

PRACTICAL HORSEMAN EXTRA

Boyd Martin and
Tsetserleg

BOYD MARTIN RIDE A SUNKEN ROAD

Teach Your Youngster To Stand in Cross-Ties

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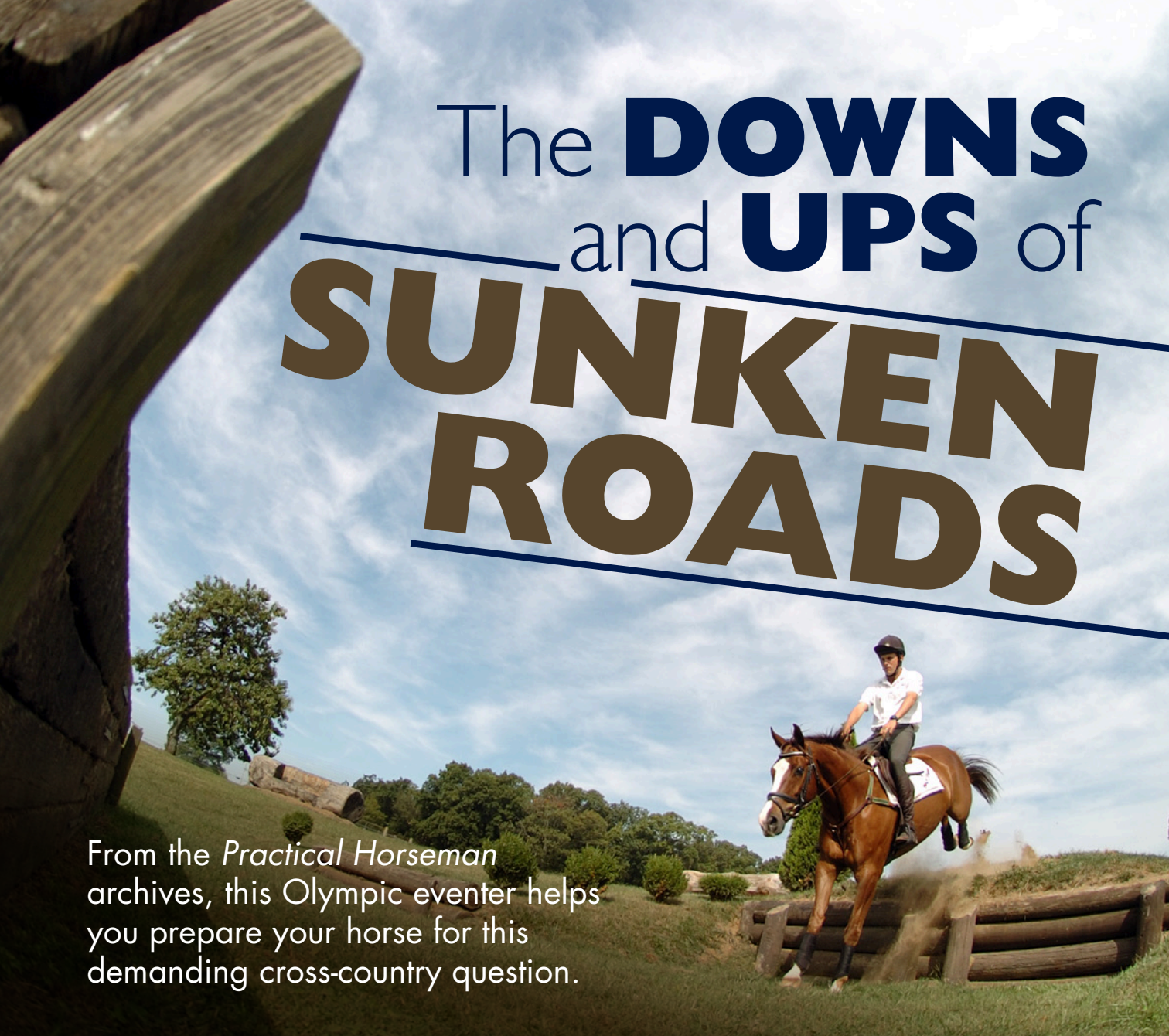
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Setting the Grooming Standard...

The background image shows a rider on a brown horse jumping over a log obstacle. The rider is wearing a white shirt, dark pants, and a helmet. The horse is in mid-air, clearing the log. The scene is set in a grassy field with trees in the background under a blue sky with clouds. A large, dark, curved shape, possibly a log or part of the obstacle, is in the foreground on the left.

The **DOWN**S and **UP**S of **SUNKEN ROADS**

From the *Practical Horseman* archives, this Olympic eventer helps you prepare your horse for this demanding cross-country question.

By Boyd Martin
Photos by Amy Katherine Dragoo

A sunken road may include as many as four jumping components at the upper level. For instance, it could be a vertical, then a stride to a considerable drop into a pit, a one-stride distance to a bank going out of the pit, and beyond the bank, another vertical or even a bounce. But a sunken road is more than just a combination of cross-country elements. It tests your horse's power, balance and agility to jump down, then rock back and rebalance within a short distance to jump up again.

Course designers introduce the sunken

road concept at lower levels, with a question as simple as a log with a little drop two strides beyond. This gives your horse time to figure out that after the log, he needs to balance himself for the drop. It doesn't punish him if he hesitates or shuffles in an extra stride before the drop. As you move up the levels, there will be a corresponding jump up and out of the sunken road and another element beyond the "up." And all parts of the question will get bigger and the distances will become more challenging. Ultimately you'll see sunken roads like the ones at five-star

Whatever your level, there is one guiding principle for your position when riding a sunken road: On the "down" side, you don't want to get ahead of your horse and "go over the top of him." On the "up" side, you don't want to be left behind and possibly hit him in the mouth.

competitions—as hard as they get: for instance, a bounce to a big drop into a sunken road, one stride, then bounce out over a vertical.

Before you attempt to school over a sunken road at a cross-country facility, you and your horse need to develop the following three prerequisites at home:

■ **Establish a balanced, collected but active canter** in which your horse's frame is a little "uphill." This controlled canter will give him time to "read" the multiple questions in the sunken road. You definitely don't want him strung out and on his forehead.

■ **Strengthen your own position** so that your seat, leg and rein aids are independent and you can change your position moment by moment to adapt to what your horse is doing underneath you. This will also help you avoid flopping on his neck upon landing in the sunken road

or getting left behind and hitting him in the mouth as he jumps out.

■ **Accustom your horse to jumping calmly through a series of fences.**

The visual aspect of the sunken road can be daunting for a horse if he is already looking beyond the first element at what comes next. Set up a series of show jumps a stride or two apart and practice jumping these from a collected canter to help your horse learn not to be distracted by what's ahead.

The sunken road's change of terrain, on the other hand, can't be approximated in a ring with stadium jumps. To school it effectively, you need to find a facility where you can practice drops and banks at various levels of difficulty, as I'm doing in this article with Ginetta Manricko (nicknamed Ricko), an Irish Sporthorse/Selle Français gelding.

The work begins with asking your

horse to walk or trot off the drop—kind of dribble down it. Canter down it at first can cause a green horse to leap off the drop and land on all four feet, unprepared to take the nice energetic stride he needs to go on. Once he's totally bored with dribbling, you can ride the little drop at a slow, balanced canter, and you can add a jump a few strides before the drop. That way he gets used to quietly popping over a fence with a drop beyond it as I'm doing in the photos below and on page 5. As he gains confidence, you can move the fence closer to the drop.

The reason for such careful, systematic work is that relying on adrenaline and momentum to get through a sunken road will eventually get you in trouble. With the basics in place, you'll be on your way to jumping a more upper-level sunken road, such as the one I'm navigating on pages 6 and 7.

Lower-Level Sunken Road

Ricko is jumping a lower-level sunken road—a log to a knee-high drop. We'll practice the "up" phase of the sunken road by reversing direction and jumping out the way we came in.



1 In his last stride before jumping this Novice-size log out of an active, balanced canter, Ricko is already focusing on the approximately 1 foot drop one stride away down a mild slope. Anticipating that he may back off at the log, I keep my upper body tall, ready to squeeze him with my lower leg and push him with my seat. My hands are "forward thinking" as the slight loop in my reins shows. If Ricko hesitates, comes back to a trot or even tries to stop, I want to be pushing him forward from the "back seat," not tipping ahead of him.



2 I stay with Ricko's motion as he jumps the log, coming forward a little with my upper body and rising out of the saddle. My upper body isn't nearly as forward as it would be if this were another type of cross-country question (like a jump on even terrain) because there is a slight downhill after this log and a drop beyond that. My reins are still relatively long so Ricko can stretch his nose out and down, which will help him balance and back himself up a bit for the little drop. My leg position is still defensive in case he sucks back. He's "looking" back at me with his ears because he feels my leg pressure.

Lower-Level Sunken Road



3 Ricko's canter is balanced as he covers the distance between the log and the drop. Although it walked a conventional one-stride distance, I won't mind if he shuffles in another canter stride or even trots before the drop because I want him to learn to come back and balance himself the moment before he jumps down. All will be fine as long as I stay behind him like I am with my upper body, gently pressing him forward with my legs, keeping my heels well down. As my upper body goes back, I've straightened my elbow so that the soft reins continue allowing Ricko to stretch out his nose.



4 Here's the drop that's been claiming Ricko's attention. I've relaxed my rein contact even more as he prepares to jump down this little step, and I am thinking about staying behind him, especially in the stride after landing from the drop. My back is quite flat, and I imagine tucking my seat underneath myself, pushing my tailbone down into the saddle almost like a dressage rider preparing for an extended trot. This is not a forceful move. It's just a way of staying close to my horse's back.



5 To practice the "up" side of a sunken road, I reverse the exercise. I want to get Ricko to a takeoff spot close enough to the bank that he isn't tempted to chip in a stride at the last minute. You want to get this deep distance by coming gently forward to it as I am doing, pressing Ricko with my lower leg and supporting but not holding him with the reins. I also want to avoid getting left behind if Ricko takes a big jump here. My position is well-balanced with my upper body forward over his center and my weight out of the saddle. Ricko's eyes and ears show that he's already studying the upcoming log element.



6 My focus is still on staying with Ricko in the uphill stride between the bank and the log. I don't want to get left behind the motion. If I accidentally hit him in the mouth, it could cause him to hollow just before the jump. My leg is wrapped around him, squeezing and supporting, as I keep my upper body forward and extend my arms to maintain the soft contact with the bit. I'm able to give Ricko a more forward ride for this "up" phase because he gets a longer look at the series of questions on the uphill approach and can read the fences from farther away.

Upper-Level Sunken Road

This type of sunken road, with a one-stride distance after the drop to a big bank out, is something you probably wouldn't encounter until Intermediate level. To introduce the drop to Ricko, I walked him into the pit of the complex and let him look at the two sides to help him understand how high they are before I begin the exercise.



1 My eyes are up—not looking down into the pit where Ricko's attention is right now—and my position is more defensive than it was over the lower-level drop. My seat is jammed more firmly into the saddle, and my lower leg is a little in front of me with my heel pushed down. Ricko is approaching the drop with an active show-jumping canter that gives him enough time to analyze the question and enough power to negotiate it. My hands are forward, giving him all the rein he needs to take a good look, but even if he really stretches his neck down for a better look, my body will not follow.

2 I am soft and encouraging and have popped out of the saddle slightly as Ricko jumps up and out over the edge of the drop. My upper body is only slightly ahead of the vertical (not nearly as forward as it would be for a regular cross-country or show-jumping fence) and my hands are extended down for just a light feel of the bit. Ricko has shifted his focus from the drop to the bank ahead.



3 As Ricko lands, he has to rock back, rebalance and be ready to jump up within a stride. I've sunk right down into the saddle, tucking my tailbone as I did in Photo 4 on page 5. My lower leg is pushed forward defensively to help me avoid getting ahead of the motion while my hands are following and supportive, not restrictive. If you look at the actual length of my reins in these six photos, it remains the same. I like to "preset" my release before a combination like this and then adjust the reins by changing the angles of my arm. In this photo my elbow is perfectly straight.

4 The stride before the big bank, Ricko needs to rock back and sit down, but for him to be ready for a crisp, powerful jump, the stride has to be forward. To help him, my upper body is starting to come forward, but my seat is still brushing the saddle and my lower leg is still hugging and supporting him. There is an angle in my elbow as I gently increase the contact to encourage him to rock back and bring his frame more uphill.

Upper-Level Sunken Road



5 In this takeoff stride, I want enough power to be sure Ricko gets his hind legs securely up onto the bank. If he just manages to scramble up the bank, he may be scared the next time we jump something like this. My leg is still pressing him strongly as he comes off the ground while I keep my upper body well forward to stay with him. I think of a bank as being like the first half of a vertical show-jumping or cross-country fence: The take-off feels the same as it does for the vertical, but you don't have the second half of the arc.

6 Ricko is pulling his hind legs well up underneath himself. His ears show the effort has left him confident—but also that there's something ahead! It's a one-stride distance to a small drop on the other side. He is already backing himself up to deal with it. In response, my position has again become defensive. I've straightened my arm to give him freedom with his head and neck, and my upper body is forward to stay with his trajectory up the bank. My seat is back in the saddle, and my leg is already preparing for the next drop. 🐾

Boyd Martin recalls that as a teenager he finished his first horse trial in Australia on a score of 386. "I fell off three times, and I had something like 150 time penalties because I'd had to jog back to the horse trailer where my horse had run back," he says with typical good cheer.

"Eventing is much more of a 'blokey' or guy sport in Australia than in the U.S.," he explains. "When I was in high school, all the guys mucked around with horses. If you had a horse trailer, you would just go. It was wild and unsafe, but by riding your horse around those horse trials, you developed great balance and a great feel for your horse."

By the end of high school, Boyd knew eventing was what he wanted to do. He says his parents, both Olympic athletes themselves, weren't as dismayed by this career choice as a more conventional family might have been: His father represented Australia in cross-country skiing and his American mother was a speed skater. They met at the 1976 Grenoble Winter Olympics.

Boyd trained with internationally renowned Heath Ryan at the New South Wales Equestrian Center. After riding his first four-star at age 19 in 1999, he won the Adelaide CCI**** on True Blue

Toozac four years later. In the interim he met his future wife Silva, an accomplished dressage rider who had trained with German greats Hubertus Schmidt and Rudolf Zeilinger and was visiting Australia. He credits her with putting the classical polish on his dressage. In 2006 he decided to ship his horse Ying Yang Yo

to the United States for a try at the Rolex Kentucky CCI****. He trained beforehand with Australian native Phillip Dutton (now a U.S. citizen), and they hit it off so well that Boyd returned to work as Phillip's assistant trainer.

The rest, as Boyd says, is history. He has consistently been in the top 10 world rankings since leaving Australia and has been on every U.S. Championship team since changing his citizenship from Australian to American in 2010. He has represented the U.S. at two Olympic Games, three World Equestrian Games and two Pan American Games, including the 2019 Pan Ams, where he won double-gold with Tsetserleg. The pair placed second at the 2019 Kentucky Three-Day Event. Today, Boyd and Silva own and operate their farm, Windurra, USA, in Cochranville, Pennsylvania.

For the latest on Boyd, visit www.boydandsilvamartin.com.



Boyd, Silva and one of their sons, Nox.



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Boyd Martin at the
Land Rover Kentucky
3-Day Event

Photo: Shannan Pinkman



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How do I teach my horse to stand calmly in cross-ties?

O I have a 4-year-old gelding. He is a greenie, and whenever I put him in cross-ties, he gets very upset. No matter what I do to calm him down with treats or a soothing voice, he still prances around as I try to brush him. It's not really annoying, but I'm afraid he might get hurt one day. How can I get him to relax and stand still?

LAURIE PITTS

A This behavior is not uncommon in a young horse. It usually stems from discomfort about having his head restricted, rather than resistance to standing still—which bothers very few horses. My step-by-step training process has successfully cured this problem in countless youngsters. With patience

and consistency, you can teach your horse to accept the cross-ties, move his feet minimally and perhaps even fall asleep during his massage! This may take several weeks, and you'll need the assistance of a friend in the beginning. But in the end, you should have a safe, confident horse who thinks nothing of hanging out in the cross-ties.

First be sure your cross-tie area has the following safety features:

- A solid barrier behind your horse: either a wall at the back of a grooming/wash stall or closed doors at the end of the barn aisle. Adjust your cross-ties so, if your horse backs up, he will hit the wall before the cross-ties tighten. This will prevent him



A safe cross-tie area has a solid barrier behind the horse, baling twine "fuses" tied between the cross-ties and the wall (inset) and nonslip footing.

from fighting the cross-ties or feeling trapped by them and panicking.

- Short lengths of breakable twine tied between the cross-ties and the walls.
- Rubber mats or some other secure, nonslip footing.

Step One: Lead your horse into the grooming area and ask him to stand still in the middle as if he were tied, but don't attach the cross-ties. Ask your assistant to hold him with the lead shank while you go about your grooming routine quietly and confidently. Create a predictable routine: use brushes in the same order each time, start from the same side with each brush and work your way from front to back on each side. As he becomes familiar with the routine, he will grow more relaxed.

As you groom, have your helper soothe your horse with a soft voice and gentle stroking while also monitoring his body language closely for signs of increasing tension (eyes frequently looking back at you, swishing tail). If she sees his muscles begin to

tense—possibly indicating an imminent explosion—she should warn you ASAP and try to get his mind back on her.

Work together to reposition him each time he moves out of place, using a tug on the lead shank or a nudge on his shoulder or haunches. When he steps back into the original position, give plenty of quiet verbal praise and stroking to tell him he has done well—even if you suspect that he'll only hold that position for a minute. Don't speak to him or reward him in any way if he

is moving excessively or being unruly.

During your first few sessions, he may move out of place 100 times, which means you and your helper will have to reposition him 101 times. That's OK! At age 4, he should have a long enough attention span to stand quietly for an entire grooming session. Let his comfort level dictate how long the sessions last. If he appears to be losing patience toward the end, wrap up your routine quickly and try to finish on a good note. Always end his



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To help your horse become comfortable in cross-ties, you will start with a helper holding the lead shank in the grooming area without attaching the cross ties. Next you'll hold his lead shank without the helper, then you'll attach one cross tie and then both. Finally, when he seems calm and comfortable, you'll take off the shank.

lessons during a moment when he is standing still.

Step Two: Once your horse is standing quietly throughout the grooming sessions with very little correction, you're ready to try them without the helper. Use a lead rope long enough to allow you to reach his tail without letting go (still not attaching the cross-ties). Holding the rope in one hand while you brush with the other, follow your normal grooming routine, quietly correcting him whenever he

steps out of position and praising him when he repositions himself properly. Pay special attention to his head, which should be as still as his body. If he moves it excessively in any way, gently guide it back to center with a tug on the lead shank, again quietly praising him when he obeys.

Step Three: When your horse is standing happily for Step Two, attach one cross-tie to his halter on the opposite side of where you are working. Keep the lead rope attached to the

halter on the side on which you're working. Follow your normal grooming routine, reminding him to keep his head straight and using tugs on the lead rope when necessary to discourage him from chewing on the cross-tie. When you switch to the other side, change the lead rope and cross-tie to the opposite sides.

Step Four: By now your horse should be standing still throughout his grooming sessions with very few reminders. When he seems calm and steady, attach both cross-ties, keeping the

lead rope attached for necessary corrections. As soon as he settles into a relaxed posture, remove the shank and finish your routine.

If at any point during this process your horse reverts to his original poor behavior, go back to the previous step—even if that means asking your helper to repeat Step One with you—until he improves. The time you spend now reinforcing this quiet behavior in the cross-ties will be more than worth it in the long run! 🐾

In the 1970s and '80s Laurie Pitts worked for some of the top professionals in the country, including Joan Boyce, Frances Rowe, Rodney Jenkins, Joe Fargis and Conrad Homfeld. She traveled with the U.S. Equestrian Team to the 1978 World Championships in Aachen, Germany, the first World Cup in 1979 in Sweden and the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Her favorite charge, Balbuco, ridden by Homfeld, was also chosen for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. She currently works for Brown Hall Farm in Middleburg, Virginia.



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