



## USEA Future Event Horse Introduction to Free Jumping

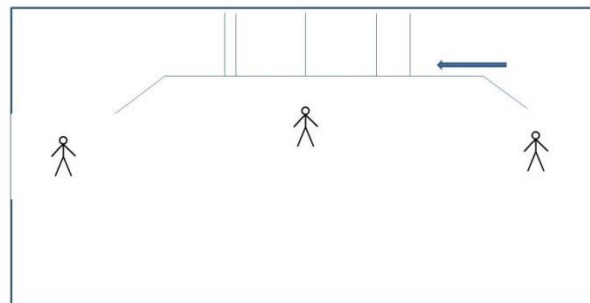


Future Event Horse Introduction to Free Jumping The USEA Future Event Horse (FEH) program evaluates the potential of yearlings, two-year-olds, and three-year-olds to become successful upper level event horses. As such, the education and preparation of the event horse in a correct and progressive manner is essential. As with any program for young horses, owners and trainers must always use their best judgment in determining the level of training their horse is ready for, both developmentally and mentally.

This article is an overview of free jumping as a training and evaluation tool for 3-year-olds as a part of the FEH program.

### **The Idea**

When introducing horses to Free Jumping, there are many ways to do it. Traditionally the most effective way, with the least amount of unnecessary excitement, is to set up a line of obstacles along the long side of the arena. There has to be another barrier, usually made of jump standards and poles on the inside track of the chute to prevent the horse from running out of the side of the fence. Whatever you use, it should be at a height that discourages the horse from jumping out and should be able to easily break away (i.e. no continuous piece of rope). This barrier should start at an angle from the corner and extend to the standard of the first fence. In an open chute, the barrier should extend at least 36' from the last fence. The horse catcher stands a bit farther away. In a closed chute, the barrier extends at least 45' to a closed end. The 45' is necessary to keep the horse from feeling trapped and also from dropping their hind end in preparation of stopping. The width of the face of the jumps should be at least 10' long as to give the horse an inviting view to jump through. It is recommended that breakaway cup be used on all fences especially on the back rail of oxers. Poles should be made of wood and have some weight to them, but not too heavy. The standards on the side of the arena wall may need to be made to hang against the wall, or may need to have fill so there is not a gap for the horse to go around. It is best to be started off the left rein.



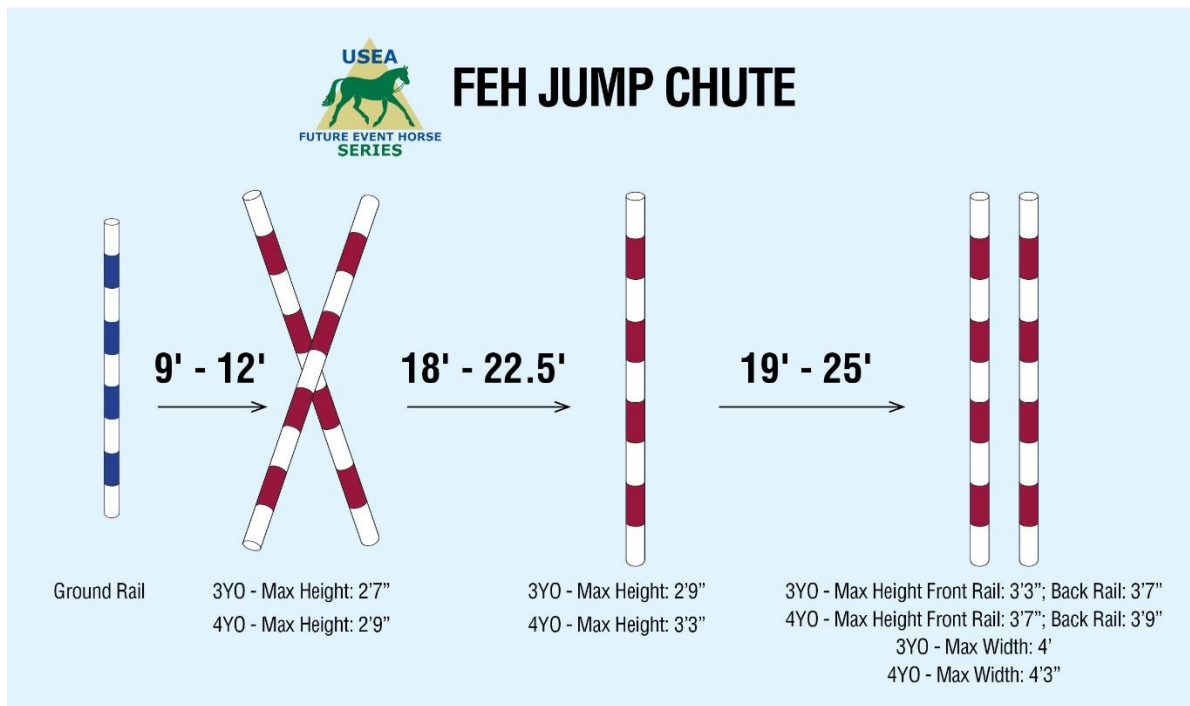
### **The Team and Roles**

An ideal minimum amount of people is to have three working as a close team. A handler that leads the horse into the chute, a whip person placed just before the first fence and follows the horse as needed through the chute and a catcher with a lead rope and some grain to catch the horse as it lands off the

last fence. The whip person can make or break this exercise so make sure they are experienced and can read whether a horse needs to be encouraged, maintained or left alone. Too much cracking can excite the horse; a whip person too far ahead can distract the horse and cause him to stop. It is best to encourage the horse by bringing the whip down just behind them rather than cracking it. However, sometimes more encouragement is needed to let the horse know that he must move forward.

### **Equipment and Set Up**

Before you begin, it is best to have brushing boots on the horse for protection (if your horse is not afraid of feeling the poles, an open front boot on the front legs are ok). Wraps risk becoming unraveled and unsafe. Have a smooth cotton or leather strap that is about 2' long with no snaps on it and a breakaway halter (for FEH Championships, a well-fitting snaffle bridle). This strap should be made of a smooth material so it can slide easily through the halter or the bit when one end is let go to send the horse through the chute. It is highly recommended that the handlers wear approved helmets, have gloves on, and a dressage whip in hand. The whip person has a lunge whip. Allow the horse to warm up on the lunge at the walk, trot and canter. Then have your jump chute set up at the distances with only poles on the ground between the standards. Make sure the jump cups are not on the standards and are stored in a place that the horse cannot easily run over them. Usually, starting with a pole, 9' to the first obstacle, 18' to the 2nd obstacle, and 19' to the 3rd obstacle works well for most horses. Another aspect is to be sure the rest of the arena is clear of other obstacles or things your horse could get into trouble with. Any mirrors in the ring should be covered and all openings closed. In an indoor arena, sliding doors should be closed as horses may jump out over gates.



### **The Process**

After lunging, the leader walks the horse through the exercise a time or two by hand allowing the young horse to take its time and figure out that the poles are ok to step over. At the end, the catcher feeds the horse a tidbit and they continue on. This can be repeated as many times as needed until the horse does this with confidence and ease. The whip person just quietly stands by for the moment. The Second step

is for the leader to trot the horse into the chute and encourage him to trot over the poles on his own. The whip person can help in the encouragement if needed. The catcher gives the horse a treat and catches the horse, quietly leads him to the leader and this is repeated a time or two, but as many as the horse needs to understand to move forward through the chute. The horse may hop over the first and canter out. That is ok, the goal is to make this fun, but not out of control.

After the horse trots through the chute and confidently negotiates the poles, the first set of standards is set to a cross rail approximately 12". The process is repeated 1 or 2 times and when the horse is confident the second obstacle is set to a vertical at 12"-18". The process is repeated again one or 2 times until the horse is confident and the third obstacle is set at 12"- 18" as a vertical only. After a confident run through, the back rail can be set at 18"-2'. This is usually enough for the horse's first session unless they are extremely game and/or bored. If the distance needs to be altered, only alter the distance or the height, never do both at once. Placement poles may be put in between obstacle 1 and 2 and obstacle 2 and 3 if the horse needs help in covering ground between the fences, if they are racing through at mock ten, or bouncing the exercise. The same applies to altering the height and width of the oxer. Only widen the fence, or change the height one at a time.

As an end result for the first few sessions, a pole, 9 feet to a small cross rail(2'), 18 feet to a larger vertical (2'3") followed by 19' to an ascending oxer (the distance may be lengthened out according to the horse's needs)(the height of the oxer is 2' in front and 2'6" in back and no more than 3' wide). This distance is a bit tight for the more experienced horse, but for introducing a young horse for the first few times to the chute, this works well.

If you run into trouble, and the horse stops, disassemble the chute on the catcher's side and encourage the horse to go out that end. Then try again. If there is more trouble, take a few steps back. Maybe you lower the last fence, or take it out and rebuild confidence. That is where judgment comes in.

Every horse is different. It is best to take more time and move slowly to keep it fun and build the horse's confidence than to exhaust him and make him resent the game. Some horses will only get through the poles on the ground the first session. It is important to read the horse, and to keep the number of repetitions to a minimum. We want the horse to think this is fun and have a good result. Free jumping should ideally only be done one time a week.

As the horse develops in confidence and scope, the distances and heights will need to be adjusted. At FEH Championships, there will be a distance of 9'-12' between the ground pole and obstacle 1, 18'-22.5" between obstacle 1 and 2, and 19'-25' between obstacle 2 and 3. For three-year-olds, the maximum height of the first fence is 2'7", the second is 2'9" and the last fence is only going to be 3' in front, 3'6" in back and 4' in width so keep this in mind while schooling. For four-year-olds, the maximum height of the first fence is 2'9", the second is 3'3" and the last fence has a max height of 3'7" in the front and 3'9" in the back, with a 4'3" width. There is a range of distances to accommodate different types of horses at different stages of development.