

RIDER 1



HIGH SCORE



LEVEL

They say growth begins at the edge of your comfort zone, but how can riders successfully move up the levels without overstretching themselves or their horses?



CREDIT 01

WHEN amateur eventer Gemma Atkin returned to riding after an 18-year break, she found 60cm showjumping courses terrifying. But, over five seasons, she moved up the levels and last year completed her first four-star.

"I was nervous at every level but crossing the finish line at Scone Palace, clear with only a handful of time-faults, was a moment I'll never forget," she says.

Her advice? "I believe in pushing slightly beyond your comfort zone but

there is a balance to be had."

Finding this balance is key to successfully moving up the levels, as Leonie Lightfoot, a sport psychologist for the British Equestrian World Class Programme, explains: "There needs to be a match of what you're doing and the skill set required. It needs to be just challenging enough but not too far, because then you

tip into the fear and anxiety zone."

Leonie encourages riders to plan their progression based on facts rather than emotions.

"With our brain, there are two systems, one of which operates with feelings and emotions," she says. "The problem with that is the emotional thinking system is not very reliable. Its job is to keep you safe, so it will never feel ready to do something that makes you feel uncomfortable."

"With dressage, there can be a reticence not to go until it's perfect but you'd be potentially waiting forever. With eventing, if the rider starts thinking too much about



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RIDER 2



UP!



BY CATHERINE WELTON

the risk then the emotional system kicks in, which can be fear or excitement.”

So Leonie encourages riders to use the other thinking system, which is based on evidence and operates logically, rather than relying on emotions.

“To compete at that level, what are the facts?” she asks. “Which movements are you able to perform competently, or what heights are you comfortably jumping at home?”

British Horse Society Fellow Danny Anholt has a few rules of thumb to help assess when the time is right to move up.

“Consistent plus-65% scores in pure

dressage,” he says. “In jumping, you’re looking for consistent double clears at the current level – not rosettes, that’s determined by the opposition.

“It should also be consistent with your long-term planning. Slow, steady steps are needed to achieve both the technical skills and the confidence.”

THE right partnership of horse and rider is fundamental and, as someone who coaches a lot of younger riders, Danny always advises

gaining mileage on a horse that’s not only experienced but also happy being ridden by a less experienced rider.

“If the horse has been accustomed to clear signals and a confident approach, when he finds himself under the guidance of an inexperienced jockey, the pin can very quickly drop out,” he warns.

An amateur rider who has produced their own horse may fall into a slightly different trap.

“There’s a real danger of a ‘blind leading the blind’ scenario,” says Danny. “An objective view at this stage is essential. The best decisions are made through a collaboration between the rider, the coach and the horse himself.”

Leonie says this is another area where thinking logically is important.

“Riders will be emotionally attached to their horse, so it’s harder to look at the situation objectively,” she says. “Get someone you trust, with knowledge about what the horse needs to compete at that level, to give you honest feedback.”

When Alice Pullem thought she might have an unlikely grand prix dressage horse on her hands, she asked her trainer Eilidh Grant for a second opinion.

“Cheeky Wee Red is a barely-15hh former racehorse I bought as a project,” says Alice. “After a month I took her to her first competition at novice level and she scored 68%.”

As “Rosie” continued to progress in training, Alice continued to move her up the levels.

“We had a leg-yield so we went off and tried elementary. We mastered shoulder-in and half-pass so we tried medium. I asked Eilidh if she was up for the challenge of taking us to grand prix, and she took us seriously. In March 2023 we cantered down the centre line in our first one and scored just under 63%.”

ONCE the decision has been made to step up, Leonie explains how the right mindset can help the transition go smoothly.

“Look at the things you can control and identify the ‘key processes’, some of which will be the same, which is quite comforting,” she advises.

“For example, the jump might be higher but your position is pretty much the same.”

She also says to be prepared for some discomfort.

“That’s just your body getting ready to meet a new challenge. It’s a positive thing, you’re going to jump those higher fences, let’s get some blood to the muscles – you’re not nervous, you’re ready.”

There’s a lot of practical preparation a rider can do too.



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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