

HOW TO NAIL YOUR COMPETITION WARM-UP

And ride like a professional in the collecting ring

By Catherine Welton



The competition warm-up is where you and your horse get mentally and physically ready to achieve the best performance you can.

But working around other horses and riders can be overwhelming, especially if you're feeling nervous or your horse is tense. Sometimes the warm-up feels like the most stressful part of competing!

The good news is there are plenty of things you can do to make it a more positive experience. We asked an event organiser, a professional eventer, a BD judge, and a confidence coach for their top tips on how to have a successful warm-up.

CHARLOTTE WARMAN, VENUE OWNER AND EVENT ORGANISER

Charlotte's venue, Kings Sedgemoor Equestrian Centre in Somerset, runs affiliated and unaffiliated dressage, jumping and arena cross-country events and there's not much she hasn't seen happen in a warm-up!

Follow the rules & communicate

But she says most problems could be avoided if riders followed the rules of the collecting ring:

- Left shoulder to left shoulder.
- Slower pace stays on the inside track. Do not stop on the track.
- Red ribbon means keep back or give space.
- Green ribbon means young or inexperienced horse.
- When jumping, the red flag or wing is on the right. Call your fence on approach.
- Respect those around you.
- Allow a minimum of one horse's length between you and the next horse.
- Use your time productively. Don't stand around and chat in the warm-up.

She advises reading your discipline's rulebook beforehand. "Read about tack, turnout, and warm up rules and what assistance you are allowed. If you do have any questions, please ask before you leave for a competition. It can lead to very stressful situations trying to change something on arrival."

She also recommends communicating with your event organiser or the collecting ring steward when you get there. "I love to talk to our competitors. I want them to feel happy and above all safe."

Do your homework

The more prepared you are, the easier it will be. "Go to the venue prior to your event for schooling hire. Do arena walks if on offer at championships. And, at home, create a competition environment by placing banners around the area or even asking a friend to walk around the outside with a pram. Competition venues aren't sterile. You never know what may appear or happen!"

Charlotte also advises learning from your local professional riders. "Go to an event and watch them warm up."

Be kind!

Finally, Charlotte says, "Remember, not one of us is perfect. Things do go wrong for everyone at every level. You may feel upset at that moment, but we have to always have animal welfare at the heart of our sport and with mental health problems on the rise we also have to support our young people and protect them from unnecessary

pressure. We don't like seeing those situations and we don't like having to follow up with sanctions."

ALEX BRAGG, INTERNATIONAL EVENT RIDER

"I think it's common for people to feel intimidated in the warm-up, they don't want people in their space, and they won't go into other people's space, and they end up scared to move," says Alex.

Ride Like You're Driving a Car

To help with this, he recommends practising accuracy and discipline in your schooling at home. "You should be able to turn your horse exactly when you want to. Start and finish a circle exactly when you want to. And be able to move up and down the gears when you want." Then, he explains, think of the warm-up like driving in traffic. "You look ahead, in the same way you would when driving a car, and prepare for the next turn, knowing that the person will have cantered out of your way when you get there. Knowing you can do that will give you more confidence and make your warm-up more fluid."

Stay Straight in the Show Jumping Warm-up

Show jumping warm-up areas can be small and in these situations straightness to a fence is crucial. "Sometimes you see people panic and dart at the fence from any direction if they spot a gap, and then their horse is like a hooligan on the other side because they had no control on the approach." Alex suggests focusing on the turn into the jump which will prepare the horse to jump in a balanced way around the course. "Ride a 90 degree turn to the fence. A square turn keeps the horse balanced, the rider can put their leg on without accelerating too much, the horse is more balanced on landing and you can ride away comfortably."

Have fun!

Finally, Alex says to remember why you're there. "Try to approach the day with the mindset that you're going to enjoy yourself. If you start off like that, any challenges that arise you'll meet with a more positive attitude, rather than thinking everything's against you."

ALAINA WEBSTER, BD JUDGE & BHS INSTRUCTOR

Alaina says achieving a good warm-up is a real art. "There's a reason people do well at competitions and it's because they prepare."

Give yourself plenty of time

Alaina advises planning your day carefully. "You can take a lot of the tension out of the day by knowing exactly what you're doing, when. Check your times – and then check them again! Make sure you allow time when you arrive to have a look around, see which arena you're in and find out if they're running to time. If you have a horse that goes off the boil, there's nothing worse than working them in to just the right point only to find out the venue are running 10 minutes behind schedule, and your horse is going to be past their best when they go up the centre line."

You can leave the warm-up and come back

"If your horse is tense or you're nervous try not to endlessly go round and round without purpose," says Alaina. She advises using transitions and lateral work to channel the horse's energy. "And if that's not working, don't be afraid to take them out of the warm-up, walk them around the car park and take them back in. You'd be surprised how many horses settle better after that," she says.

Stay focussed when you leave the warm-up to do your test

Alaina explains, "I often see riders who've warmed up nicely and then they come into the dressage arena and they're not sure what they should do, and they lose what they've just achieved in the warm-up. Give your horse a job in that minute or so before the bell goes. Don't be afraid to have a canter around the white boards (if you're above Intro), do some leg yield or shoulder-in. Keep the horse focused on you and listening. You worked hard to achieve that in the warm-up – don't lose it in the seconds before your test starts!"

ALEX FLEMING, FOUNDER OF COACHING FOR CONFIDENCE

Alex thinks it's important to have realistic expectations about what you can achieve in the warm-up. "I would always advise riders that the warm-up is not a place for improvement. Instead, it is about knowing what routine is best for you both, to get you in the zone and then going through the motions of that."

Bring the right energy

Alex points out that the energy you need to bring to the warm-up will depend on you and your horse. "Every horse and rider combination is different. A couple of simple examples would be that for a rider who needs relaxation, I might suggest they begin with a body scan, running through their entire position, checking for areas of tension, and consciously letting them go whilst carrying out the walk work. For a rider who needs to bring her gritty game face on the other hand, I may suggest a power posture and some star jumps in the back of the trailer before they even get on!"

Have the right goals

Alex draws a helpful distinction between “process” and “outcome” goals. “I would advise all riders to focus on having process goals over outcome goals. You can control process goals. If you focus on what is within your control, you will feel instantly calmer.”

To work out your process goal, Alex explains you need to work backwards from your outcome goal, which might be wanting to achieve a 70% score in your dressage test, for example.

“Ask yourself, how do I need to ride to achieve that? This might be 'I need to use my corners and ride my test accurately.' Then go one step further and ask how do you ride when you're riding accurately? The answer is often something simple like 'taking my time and looking where I am going'. That is your process goal. If you can manage to take your time and look where you are going, you have won today.”

Remember, it will get easier!

Alex points out that riding your best your warm-up, like any other skill, is a constant progression. “Make some notes every time you go out about what you did in the week leading up to the show and what happened on the day and what you think could be better. Then tweak and tweak with zero judgement, just knowledge that this is only going to get easier and better as you learn what works best for you both.”