to everybody is to practise counting the stride six strides out from the rail. This exercise can and should be practised pretty much every day. “If you come round the corner and see a distance three strides out, it’s too late to do anything about it,” explains Kirstin. “You want to train your eye to see a distance six strides out and the best way to do that is to start with poles on the ground.”

Kirstin has these rails set up in her arena all the time, even when she is flat schooling. Riding over poles also gives the rider awareness of the stride length –

whether it’s a normal canter, a collected canter, or a bigger stride. Then when they go to a combination, they know exactly what canter they are sitting on, says Kirstin.

Jessica’s first attempt at the canter poles is a perfect example of why this is a good warm-up exercise. She finds an awkward distance to each rail, which Kirstin says would have equated to two crashes if they were real jumps. “Always do some rails until you get that feel of your distance coming in,” she advises.

Once Jessica is comfortably cantering down the two rails with a pretty even six strides, Kirstin asks her to shorten the stride and ride down the poles in seven. The first time through, Jessica actually collects the stride too much, and gets seven and a half strides. “It’s just a lack of training,” says Kirstin. “What I’m seeing so far from this one exercise is that his rhythm is a little erratic. No wonder you find it hard to get down to the fence consistently if you’re on a canter that’s

changing all the time.”

The next time through, however, Jessica does a beautiful job. “Foot-perfect, well done,” says Kirstin. “You got a really nice ride to both rails and you kept the rhythm perfectly.”

The exercise concludes with Kirstin getting Jessica to ride down the poles in a very collected eight strides, gallop back the other way in six strides, and finally finish with the collected eight again (below). “Because if you’re show jumping and you see a galloping distance to a fence, you need him to understand that you can be wild one second and then you’ll get composure back and be well balanced for the next one.”

Overall, Kirstin feels Patch has a great canter. She tells Jessica that whenever she canters down to a fence or pole, she should try to guess when she is six strides out and commit to that rhythm. “When you are working together in a rhythm, he’s much more likely to listen to you.”



Kirstin on: ‘how often should I jump?’

If you’ve got a good surface, you should jump your horse at least twice a week. If you only jump every so often, how do you expect to do it properly? Professionals will ride 15 horses a day and they’ll probably jump each one two to three times a week. That’s why they can canter around a corner and see a distance – they do it a lot. And that’s the biggest issue, I think, with riders who have just one horse: they don’t jump enough as they are worried about breaking their horse and jarring them up. But you don’t have to jump for a full 45 minutes – you can work the horse on the flat, then pull your stirrups up and jump six fences. It’s all about getting your eye in and getting a feel for your rhythm.



3 A WAITING EXERCISE The high-armed 'X'

Kirstin sets up a little cross-rail, with a placing pole 2.5m in front, to work on technique. After Patch has popped over it a couple of times, she quickly raises the arms quite high. The high arms of the 'X' keep the horse right in the middle of the fence

and also tune up the front end. When approached in trot, this is a 'weight-lifting' exercise for the horse, as it really has to rock back, explains Kirstin.

At first when the arms are raised, Patch knocks the fence over in front. "That

doesn't worry me," says Kirstin. "He actually has to sit down on his bum over this fence rather than using speed, and he found it a little bit hard."

The next time through, Patch jumps well. Kirstin tells Jessica she should trot a couple of these each time she jumps, just to teach him to pause and sit on his bum, and not think about speed.

4 SPOTLIGHT ON POSITION

Kirstin says Jessica needs to think about pushing her weight right down into her heels. Her toes tend to be a bit straight and she should think about having them turned out slightly, at 45 degrees, which will allow her to have a softer knee and wrap her legs around her horse's side.

Her stability over the fence also needs to improve. Kirstin tells her to think about keeping her chin up and touching the mane on either side of the neck.

"It's totally fine to see a deep distance, but remember to lift your chin, which gives you good posture so the horse can lift his shoulders up. Crouching and collapsing through your



core means you're sitting like a lump on him and then he has to pull your weight back. You've got to be poised in that uphill feeling so the horse can rock up."

When cantering to a jump, Jessica should be looking at the jump, not looking up. "Don't go staring into space

- you won't find the distance out there," says Kirstin. "The reason people tell you to look up when you jump is to stop you creeping forward and getting in front of the movement. But you can look down at the fence and still keep your head up."

5 A STRONG CORE Putting fences together

The next exercise is a one-stride. At first, Jessica keeps getting a very deep distance, right to the base of the fence. Kirstin tells her to ride the canter a fraction more forward to the first fence, because she will then jump in a little bigger.

By opening the canter up, the ride in is much better. "The canter dictates what sort of distance you get," explains Kirstin. "If your canter is short and bouncy, you are more likely to get a deeper distance. If your canter is long and flat you're more likely to stand off everything."

When Kirstin starts to put a few fences together for Jessica in a course, things come a little unstuck in her round and she's still chipping in sometimes. Kirstin says one of the biggest things hindering Jessica's consistency is her instability mid-flight, which causes her to collapse on landing. "When you land, you are a little bit untidy, and that makes it much harder for you get

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organised between these related fences."

It's something Jessica can fix really easily, simply by keeping her chin up. "Think about the triangle from your head to both shoulders," says Kirstin. "By keeping that up, it will improve the strength in your core."

Sure enough, when Jessica rides the same course again but thinks about keeping her head up and her core strong (below), she is much more able to pick herself up quickly on landing.

"Well done - that was much, much stronger," praises Kirstin. "Can you feel the difference now you're not having to land and pick yourself up off the neck?"

TOP TIP

You're never going to find the perfect distance every time. You've got to train your horse to have a good canter and keep a really good rhythm, so when you are a little bit deep, you just lift your chin.

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6 TACKLING A HEIGHT BARRIER

From 1.05m to 1.15m

The final course Kirstin builds for Jessica is actually set at 1.10m-1.15m and Patch jumps it all easily without Jessica even realising the height of the fences. When Kirstin tells her, she is obviously delighted to have broken her 1.05m height barrier. Kirstin's tip for riding the bigger fences is not to change anything and keep the rhythm. "You've got to hear the rhythm as well as see it. That's why counting is so effective, because you use both senses: listening and looking."

In fact, Kirstin says Jessica does not have a problem with the increased height at all. Her problem is simply that she doesn't jump that height often enough. "I have jumped for years and I'm pretty confident I can canter down and find a distance, but at the beginning of the season, when I've jumped babies all winter, the jumps look massive. If you don't jump that height regularly, you're going to be anxious every time you go to jump it and you won't trust what you see. You need to start getting used to the look of them."

"Start with building the higher fence out of your related lines, because when you have a nice fence in, you can relax a little bit. Then you will get used to that height and he will have to pick his legs up that extra little bit, so both of you kind of get a little bit more confident at it."



CONCLUSIONS



Jessica

I thought Kirstin was great – she was really nice but straight to the point. She could identify where we were going wrong and gave really practical advice on simple things I can do at home to improve our rhythm and accuracy. I liked how she got us confident jumping and then put the jumps up so slowly that I didn't realise how big they were until after the lesson! She gave me heaps of confidence that yes we actually can jump 1.10-1.15m and do it well, plus lots of advice on little things such as my position, for example turning my toes out slightly so that I could use my lower leg more effectively.

I liked Kirstin's exercise of starting to count when I thought we were six strides out. At the end of the lesson, I could start to trust that I knew where we were going to take off, and that stopped me from panicking and rushing Patch. I have a terrible habit of looking down when we land over a jump, and therefore I tend to crumple on the other side, but being reminded to keep my head up meant I was more stable with my upper body and

could effectively continue on without having to reorganise myself before the next jump.

Kirstin

I really like the horse – he's got a super engine, but he's also really careful. The biggest thing for Jessica is that she needs to jump more often and keep counting and looking for the six strides every time, because all that's going amiss is just a lack of practice and consistency. She has also got to be more aware of where she is in the spectrum of the canter when she jumps into related distances, and that will get so much better with the canter poles.

Position-wise, Jessica needs to get down more into her heel with the toe staying out a little bit, and work on keeping her head up and strengthening her core. It's not the height that's making a mess; it's the fact that she's a bit unstable over the top of the fence, so her rounds will get more untidy as she goes around. Her body is much better when she is focused on keeping her chin up.