

STEPPING UP

“With dressage, if you’ve learnt the new test, do an arena hire and if that goes well that’s the evidence that you can do it in a competition,” says Leonie.

Danny also advises considering the venue for your first outing at a new level.

“For eventers, we all know that there are stronger courses and softer courses; more or less technical; bigger atmosphere versus quieter events,” he says.

Doing some background research can really pay off.

“In showjumping, it’s worth finding out the methods and style of the particular course-builder, the size of the arena, the footing, the atmosphere,” he adds.

The same goes for dressage.

“Choose a familiar venue where you’ve competed happily at the lower levels, a welcoming atmosphere, a good-sized warm-up arena with good footing,” Danny suggests. “You can even seek out judges who have been favourable to you and your horse in the past.

“It’s also worth checking out whether it’s a venue frequented by professionals with strings of horses, as the less-experienced rider can find this quite intimidating at first,” he adds.

Event rider Rupert Hyde, 18, is currently competing at two-star and looking to move up to three-star this season. The first time he stepped up a level, choosing the right venue for him was part of his strategy.

“I had an Andalusian pony who was amazing at dressage and had been showjumping at 1m but she wasn’t so confident across country,” Rupert says. “So we did a lot of schooling with her, especially ditches, and then chose Mendip Plains for the first competition as it was a venue she knew well having trained there.”

It paid off, and although the pair were slightly down on the time, the ditches caused no issues.

Riders should be prepared for some steps up to feel more challenging than others.

“Going from BE100 to novice is a difficult one,” says Rupert. “The movements in the dressage become more complicated, the courses become more technical, plus the height. My mindset changed for novice; I was more focused and practised a huge amount.”

Of course, even the best-laid plans sometimes go awry. When this happens, Leonie returns to the idea of the two thinking systems.

“The emotional one is about expectation and how things should be,” she says. “Everyone’s version of that is seamless and easy, you start here and get better and better. Then the world doesn’t live up to



that and you get unwanted and unhelpful emotions like frustration.”

Instead, Leonie says to work with reality: “Progression isn’t neat and linear. You might step up and think, ‘Oh, the evidence now is that it wasn’t the right time. I’ve got more information now, so I’ll go away and work harder.’

“Keep your perspective – just because you’ve not done it when you thought you would, doesn’t mean it’s never going to happen,” she continues. “You just need to think about what you’re going to work on before the next time you try.”

Gemma’s step up to intermediate coincided with three falls in the space of a couple of months.

“I questioned whether I was ready to be at that level at all,” she says. “I lost all confidence in my ability and very nearly gave up. But over the winter I watched hours and hours of video footage of top riders alongside my own competition footage, and realised the mistakes I had been making.

“I worked with my trainer to correct my rein length and made the decision to step back down to novice to practise the new

technique and rebuild my confidence.”

For Gemma, these videos were the “evidence” she needed.

“Understanding why it had happened and how I could prevent it in future was key, and that’s why video analysis has become one of the most valuable tools I use. It’s done wonders for improving my technique and confidence.”

In fact, even if your first outing at a new level goes well, there can be an advantage to dropping back a level.

“I’ve always found that ‘toe-dipping’ is a wise strategy,” says Danny. “It’s worth going back to the previous level next time out to confirm confidence. We can’t always be sure how the horse is feeling and the first upgrade outing can be overwhelming mentally, even if the technical performance was satisfactory. One of my maxims is: ‘You can never make a horse too confident.’”

Finally, Leonie advises making sure to celebrate what you’ve achieved.

“The mind has this tendency to go, ‘When I reach this level, I’ll be happy,’ and then when you get there, instead of celebrating success, you think, ‘I need to be better,’” she says. “Build in time to reflect on how far you’ve come, and the hard work and effort that has gone into it.” **H&H**



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