

Collecting Capers

Jonathan Chapman,
BE's National Safety Chairman,
explains collecting ring
complexities and etiquette

THE RIDING OF horses may be considered to be a risk sport, but, as we all know, just being around them can be hazardous too. Indeed one of the most common injuries associated with horses is broken toes, and that happens without ever venturing on board.

An area of risk that has been highlighted recently is the show jump collecting ring, or warm-up area. I don't mean only the risk to riders, which we all appreciate. I mean the risk to ground crew: grooms, helpers, parents, friends. Why does the collecting ring pose such a risk? I think there is a combination of factors, many of which have to do with increasing the density of horses in the area.

The flow of horses through a collecting ring should be constant in theory, but it isn't. A constant ebb and flow of horse numbers tends to be witnessed through the day. When numbers are low, risks are reduced. When numbers and congestion build up, risks increase. So it would help if riders stuck to their times and evened out the flow.

The size of the collecting ring will obviously affect the density of horses in it. I would encourage all Organisers to "go large" if they can. Give riders as big an area possible, so that people not actually using the practice fences can walk or stand out of the way of the horses that are.

The shape of the collecting ring will affect how easy it is to use. Long narrow collecting

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rings concentrate horses at each end and in the middle near the jumps. Square ones allow space to move around the sides of the fences without getting so much on top of each other.

The collecting ring should be as flat as possible; slopes tend to encourage a less balanced warm up, and tripping horses tend to become riderless horses. Likewise the ground conditions are very important. The warm up should build confidence in the horse and rider and jumping on hard, soft or rutted ground will not do this. Collecting rings do take a hammering during an Event, with up to 300 horses in a day effectively covering the same tracks. This means the pre-Event treatment of the ground in this area needs to be just as meticulous as in the competition areas. A good soil structure, free of compaction, will encourage good drainage and grass cover. Frequent practice jump moves throughout the day will help avoid chewed up areas forming in front of and behind the fences.

The positioning of the entrance to the show jumping arena can also influence safety in the collecting ring. Definitive advice is not possible because each Event site is unique, but some thought does need to be given to this, and to the entrance to the collecting ring from the park.

Three is the minimum number of warm up jumps under BE rules, but in my experience more is better. It reduces the frequency of use of each jump and allows riders more scope to jump what they need to, not just what someone else is jumping. It is also usually best if all fences are to be jumped in the same direction.

There is no doubt that the collecting ring is a stressful place. I have personally witnessed more colourful exchanges there than anywhere else on an event site. More filial relationships are ruined here than in any other walk of life; if I were a parent I would not venture near a collecting ring!

But why is it so stressful? I will confess

to suffering more nerves here as a rider, coach, owner and husband than anywhere else. It is because the show jumping is so influential in the end result. Miss a marker with a transition in your dressage test and the judge might not notice, but miss a turn or stride show jumping and that four penalties will cost you several places or a point for a double clear. In this highly emotive state people behave differently. They forget to pass left to left, they stop directly in front of you as you canter round, their helpers take kamikaze walks across the front of the fence, or suddenly decide to put it up as you approach it. They also get so possessive of a fence you would think they had brought it with them on their lorry. There is no doubt that common courtesies go out of the window as helpers put on their “practice fence face”. It is this state of affairs that creates risk to both riders and the people on the ground.

How do we alleviate it? We need to re-establish some form of collecting ring etiquette.

- The first thing is for each rider to leave themselves enough time to warm up (allowing for the odd wait for a fence), and to have a warm up plan. This takes a lot of the stress out and prevents over jumping a horse.
- While focus is important when riding, in the collecting ring you must have spatial awareness and know what is going on around you.
- Do not take more than one helper into the collecting ring, and make sure that person is either experienced or very well briefed.
- Don't hog a jump – they are everybody's toys, not just yours.
- Be courteous to others, pass left to left. If someone is on a fractious horse, give them a bit of space, and if there is a riderless horse keep still.

Last but not least remember this: the collecting ring steward is a Volunteer. They do not give up their time, and stand in the rain and cold, to be abused by competitors or their teams. They do it for the satisfaction of contributing to the sport that they love, that we all love. A fence or two down might seem like the end of the world, but it isn't. So don't use the collecting ring like the training camp for the Hunger Games, and whatever happens in the ring, thank the steward as you leave. 🐾