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Riding the best warm-up is like any other skill — it has to be learned and honed

Alaina Webster, a BD judge, says that achieving a good warm-up session is an art.

"There's a reason that riders do well at competitions and that's because they prepare," she explains. Alaina advises planning the day carefully.


"You can take a lot of the tension out of the day by knowing exactly what you're doing and when. Check your times — and then check them again. Make sure that 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 who goes off the boil, there's nothing worse than working him in to just the right point only to find out that the class is running 10 minutes behind schedule. By then your horse is going to be past his best when he goes up the centre line."

Alaina's advice to nervous riders or those aboard tense horses is not to go endlessly round the practice area without

purpose. Instead, she suggests using transitions and lateral work to channel the horse's energy.

"And if that's not working, don't be afraid to take him out of the warm-up, walk him around the car park and take him back in later. You'll be surprised how many horses settle better after that," she says.

"I often see riders who have 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. You need to 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 — and 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." 



Have a warm-up plan and stick to it. Doing too much or too little will affect your horse

"Sometimes you see people panic and dart at a fence from any direction if they spot a gap, and then their horse becomes like a hooligan on the other side because they had no control on the approach."

Alex suggests focusing on the turn into the fence, which will prepare the horse to jump in a balanced way once he reaches the course proper.

"Ride a 90-degree turn to the fence. A square turn keeps the horse balanced, the rider can put on their leg without accelerating too much, the horse will be more balanced on landing and the pair can ride away comfortably."

Finally, Alex advises that the day should be fun.

"Try to approach the competition with the mindset that you're going to enjoy yourself. If you start off like that, any challenges that arise you will meet with a more positive attitude, rather than thinking that everything's against you," he says.