

CONQUER COMBINATIONS

In the first part of a new training series with leading Aussie Paul Tapner, the 2010 Badminton winner breaks down a BE100 campaigner's inefficient half-halts with two easy movements that make shortening a stride easy. **AIMI CLARK** reports



MEET...
PAUL TAPNER

AUSTRALIAN Paul Tapner has become one of the sport's leading names since arriving in the UK in 1999. He won the Badminton CCI**** on Inonothing in 2010 and was a member of his nation's World Equestrian Games team the same year. Paul is also a renowned trainer and he runs his business from Wickstead Farm Equestrian Centre in Wiltshire. He is aiming Kilronan at Burghley.



'Every phase is a test of how well you can ride straight lines and corners' – Paul explains the importance of being focused when warming up in a spacious area



MEET...
JEN LE MIERE

BEDFORDSHIRE-based Jen Le Miere teamed up with Nuro's Boy ('Bentley') three years ago. The 10-year-old warmblood lost an eye as a result of a field injury in 2011 but he made a successful return to work and competes at BE100 level. Jen, a patent attorney, is aiming him at novice level.

"We struggle with related distances," she says. "We can cope in an arena but it all goes to pot when we are on a course."

BEING able to lengthen or shorten a stride in a split second is crucial for negotiating a cross-country course. Therefore an agile, responsive and well-trained horse is a must.

BE100 campaigner Nuro's Boy ('Bentley') measures a strapping 17hh. His record over the past three seasons is littered with errors in the final phase because his rider, Jen Le Miere, struggles to contain the warmblood's long stride for combinations and tight turns.

The rectangle effect

There is a spacious field to warm up in and it is sloping so Paul tells Jen to be strict about the area she covers.

"I want to see four straight lines and four corners. It's easy to wander around but cross-country is all about being in control of your horse and riding from point to point on the quickest and most efficient line," he says. "Riders should do the same in the dressage warm up, too, but most don't. Every phase is a test of how well you can ride straight lines and corners."

Jen sets off in rising trot.

"I'd like to see more energy in the trot," says Paul.

Jen must concentrate on maintaining a regular rhythm which is difficult on undulating terrain.

"The trot needs to stay the same the whole time — don't let the horse get faster or slower up and down the hill. Lazy horses tend to see a hill and slow down while the Thoroughbred types will speed up."

Bentley tries to speed up down the slope and then he spooks and loses energy in the trot while passing a staircase.

"You should be able to go towards anything without him changing unless you ask him to," says Paul who instructs Jen to ride closer to the fence the next time she passes.

"Confront the issue and ride him where you want to go. Don't let the horse decide."

Jen picks up canter and continues on the rectangle. Paul remarks that the horse could

LEFT Bentley's canter lacks energy and he is inclined to slow down uphill **RIGHT** When he is going forward Jen has more to work with



WITH PERFECT HALF-HALTS



The most important part of a half-halt is relaxing in between the aids otherwise it turns into an argument

When Bentley isn't travelling forward his take-off point is deep and uncomfortable



be more energetic (*below, far left*). To help him achieve this Jen needs to stand up higher in her stirrups to free the horse's back rather than touching the saddle.

"He lengthened going up the hill then. Think about how he feels underneath you and respond to him. There will always be a signal that you need to learn to recognise."

Paul notes that Bentley is better on the right rein and stays balanced while cantering down hill in this direction.

"Horses are right or left handed like humans and it's the rider's job to make sure they can do things equally on both reins," he says. "There is only a subtle difference but attention to detail — whether it's his suppleness, direction or rhythm — is crucial because when you get to a competition little problems become more dramatic and it's too late to do anything about them."

Short and sweet

Paul points out four small fences to warm up over and Bentley finds a deep take-off spot for each (*above right*).

"This time keep the forward momentum going all the way to the fence," instructs Paul.

Bentley's take-off points are further away which results in a smoother round.

At the end of each exercise Jen asks Bentley to walk from canter without

trotting. The gelding makes the downward transition easily.

"He responds to your aids instantly and I've seen him shorten in front of fences so he has the ability and the communication line is open. I suspect the problem is in the way that you ask him to shorten."

Paul asks Jen to describe how she asks the horse to lengthen — by kicking on with her legs. She understands that shortening is a combination of her seat and hands.

"It happens through a series of half-halts," explains Paul. "You need to half-halt in time with each step for five or six strides in front of a fence. I suspect that you hold, then he holds

and you will argue into the jump (*left*). That will always happen because a horse has more muscles in his neck than a rider does in their entire body."

A half-halt is a coordination of a rider's legs, seat and hands:

- LEGS Are needed to maintain the energy in each step
- SEAT Ensures that the pace shortens within the rhythm and with engagement
- HANDS Come back towards the seat to ask the horse to shorten

"Half-halts have to be used in the rhythm of the canter. It almost feels like your legs and hands are having an argument," says Paul who explains that it is important to relax in between half-halts rather than constantly nag at the horse's mouth.

"Think half-halt and then blob. The most difficult part of the aid is relaxing or softening between each half-halt."

Paul instructs Jen to ride a rectangle again, asking for a more forward stride on the long sides before shortening for the corners using half-halts.

"He slowed down then rather than shortening because you lost all the energy in the canter and you didn't make a clear turn."

Paul notes that every time Jen goes into a light seat Bentley tries to speed up.

"Only your leg aids mean go. Collect him on a straight line and when the canter is shorter you can turn."

When the horse has responded to his rider's aids Paul reminds Jen to be soft with her hands in between the half-halts.

"You're starting to hang on to his mouth again. He's slow to accelerate so don't be afraid to kick on and go for longer. When he comes back to you, though, you must be softer. At the moment you are physically holding his neck short which means that when you want to shorten the canter there is no more pull left."

Repeat as necessary

Ditches are the nemesis of many riders. ➤

Why less contact is more

WHILE Jen holds the reins, Paul holds the other end to act as Bentley's mouth (*right*).

"Brace against the pull. Your bottom needs to stay underneath you in the saddle with your hips flexing so that I don't pull you forward," he says.

"Your hands aren't moving but there is a huge amount of conversation going through them."

Paul asks Jen to do some half-halts.

"I was leaning on you then like the horse would and you're not relaxing so effectively you are fighting each other. Your half-halts need to be shorter and sharper," he says. "If you half-halt as you turn then you can be softer in your hands as you straighten for the fence and put your leg on."





Bentley jumps a lot of ditches out hunting but he is still nervous (ABOVE) and so Jen repeats the fence until he settles (BELOW)



"In nothing is one of the least brave horses and his success came through having a nice feeling over fences for so many years. Trotting to a fence is not easy or comfortable."

Create good habits

Bentley has picked up jumping faults at trakehners in the past. Paul believes that can be easily overcome by Jen using half-halts correctly on the approach.

"I want you to come in in a forward canter and then sit up and half-halt before you turn so that it is controlled and balanced."

When Jen is straight for the fence she can ride forward. Bentley trots at the final moment and leaps the fence. Jen squeals.

"The horse's response to it was the same as when he went over the ditch. If you have enough time to shout you have enough time to get your position sorted."

"I train over a ditch regularly — even on my top horses — because they all need to be happy to just pop over," says Paul. "If a ditch is easy for me to step over, a horse has got twice as many legs so it should be twice as easy for them."

Jen approaches in a quiet canter and Bentley puts in an enormous leap.

"That tells me he isn't sure about the ditch so pat him and keep coming round. He's leaping because he's not confident and that's why you need to repeat it," says Paul.

Bentley continues to over-jump (top).

"You don't need to change the way you are riding to it. You want the horse to give it a little height so that he doesn't fall in but not so much that it upsets the canter rhythm."

Jen tackles the ditch in the opposite direction. The gelding returns to leaping.

"Changing the direction is like changing the exercise."

Paul notices that Bentley is reluctant to canter to the ditch.

"I prefer horses to canter rather than trot because a jump is another canter stride and so it is easier for them," he explains.

Bentley lands in trot and Paul instructs Jen to make him canter away.

"He must land and go."

Jen negotiates the trakehner again. Bentley still jumps it from trot (below).

"You are getting to the turning point in a good canter but the acceleration once you have turned isn't happening," explains Paul.

Jen tries again. This time Bentley canters.

"That was your best attempt in terms of your riding but not the horse's because he backed off."

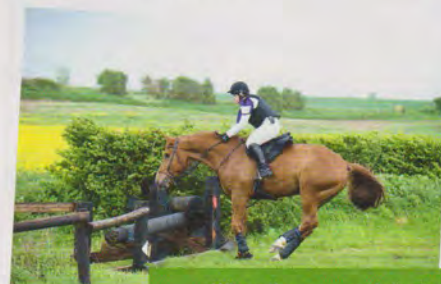
Jen circles around for one more go and the gelding is more confident (bottom).

"Much better — do it once more," says Paul. "Horses are creatures of habit and my rule is 'twice is nice'. If you jump the trakehner four times and only the last is a good jump the balance is wrong so you have to do it again correctly to give them a good feeling that they will remember."

Jen plans to put what she has learned into practice at home.

"Paul's explanation of half-halts is different to what I've been doing and it instantly improved our approach to fences," she says. "I feel more confident about tackling trakehners now and I'm itching to get out and do more."

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When the approach isn't strong enough Bentley backs off the trakehner and Jen tips forward (ABOVE) but when she uses half-halts to balance the horse around the turn she can ride positively forward to the fence



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INJECT THE FUN FACTOR TO BEAT WATER WOES

How can you persuade a reluctant eventer to get his hooves wet? Paul Tapner transforms a green BE90 campaigner who consistently refuses at water fences into an equine eager to go for a paddle. AIMI CLARK reports



MEET... DEBBIE BARRITT

DEBBIE Barritt, who is based in Evesham, is a full-time dog trainer for the Dogs Trust. Her 11-year-old Thoroughbred Hometomammy ('Spoken') began life as a racehorse and teamed up with Debbie four years ago to be retrained. The gelding won a BE80(T) section last year but his progress at BE90 level has been slow due to a fear of water.

"He has always been scared of it but I'm not sure if it's me hindering him or whether he is genuinely still lacking confidence so I would like some tips from Paul," says Debbie.

IT doesn't take long for one small problem to spiral into a major issue. Debbie Barritt's ex-racehorse Hometomammy ('Spoken') is not a fan of getting his hooves wet and refusals at water fences have cost him several high placings at BE90 level.

"He backs off going into water regardless of whether there is a fence in or not and he will stop," explains Debbie.

Badminton 2010 winner Paul Tapner believes that familiarity is at the root of the problem.

"All types of fences need to be familiar so that it is normal for Spoken to go in and out of water," he says. "Every time I jump my horses I jump a skinny. None of my cross-country fences are bigger than 100cm but even my four-star horses come up here regularly to jump a ditch, go through the water and up and down steps so that it is normal for them to do that and it is fun."

Water baby

Paul asks Debbie to enter the water and ride a half circle before coming back out.

"Treat it like a dressage test. Your line in needs to be central and straight, the half circle needs to be accurate and then come out on the same centre line."

Spoken hesitates before stepping into the water (*right*).

"In a test a change in rhythm is penalised," continues Paul. "The edge of the water is the most likely place that the horse will wobble left or right or speed up or slow down so be quick with your aids to correct him."



Spoken leaps into the water but Debbie slips her reins without keeping her elbows straight and hands forward. Consequently she cannot steer her horse when he lands



It takes time for horses to get used to splashing

Debbie rides back into the water. Again Spoken pauses and slows down so his rider applies her legs.

"That was a good response from you," says Paul.

Debbie walks through the water once more before approaching in trot. Paul reminds her to go in and out in the middle.

"The trot got quicker on the circle. Focus on the regular rhythm you would want a dressage judge to see."

Spoken trots in and out once more before Debbie asks for canter.



Spoken is unsure about going into water and so Debbie needs to spend as much time in it as she can

"Make sure the canter is established before you enter. Keep it short and bouncy."

The gelding breaks into trot on the circle. Paul explains that there are three key things that horses need to become familiar with and confident about when negotiating water:

- **Drag effect** on the legs, which makes moving harder work
- **Splashing** (*left*) which distracts the horse and causes him to slow down
- **Noise** — water is loud which is distracting and unnerving for green horses

According to Paul, if a horse can canter a 10m circle in an arena they should be able to canter in water.

"Water shouldn't affect the horse's ability to move at all and when it doesn't you know they are happy and confident to be in it," he says. "At the moment Spoken finds it difficult mentally and physically which is why he needs to do lots of different things to make him believe that he's having fun."

Making waves

Debbie canters into the water and out via a small step followed by a log.

"Make a decisive turn so that it's obvious to the horse what you're asking him to do."

Debbie negotiates the fences again before steering Spoken through in the opposite direction. The gelding trips off the step rather than jumping.

"You were going too quickly and he didn't respect the drop. It wasn't a nice feeling for him and that is key to him enjoying himself."

The pair approaches the log to step again. "Keep cantering but balance him in between the two using a half-halt."

Spoken's entry into the water is cleaner.

"Confidence doesn't come from speed. You need to create balance and hold him

together more rather than kick on so that he gets confidence from the quality of the canter and having a nice feeling."

Sit tight

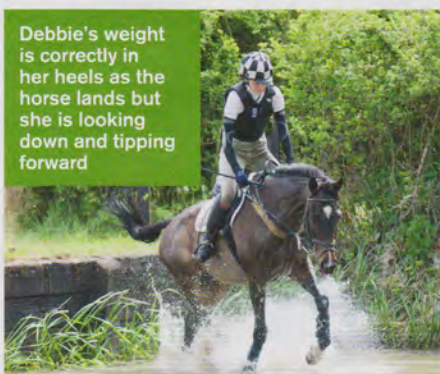
Debbie circles to a larger log in front of a bigger drop into the water. Spoken jumps straight in but lands in trot.

"That was good from him but your reins got too long. What if you land and there are two curving strides to an arrowhead?" Debbie would probably struggle to regain her reins in time to steer to the second element.

"This time slip your reins less and straighten your elbows so that your arms reach down rather than staying close to your rib cage."

Debbie's rein contact is better although her position needs fine tuning.

Debbie's weight is correctly in her heels as the horse lands but she is looking down and tipping forward



"As the horse landed you flopped down on to his back and that's why he's breaking into trot," says Paul.

"Landing heavily is not giving him the good feeling you want him to have."

Paul instructs Debbie to keep her eyes looking up and ahead with her arms straight and down without leaning too far back (right).

"Then you will land with your weight in your stirrups so that your legs act as the shock absorber. I don't want to see you touch the saddle."

The next attempt is a clear improvement.

"This time your eyes went down and your upper body tipped forward (left) so you've gone from one extreme to the other. Land with your heels down and your eyes up."

Debbie tries again.

"Much better — that was a nicer feeling for the horse and for you," enthuses Paul.

Summing up

Paul advises Debbie to continue training at home by riding in water as often as possible.

"Do it every day if you can and try to visit a course with a water fence once a week and spend time playing with it. The day before an event he needs to go through water," says Paul. "It's easy to think that cross-country

Paul demonstrates how Debbie should sit as Spoken jumps into the water (LEFT) so that her legs act as a shock absorber on landing (BELOW)



schooling is about going out and jumping as many different fences as possible but you only need to do what will benefit your horse."

Paul spends a lot of time repeating the same exercises on his horses.

"Horses learn through repetition. I might approach the water in a collected canter and then come in in medium canter or I may come off a straight line before a curving one. It must be my choice and the horse has to listen."

Debbie has taken this advice on board.

"I'm feeling more confident about our technique into water now," she says. "How we enter — even in walk — has an effect on the quality of the jump and I need to focus on keeping the speed the same while staying soft on Spoken's back." **E**

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