

Words: *STEPHANIE BATEMAN*Photography: *JON STROUD*

Masterclass

with Lisa Morris

Lisa Morris

FBHS

British Horse Society (BHS)
Fellow **Lisa Morris**, is a UKCC level 4
coach, British Eventing Youth Couch
and a Pony Club Specialist Coach/
Assessor, as well as a
BHS Assessor.

Sally Wood, a Performance Confidence Coach, rides Rauri, a 14-year-old bay, Irish Sport Horse gelding, who she has owned for 10 years. "I got him when I retired to have a go at eventing. We learnt together and got to novice level. I was diagnosed with terminal cancer in March last year, and I'm making the most of having a lovely horse to ride. We've got such a bond and he is what I focus on."

Abi Sendel, a Stage 2 Foundation Coach in Complete Horsemanship, rides Breeze, a 19-year-old grey Irish mare. "She is my first competition horse and we're eventing at BE90 level. She's showing me the ropes but she loves her job. I was a student at Derby College and now I work here. I'm working towards my Stage 4."

Lisa Morris FBHS



Lisa Morris helps two riders with their jumping preparation, considering both the partnership and the whole horse in the process



Lisa Morris FBHS

The British Horse Society (BHS) Fellow Lisa Morris is a BHS Assessor, UKCC level 4 coach, British Eventing Youth Couch as well as a Pony Club Specialist Coach/Assessor.

She started riding when she was six and used to ride "anybody and everybody's pony" until her mother eventually gave in and bought her a four-year-old New Forest pony when she was 11. A keen member of the Pony Club, Lisa competed in all disciplines and trained with Janet Sturrock FBHS, receiving her BHSAI when she was 17. She then went to university "to please the parents" but soon returned to continue riding, teaching and eventing.

"The BHS has provided me with a really great way of turning my passion into my career," says Lisa. "After university, I continued eventing and then decided to finish my exams when I was 40. I completed my Intermediate Instructor and then the BHSI certificate, and thought I'd try for the Fellowship which I achieved in March 2022. It has been a journey which I have really enjoyed. I've met many people along the way and feel hugely privileged to have worked with some amazing horses. It's easy to forget why we do this, but ultimately, it's our passion for and love of horses that underpins everything we do."

Lisa keeps her own horse Rupert

at home and enjoys doing "a bit of everything" with him.

"He does dressage, showjumps, goes to the seaside, goes hacking and down to the woods," says Lisa.

"I adore him and he's my favourite. He's my reason for getting up in the morning and lives under my bedroom window. If there's any money in my bank account, it doesn't go on me, it goes on him. He knows when I'm about and won't let my husband catch him. I've never had a horse that I've loved so much for so long.

"I've gone through my serious competing phase and now I just like to enjoy my pony."

Step One



Aims of exercise

- Physically and mentally warm up horse and rider
- Stay mentally alert and hone competition skills
- Use the body to turn instead of the reins

WARMING UP THE HORSE AND RIDER

As the riders are warming up in trot and canter around the arena, Lisa discusses her plan for the session and what she wants the riders to achieve.

"We all know it's important to warm up our horses, but people often forget about warming up the rider," begins Lisa. "Especially on a cold day, it's important to warm up the big muscles that you use to

balance and stay on. I like to work on getting the rider to be independent of the rein and steer with their bodies as much as possible and use the body to change the gears.

"I use these sessions to make sure the riders can stay mentally alert and keep their competition skills honed while highlighting areas they want to work on. I encourage them to watch each other because that



■ Sally Wood and Abi Sendel focus on the first exercise riding over two canter poles



doubles the value of the session. I have a good motto – ‘tell me and I will listen, teach me and I will learn, involve me and I’ll remember.’ I want them to use the mirrors and tell me what their positional weaknesses are.”

Lisa has set up a course in the indoor arena, but to start with, most of the poles begin on the ground.

“When we start riding over the poles, I want the rider to allow the horse to use its head and neck and steer with their body to stop being so reliant on the reins,” she explains. “I also make a point of having the horses in the arena with at least one other horse because they don’t like being on their own.”

The first exercise is to ride over two canter poles down the long side while maintaining the rhythm and stride pattern.

“While you’re doing that, check in with your jump position,” Lisa tells the riders. “Use the mirrors to do a personal body MOT – are you independent of

Coach notes

- I’m keen, with competition horses not to always begin a session jumping over cross poles because they don’t always have them in the collecting ring.
- Polework, even for more experienced horses, is really important to work on their suppleness and awareness of their body.
- I keep the fences small to prevent unnecessary wear and tear on horse’s legs.

the horse? Think about something you like about yourself and something you want to work on.”

Both riders feedback on their body: Abi says she uses her top body to steer, looks where she is going and uses her shoulders to regulate the rhythm, but is tight through her right leg and has to work hard to keep her heel and knee relaxed. Sally feeds back that she is pleased Rauri is being responsive going up into the transitions, but that coming down the transitions, her core feels weak meaning she struggles to steady him. Lisa advises her to over-exaggerate bringing

her top body back to slow him down.

“Canter up through the two poles thinking about the number of strides and seeing if we can make it the same – the main aim is that the rhythm and stride length stay the same.”

The next exercise is to canter over four poles on a large circle on both reins.

“I want you to look up and at the next pole,” says Lisa. “It’s interesting to compare the two horses – Breeze likes to put a short one in, whereas Rauri was happy to go on a long one.”

Next, Lisa put the poles on the circle up into small straight bar fences.

Abi went first and after one go round, Lisa stopped her because Breeze was getting faster and faster.

“The aim was to keep the rhythm, but we were going to lose it, so it was better to stop at that stage and reset.” says Lisa. “The first bit was super.”



■ Lisa helps skinny fences become a positive experience and a question a horse can understand



Step Two



Aims of exercise

- Introduce and teach horses about cross country flags
- Build the horse's confidence going through small gaps
- Hold a line into a narrow fence

JUMPING NARROW FENCES

"I feel quite strongly about skinny fences, so I always get the riders to walk the horses through the flags – whatever the stage the horse is at – and then trot them through before moving the flags in and making them narrower" says Lisa. "We want it to be a positive experience and for the horse to understand the question."

Lisa explains that there is more than one reason why we teach horses about flags – one is that we hope they learn not to run out and two is that they learn that there is a jump

because there are flags there.

"As we know ourselves, when you go through a narrow space, you duck and so do horses, so it's never a waste of time to teach them to go through the flags," adds Lisa. "Start by trotting through the flags and I will gradually push them in closer together."

Breeze got tense going through at first, but soon relaxed the more she did it.

Once both horses are confidently trotting through the flags, Lisa adds the brush filler to the skinny.



Once the horses are confident trotting through the poles, Lisa adds a brush filler to the exercise



Coach notes

- When teaching young horses to go through skinny fences I put a pole on the floor to help guide them.
- When teaching horses to jump skinny fences, keep the fences low to help build the horse's confidence so they go away happier than when they came in.
- With experienced riders, I would take the brush exercise a step further and get them to ride down the line from the upright to the brush one-handed to see how straight their horses are.

"We want them to be able to use their head and necks," says Lisa before the riders begin jumping the brush. "It's very tempting when you are jumping something narrow to feel like you have to climb up the reins, but in doing so, you are removing their eyesight and their fifth leg because they use their head and neck to balance. When I say long reins, I mean long not loose. You still have a contact but are allowing the horse to look through the bridle."

Both horses negotiated the brush fence well.

The riders finished the second exercise by riding down from a simple upright to the skinny.

"To finish, we are looking at holding the straightness between the upright fence and the flags," says Lisa. "We're mimicking cross country because the horse has a chance to zoom off and run out. If we've used the training correctly, they shouldn't."

Both horses made light work of the exercise.

Step Three



Aims of exercise

- Maintain balance between fences
- Keep the rhythm and maintain the correct line
- Ride a course of fences smoothly

PUTTING FENCES TOGETHER

For the final exercise, Lisa puts a small course together incorporating the techniques they have been working on including the three fences on the circle, the plank in the middle, the upright to brush and an oxer which they haven't yet jumped. They begin by jumping the oxer near the seating area.

"They are jumping straight into the audience which is a good distraction, similar to what they would get at a competition," says Lisa. "They need to ride straight because the turn will come quick and the audience is scary for the horses."

Both horses had a little look at the oxer but cleared it well. The riders then move on to putting all the fences in the course together.

"We have been completely fair to the horses and shown them the problems first," says Lisa who then explains the course the riders will take. "We'll be watching how quickly they turn and whether they land balanced on the correct canter lead, how straight they are and if they can make a gear change when coming down the line to the oxer."

Both horses jumped the course well and cleanly, although Abi came down the final line





■ Lisa challenges the riders with a change of lead on the turn to the plank

ahead of Breeze's movement which made her go deep into the final fence, so Lisa asked her to ride that line again and keep her upper body back. As a result, Breeze made a better jump over the last jump.

To finish, Lisa asks the riders to ride on the left rein over the three blue fences at the top of the arena on the turn to the plank, with a change of lead to the right skinny brush. "The coach emphasis is on watching how soon the rider sent their signal to the horse and if they can control a left-right change as well as a right-left when going from the skinny to the plank and then left-handed onto the circle."

Sally lost the corner coming into the Derby College planks so re-rode the line and was much better the second time.

* With thanks to Derby college and its students for hosting the masterclass*



Coach notes

- I like to encourage the riders to assess one another and give feedback as it adds another dimension to their session.
- It's important for the riders to practice certain lines as they will come across these on the cross country course.
- Asking the riders to give feedback means they are learning to assess their own performance and know how to make improvements.

