

Full steam ahead

Two Eventers competing at different levels are put through their paces by International Event rider **Bill Levett**. How will this winter 'MOT' help them prepare for the new season – and how could it boost your performance? Ellie Hughes investigates... →



Cross Country

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The trainer



Bill Levett

Bill, an Australian International Event rider, has been based in the UK since 1994. He is not only a respected producer of young horses, but he has racked up successes at the very highest level. In 2010, he finished seventh at the Mitsubishi Motors Badminton Horse Trials with Hippolyte.

Bill enjoyed a successful 2011 season, which included notching up a double at the NAF Hartpury International Horse Trials in August, where he topped the CIC3* with One Two Many NJ and won the CCI2* on Baggrave Summertime.

Bill runs a yard in Chipping Campden from where he also trains up-and-coming Event riders. He is a BE Accredited Coach.

Showjumping

The pupils



Georgie Bird

Georgie, 14, is aiming to step up to compete in KBIS ONU-18 classes in 2012. She has owned her 13-year-old gelding Helms Calibro (Corky) for two years. The pair competed in BE100 U-18 classes in 2011, with their best result coming at Ascott under Wychwood (1), where they won.

"Corky's quite a careful horse so I have to present him properly to the fences to keep him confident, but I think he has the ability to step up to Novice," says Georgie.



Rachel Buckle

Rachel has qualified for the BE90 Grassroots Championship and would like to progress to BE100 level later in the year.

Rachel works full time as a civil servant and has owned her 12-year-old ex-racehorse, Earls Course, for four years.

"Our weak link is the showjumping," she explains. "Earl had raced over hurdles when I bought him, so he was used to going through fences rather than over them."



Dressage

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Keeping ex-racehorse Earl calm is the key to producing a sub-30 score



Develop a strategy on the flat

Rachel's dressage winter check list:

To improve Earl's suppleness and engagement

To practise riding a test in a 20 x 60 arena

To devise a warm-up strategy to help keep Earl calm at Badminton

Typical of a Thoroughbred ex-racehorse, Earl is prone to rushes of adrenalin. Rachel explains that although he has produced consistently good tests at BE90 level in 2011, she is worried that the atmosphere at Mitsubishi Motors Badminton's Grassroots Championships will affect him. When he tenses, Earl becomes stiff in the back, champs at the bit and loses the natural lift and swing in his paces.

Bill encourages Rachel to introduce variations within the pace, slowing the trot and then asking Earl forward

again, and then repeating the exercise in walk and canter.

"If you make a point of introducing these differences in training, the horse will start to accept you putting your leg on or taking a half halt, which will give you more chance of keeping him soft and listening if he does get excited at a competition," says Bill.

Rachel explains that she is concerned about keeping Earl straight in a 20 x 60 arena – the size that will be used at the Grassroots Championships.

"The second centre line could be especially tricky," she says. "By the time he gets to the end of his test he will probably be tense and ready to start swinging his quarters all over the place."

Bill instructs Rachel to ride some centre lines and encourages her to focus on the quality of the turn at A.

"As soon as you rely on the inside rein →

“As soon as you rely on the inside rein to turn you lose the outside shoulder. That's when you can start to wiggle”

Practising halting square will gain you extra marks

to turn you lose the outside shoulder. That's when you can start a wiggle," he says. "Before you ask for halt, try to collect the trot a little – this is where the ability to smoothly adjust the horse's pace becomes important. You need him to keep stepping actively into the halt so that you can ask him to make subtle adjustments until he is square."

When Rachel thinks about keeping Earl's stride shorter, she is able to control his straightness more effectively.

Bill asks Rachel how long she usually spends warming Earl up at a One Day Event.

"If he's being particularly hot I will usually spend 40-45min on him, but on a calm day he only needs 20-25min," she says.

Bill advises that rather than working Earl solidly for 45min or more, at an important competition she should break up his warm-up into two or three shorter sessions.

"If you get him out several times you can allow him to acclimatise to the atmosphere without feeling pressured into having to knuckle down to work straight away," says Bill.

Back to basics

Georgie's dressage winter check list:

To improve Corky's lateral work

To confidently ride the more technical movements like rein-back and medium trot

To focus on her own and Corky's straightness

The first thing Bill notices as Georgie warms up Corky in walk, trot and canter is that she doesn't always carry her hands level in front of her, which means she often doesn't have a true contact with his mouth.

"If you want to make a horse straighter, the first thing you need to do is to focus on yourself," says Bill, who instructs Georgie to carry her hands up and together more, with her thumbs on top."

Bill observes that Corky has three very good paces and that his outline and way of going is rightly earning him high marks at BE100 level. →



“If you get him out several times you can allow him to acclimatise to the atmosphere without feeling pressured”

“But to move up to Novice we need to step everything up a gear,” says Bill, who starts to work on improving the pair’s leg yield.

Bill tells Georgie to ride down the three-quarter line and leg yield Corky to the right, back to the track.

The first time the pair crosses the school, Corky does not respond to Georgie’s outside leg aid and barely moves sideways.

“If a horse isn’t listening to the sideways leg aid I would always bring him back to walk and make sure he understands what is being asked of him at this slower pace first,” says Bill. “Ask him normally and if he leans into your leg rather than moves away from it, give him a short, sharp kick.”

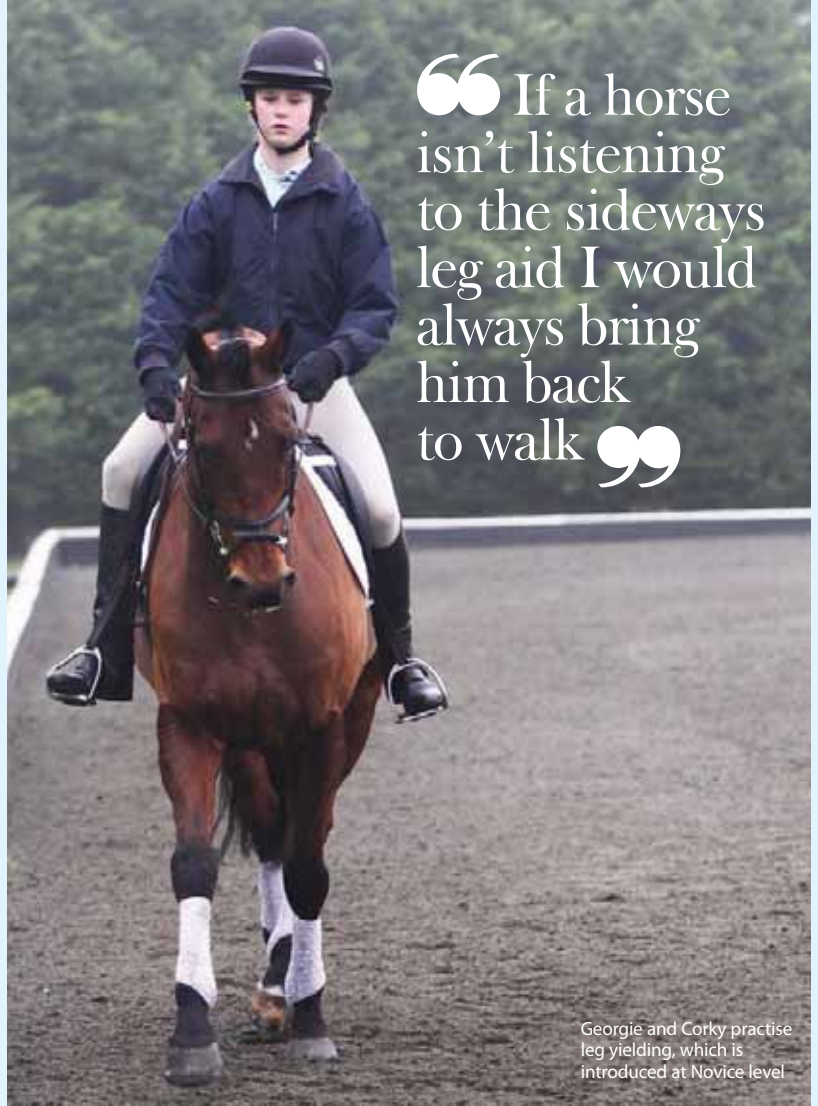
Once Georgie has Corky answering her leg aid in walk she moves back up to trot.

Bill notices that Georgie tends to lean against the direction of movement.

“Keep your body upright and don’t collapse your hip,” he says.

Bill also reminds Georgie that in a leg yield the emphasis is as much about maintaining the forwardness as it is about going sideways. →

“If a horse isn’t listening to the sideways leg aid I would always bring him back to walk”



Georgie and Corky practise leg yielding, which is introduced at Novice level

Bill showing leg yield





To stop the horse anticipating rein back, always intersperse it with halting and moving forward

“ Bill warns Georgie not to noticeably adjust her position when asking for the rein back ”

“People get so hooked up about going sideways that they forget to ride forwards,” he says.

Next, Bill asks Georgie to ride a halt and rein back – another movement that is introduced at Novice level.

At the first time of asking, Corky rushes backwards and hollows his frame.

“Make sure you establish the halt before you ask for rein back,” says Bill. “The more you practise this movement – interspersing it with halting and moving straight off – the more consistently you will be able to perform it.”

Bill warns Georgie not to noticeably adjust her position when asking for the rein back.



Summing up

Bill's top winter training tips

1. Focus on specific issues and target your training accordingly. Set aside a month to practise riding skinny fences, or improving your lateral work. Intersperse this with plenty of variety but make these key areas your focus.
2. Remember, the more confident you and your horse are at the beginning of the season, the more likely you are to get off to a flying start. Jumping-wise it's more productive to spend time working on the basics at a lower height than trying to jump big fences and running into problems.
3. Try to get out cross country schooling early – don't leave it until the last week in February. The weather is unpredictable at this time of year and you may run out of opportunities.
4. Get out winter showjumping and to dressage competitions – practise makes perfect!
5. Identify your goal for the season and work backwards. Decide which competitions you want to do in the lead-up and work out how you are going to fit in training and lessons around this. Do not leave it too late to start working on your horse's fitness.

“Make sure you keep your legs soft and relaxed and don't lean in against the movement of the horse”

“The judge doesn't want to see a rider dropping their hands and fiddling. Make sure you sit up, keep your hands level and just lighten your seat.”

Bill concludes the session by watching Georgie ride counter canter, again emphasising the importance of the rider's bodyweight.

“Make sure you keep your legs soft and relaxed and don't lean in against the movement of the horse as that will cause him to lose balance,” says Bill, who concludes by telling Georgie that she is more than ready to ride a Novice test, but that focusing on her own balance and straightness over the winter will be the key to achieving a score in the 20s. 🐾



Bill explains why it is important that Georgie sits symmetrically and keeps her hands level

Learn to love the deep spot

Rachel's showjumping winter check list:

To maintain an even canter rhythm and not let Earl take strides out

To get out to more shows before the start of the season

To feel confident jumping 1m

"Clear rounds are like the Holy Grail," admits Rachel, who explains that showjumping is her own and Earl's Achilles heel. "We had a few disasters at the beginning of 2011 which meant that we had to go back to basics to restore our confidence."

As Rachel warms up by cantering over a small cross-pole, Bill immediately identifies Earl's ex-racehorse trait of speeding up and hollowing.

"The quality of the canter is very important," he says. "Try to wait for the fence to come to you rather than allowing him to launch at it. You have to learn to love the deep spot and feel comfortable waiting for it."

Earl is not naturally careful in front and his propensity to dangle his front legs rather than snap up at the knee causes him to rub rails in front, especially when he becomes long and flat. Bill also notices that Rachel tends to push with her seat in front of the fence.

"Don't try too hard to see a stride," says Bill. "There is nothing wrong with helping a horse to find a better take-off spot by making subtle adjustments to the canter, but if you are struggling to judge distances, rather than push for something that isn't there, sit up and wait for the fence."

"I would much rather you kept him slow and gave him time to chip in, than let him run away from you," he adds. "At this height – and even up to Novice level [1.10m] – so long as you have a balanced, forward canter, the horse will be able to cope without being on the perfect take-off stride."

Bill then instructs Rachel to jump a course of fences, including a related distance on three strides.

"He is much more likely to rush if he sees one fence followed by another," says Rachel.

Bill tells her to keep the approach to the first element slow to encourage Earl to throw a smaller, less exuberant jump.

"And then sit up and support him with your hand, but don't pull back," he says.

Having initially rushed down the distance, at the second time of asking Rachel has much better control and the pair go on to make a good job of negotiating the course.

Bill advises Rachel to prioritise indoor showjumping over the winter.

"But keep the fences small – that way neither of you will lose confidence if things don't go to plan," he says.

"Concentrate on getting the basics right and then you will have a solid foundation to build on in the spring."

“There is nothing wrong with helping a horse to find a better take-off spot by making subtle adjustments to the canter”



Earl may not have a classic jumping technique but Bill shows Rachel that it is possible to keep jumping clear

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A more powerful canter helps Georgie and Corky tackle bigger fences

The importance of a solid partnership

Georgie's showjumping winter check list:

- To jump around 1.10m tracks confidently
- To establish a more powerful, energetic canter
- To be more accurate on the approach to fences

Having watched Georgie warm up over several small uprights, Bill remarks on the solid partnership she seems to have with Corky.

When the pair doesn't meet a fence on a perfect stride, Georgie sits up, keeps her leg on and 'clucks' at Corky, encouraging him to pick up and be careful. "That's the sign of a solid partnership – which is so important to develop as you move up the grades,"

says Bill, who wastes no time testing the pair by putting up the fences to around 1.10m – Novice height.

"Remember to maintain the quality of your canter around the turns," says Bill. "There are two things that can cause a horse to lose confidence in the showjumping – the first is too much speed, and the second is being underpowered.

"When you turn towards the fence you need to feel that you have contained power underneath you. Then it will be easier to make small adjustments to the canter if necessary."

While encouraging Georgie to keep developing her ability to see a stride, Bill also points out that while training

at home it is important to avoid presenting the horse perfectly to a fence every time.

"Amateur riders need to learn to develop accuracy, but once you have honed these skills you need to make sure you don't always ride to a fence perfectly otherwise the horse never learns to think on his own two feet," says Bill.

Georgie and Corky finish the session by jumping a confident clear round.

"I don't think you'll have any problems stepping up to Novice, so long as you keep focusing on maintaining a quality canter," says Bill. 🐾

Georgie showing good control and balance



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Bill on the cross country course

“ How fast you can go across country depends on how much time you need in front of the fence to set yourself up ”

Wait for the fence to come to you

Rachel's winter cross country check list:

To work on maintaining an even, level rhythm between fences

To think about being able to achieve the optimum time on her terms – not Earl's

To improve her own position on the approach to and in between fences

At last year's Badminton Grassroots Championship, several riders picked up time penalties for going too fast on the cross country.

"The course at Badminton is different to an average course because you have long, straight, galloping stretches in between fences, so it is easy to go quicker than you would do on a twisty track with more jumping efforts over a shorter distance," says Bill, who addresses the issue of speed and control right at the start of the session. Bill asks Rachel to jump several straightforward fences at a cross country pace, setting up for the fence as she would do in a competition.

"How fast you can go across country depends on how much time you need in front of the fence to set yourself up. If you know that it takes you 500m to set your horse up safely, then you must leave this amount of time. Make up time by riding away from the fences quickly."

As with the showjumping, Rachel has a tendency to push for a long stride rather than sit still and wait for the fence to come to her.

This becomes evident when Bill tells her to jump a spooky goose fence. As Rachel drives for a long stride, Earl thinks twice and puts down again at the last minute resulting in a stop.

"By pushing the stride longer you give the horse less time to assess the question. Try to maintain consistency in your own position to the fence – if the horse feels you suddenly shift your weight and sit down and push it will upset your balance and rhythm."

Once Rachel concentrates on keeping a more consistent approach, she and Earl continue to jump a succession of fences that are far more technical than she will meet at Badminton – foot perfectly. →

Rachel steps down into water



Rachel at the Goose fence



Train the brain

Georgie's cross country winter check list:

- To tackle more technical fences
- To boost Corky's confidence over bigger fences
- To develop a clear strategy to deal with training issues

To make the step up to Novice level, Georgie and Corky will need to step up their training over technical fences. Having warmed up over some straightforward fences, Bill asks Georgie and Corky to tackle an unusual-looking, narrow tyre fence. The first time they come to the obstacle, Corky slams on the brakes.

"There was nothing wrong with your presentation – he was being a bit cheeky," says Bill. "I would give him a bit of a kick to let him know that he's been naughty."

Bill explains the importance of taking the opportunity to reprimand the horse in a constructive way while in training.

"In that situation I would have stood him in front of the fence, turned his head around to my knee so that he couldn't run off and then given him a couple of good kicks to let him know he's done the wrong thing," says Bill, who explains to Georgie that there is plenty she can do at home over the winter to develop hers and Corky's skills.

"You have to teach a horse to jump even if it doesn't suit him to. Make the fences more difficult by putting blocks in front of them and approaching them on angles. You have to train the horse to be quick-thinking – to see a set of flags at the last-minute and make a snap decision."

At the second time of asking Corky sails over the tyres and Bill compliments her positive riding as she tackles other, similarly technical fences.

"You have a great partnership and the key is learning to trust one another," he says.

At Novice level, courses are also more likely to include related distances and curving lines.

"Although you will probably have walked the course and decided on the ideal number of strides, once you're out on the course you need to be able to react quickly to what is happening underneath you," says Bill. "Just because a combination has been designed for three or four strides, doesn't mean that that is gospel. The most important thing is to keep the horse together and keep your leg wrapped around him."

This point is emphasised as Georgie negotiates the water – a crocodile perched on the edge of the pond followed by a hanging log around four strides later.

"So long as you're holding him together and maintaining the energy, it doesn't matter what stride you meet the log on," says Bill.

The pair makes a very neat job of negotiating the complex and Corky earns plenty of praise from both Bill and his jockey. 🐾

“ You have to train the horse to be quick-thinking – to see a set of flags at the last-minute and make a snap decision ”

Below from left: Maintaining the energy through the water is the key to a good jump



Training the horse to lock-on to narrow obstacles is vital



First time, Corky applies the brakes at the tricky narrow tyres

