

*Riding in the open countryside can be beneficial to both horse and rider in a variety of ways. Jo Winfield FBHS discusses how to make the most out of riding outside the arena*

# The call of Nature...



## CASE STUDY MARY KING

Olympic event rider Mary King lives in Devon and rides outside of the arena as much as possible.

"We ride through woods, clamber over banks and jump logs if it's safe, to teach them where their legs are and to think for themselves.

"We live near the River Sid which we ride the horses through, starting with shallow parts, and building up to sliding down banks into deeper parts.

"Everyday they hack followed by either a schooling session or jumping session. The schooling is done out on grass as much as possible because they learn to deal with the odd bump in the ground, or slip if the going is a bit muddy. It also means they aren't relying on a fence to keep them straight.

"I'm actually really pleased that we don't have an all-weather gallop to train on because it's far better for them to train on the surface they will compete on – grass."

**H**orses are naturally used to moving around on grass, but modern management means that we often ride on roads or in an arena on a consistent surface. By riding across a variety of terrains, the horse's body has to adapt to the changes underfoot. This is called proprioception, which not only improves the balance of the horse, but also improves his sure-footedness.

For riders, negotiating the countryside helps to develop suppleness, build confidence and develop skills such as halting at junctions, opening and closing gates and mounting and dismounting.

The ideal terrain to ride over is one that has variety but also consistency, such as well-drained meadows with good grass coverage. Fields, woods, tracks, beaches, lanes and headlands are all safe as long as the footing is sound.

Working up and down hills is great for improving fitness and balance, as is walking across the face of a hill or slope.

Regardless of the terrain, riders should consider their safety and control at all times. Some places are best negotiated at a walk, such as rutted or boggy going.

Be on the look out for hazards such as rabbit holes, boggy patches, fallen branches and fields with livestock – if in doubt, walk and stay close to the headland.

## RIDER CONSIDERATIONS

Riding over uneven going can result in the horse and rider momentarily losing balance, so it's a good idea to shorten your stirrups by a hole or two.

A secure lower leg will allow riders to stay in balance and then recover the balance of the horse if he spooks, spins, or stumbles.

Use a neck strap to offer extra security to nervous riders or those riding young horses.

It's far better to rely on the neck strap than the horse's mouth.

Jumping over natural obstacles, and cantering along wooded tracks is great fun and brilliant experience, but before doing anything new in a different environment, it's a good idea to keep it steady until you know the route well. Get to know where the boggy patches are, or where there are low-lying branches, so that you can avoid them.

*Below right: Working up and down hills is great for improving fitness and balance, as is walking across the face of a hill or slope*



*Be on the look out for hazards such as low hanging branches*

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**CASE STUDY**  
**STEPH CROXFORD**

International grand prix dressage rider Steph Croxford, uses the natural landscape in the Derby Moors where she lives to school her dressage horses.

"We only school them three times a week, for a maximum 40mins in the school. The rest of the time, they go out on a schooling hack where they are schooled across fields and along verges, roads and rocky, uneven tracks.

"We do a lot of trotting up hill with their hind leg underneath them, and then walking downhill in a controlled, balanced manner.

"I practise things like shoulder-in, leg-yield and half-pass, and play with piaffe and passage. I also perform transitions such as walk to canter and halt to trot.

"The tracks that we ride on are undulating, and often strewn with puddles, so if they can do a line of one-time changes on undulating, wet ground, they can do it perfectly on an arena surface in a test!

"Opening and closing gates mounted is good for rein-back and leg-yielding too."



If riding on the beach, look out for deep pockets of sand, and make sure you check out the high tide times so you don't get caught out.

Always wear hi-viz so that you are easily seen, be polite to other users and walk past cyclists and walkers on small or narrow paths, as horses can be intimidating.

Before setting out, check the condition of your horse's shoes. A lost shoe or a horse due for shoeing is a potential trip and lameness hazard.

**EXERCISES OUT OF THE ARENA**

Always aim to establish a good balance and rhythm in every pace.

When riding along straight tracks and roads, when it is safe to do so, practice riding shoulder-in and leg-yield. It's a lovely way to introduce suppleness and acceptance.

Walk horses on a slightly more relaxed rein contact when hacking, as walking on the bit for any length of time can be very demanding for them.

Riding up a slight hill or incline is a great way to encourage more forward medium paces. Medium trot can often be found up a slope before it becomes established in the arena.

Teaching a horse to stop, go and turn left and right whilst navigating woodlands tracks improves the clarity of the rider's aids and the horse's acceptance of them. ○

**DISCLAIMER**  
The BHS recommends that riders should wear a riding hat of the required standard and hi-viz clothing at all times