

21-Day

PROGRESSIVE POLEWORK PROGRAMME

Build Strength, Coordination & Habits



DAILY PROGRESSIVE
POLEWORK EXERCISES

@EDixonEquinePerformance

CORE PHILOSOPHY



This programme is built around one simple but powerful idea: consistency creates stronger, sounder, more confident horses.

Rather than overwhelming horse and rider with multiple exercises, this plan focuses on one polework exercise per day, allowing time for understanding, repetition and physical adaptation.

The 5 principles behind this programme are;

1. Progressive Loading
2. Simplicity Builds Habit
3. Train the Whole Horse
4. Relaxation Before Progression
5. Quality Over Quantity

Each exercise builds gently on the last. No sudden increases and no unnecessary strain.

One exercise per day means that there is no confusion, no overthinking and higher consistency. Consistency is what creates real change.

Polework improves joint flexion, core stability and proprioception. But only when done correctly and without tension.

A relaxed horse learns and a tense horse compensates. You should always see a steady rhythm and willing forward energy. You do not need long sessions, 20-40 minutes is enough when the work is correct.

NON-NEGOTIABLES



Every session (particularly ridden) should include a warm up of between 10-15 minutes of active walking in large shapes and plenty of directional changes.

They should also contain cool downs of around 5-10 minutes again in nice stretching walks on a long rein where possible.

Remember to give your horse regular breaks throughout to reduce frustration and fatigue.

Horses should be given to at least one or two rest days per week. The plan is laid out in 7 day installments, however this plan, including rest days should effectively take one month to complete.

Ensure that the horse has a well fitting saddle, bridle / bitless bridle and has no other issues that may contribute to the outcome of this programme.

When recovering, horses muscles should be kept warm where appropriate and should be provided access to turnout, fresh water and good nutrition.

If you notice that the increase in workload is proving too difficult for your horse, I recommend decreasing immediately and reviewing this at a later date. Any reluctance or unwillingness to participate should be taken at face value as communication and relevant action should be taken such as veterinary or physiotherapy intervention.

This plan is not a rehabilitation plan.

WEEK 1 RHYTHM, CONFIDENCE AND UNDERSTANDING



DAY 1 - SINGLE POLE AWARENESS

Introduce focus, straightness and calm stepping

Set Up: 1 pole on flat ground



IN-HAND

Lead the horse towards the pole in a straight line. Walk positively but calmly. Let the horse look if needed, then encourage a steady walk over the pole. Repeat several times on both reins if you are working in an arena.

RIDDEN

Ride the horse in walk on a straight approach to the pole. Keep the contact soft and the leg quietly supportive. Ride straight before, over and after the pole without changing rhythm.

This begins the horse's awareness of foot placement and introduces the idea that poles are something to step over in balance and not rush at or avoid. Don't let the horse drift. The horse should step quietly and evenly.

DAY 2 - DOUBLE POLES

Develop consistency of rhythm through more than one pole

Set Up: 2 poles on flat ground



IN-HAND

Lead the horse through both poles in walk, aiming to keep the same pace before, between and after the poles. Repeat until the horse stays relaxed and organised.

RIDDEN

Ride through in walk first. Once settled, more established horses can also try a quiet trot approach if appropriate.

The horse begins to organise its body over a sequence rather than a single object. This improves concentration and rhythm, The horse should not rush the second pole after stepping the first one. Keep the same tempo all the way through.

DAY 3 - LINE OF 3 POLES

Improve regularity and confidence through a longer line.

Set Up: Place 3 poles in a straight line at comfortable walk/trot distances.

IN-HAND

Lead through in walk several times. Keep your own body straight and forward so the horse stays organised.



RIDDEN

For novices, ride in walk. For more experienced horses, ride through in trot, focusing on keeping the horse straight and even in the contact.

Three poles encourage rhythm and regularity over multiple strides. This helps establish better stepping patterns and coordination.

The horse should not overreact to the line. Quiet, even steps are more important than impulsion.

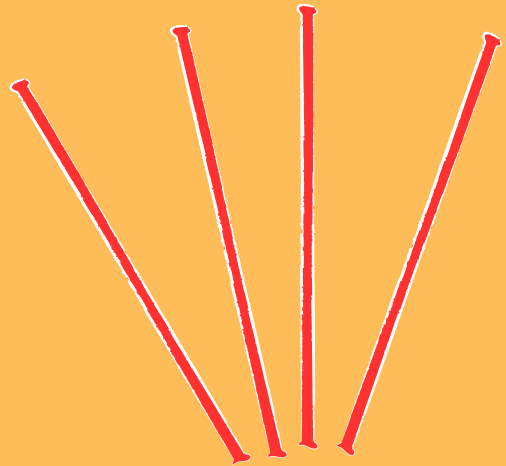
DAY 4- FAN POLES

Introduce bend and line choice.

Set Up: Arrange 4 poles in a fan shape, with one end closer together and the other end wider apart.

IN-HAND

Start by leading the horse through the widest side of the fan in walk. This keeps the exercise easier and allows the horse to understand the shape.



RIDDEN

Ride through the wider side in walk first, then trot for more established horses. Stay balanced through the turn and do not fall in with the inside shoulder.

Fan poles introduce bend, coordination and body control. The horse has to think more about where to place the feet. The horse should stay bent through the body rather than just turning the neck. Keep the exercise easy to begin with.

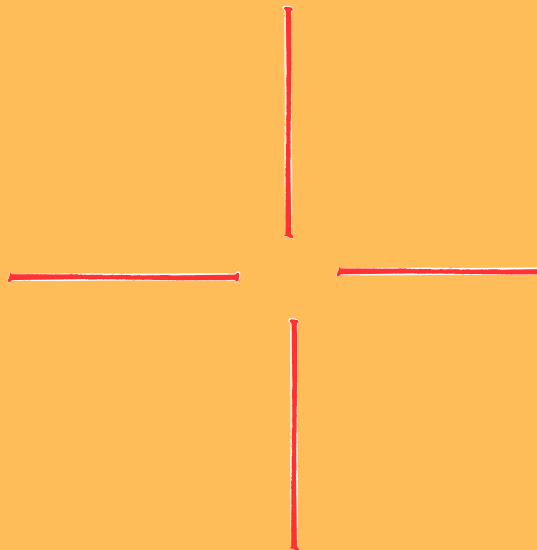
DAY 5 - CIRCLE POLES

Improve balance and rhythm on a curved line.

Set Up: Place 3 or 4 poles on a 20m circle like the numbers on a clock.

IN-HAND

Lead the horse on a circle over the poles in walk. Keep the circle size consistent and avoid pulling the horse inward.



RIDDEN

Ride the poles in walk first. More experienced horses can then try them in trot.

This develops balance on a bend, improves body control and helps the horse stay consistent in rhythm around a turning line. Maintain the shape of the circle. The horse should not fall in or drift out.

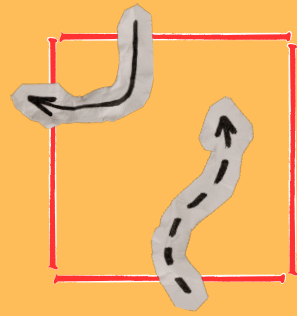
DAY 6 - POLES IN A SQUARE

Improve steering, straightness and turns.

Set Up: Place four poles in a square.

IN-HAND

Lead the horse around the outside of the square making clear turns at each corner. Then walk through the middle and around again if the horse is settled.



RIDDEN

Ride straight lines along each side of the square with deliberate turns at the corners. Later, ride through or across the square for variation.

The square layout sharpens straightness and cornering. It encourages horse and handler to think more deliberately about line and positioning.

Do not ride rounded corners unless it is your intention. The square is useful because it encourages clearer changes of direction.

DAY 7 - SERPENTINE POLE LINE

Introduce change of bend and flowing changes of direction.

Set Up: Place poles so they can be ridden or led on a serpentine style line.



IN-HAND

Walk the horse through the line, gently changing bend from one side to the other. Keep your own path smooth and planned.

RIDDEN

Ride a shallow serpentine over or between the poles in walk, then trot if the horse remains balanced.

This develops suppleness, coordination, and responsiveness to turning aids. It also encourages the horse to stay with the handler or rider through directional changes.

The horse should change bend smoothly, not just swing through the shoulders.

WEEK 2 COORDINATION AND STRENGTH



DAY 8 - RAISED SINGLE POLE

Introduce a small increase in physical demand.

Set Up: Raise one end or both ends of a single pole slightly and safely.



IN-HAND

Lead the horse in walk over the raised pole. Keep the horse calm and straight and allow time to assess the pole.

RIDDEN

Ride in walk first, then trot for more established horses.

The raised pole asks for more flexion through the joints and more effort from the shoulders and core.

The horse should lift and step, not jump or rush.

DAY 9 - DOUBLE RAISED POLES

Build strength while maintaining rhythm.

Set Up: Place two poles in a line and raise them slightly.



IN-HAND

Walk through quietly, giving the horse time to organise the body between the poles.

RIDDEN

Ride through in walk first. Trot can be added if the horse stays relaxed and strong.

This develops coordination and greater body awareness while adding a little more strength demand.

The horse must stay careful without getting tense.

DAY 10 - RAISED POLE LINE

Develop more sustained strength and concentration.

Set Up: A line of three raised poles.



IN-HAND

Lead the horse through in walk, with enough energy to keep the body organised but not enough to rush.

RIDDEN

Ride through in walk or trot depending on level.

This asks the horse to repeatedly lift, step and coordinate across a sequence. It is excellent for posture and proprioception.

The horse should stay forward but not hurried.

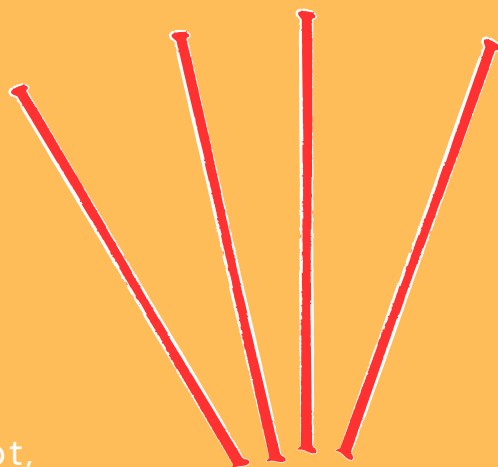
DAY 11 - NARROWER FAN POLES

Increase the coordination demand from fan poles.

Set Up: Use the same fan shape but work on a slightly narrower line than Day 4.

IN-HAND

Lead the horse through a slightly tighter curved path, still in walk.



RIDDEN

Ride through in walk or trot, holding a more accurate line.

Narrower fan poles ask for more bend, precision and coordination than the easier wide line.

Only narrow the line as much as the horse can manage without tension.

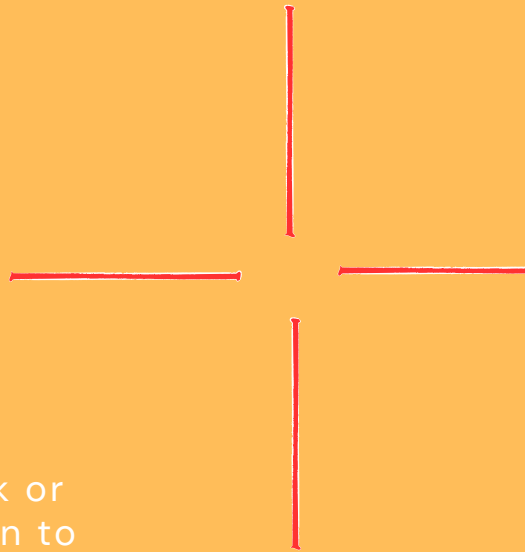
DAY 12 - CIRCLE POLES WITH TRANSITION

Combine polework with control of pace.

Set Up: Use the circle pole set up from Day 5.

IN-HAND

Walk over the poles on the circle, then halt after one of the poles. Walk on again once balanced.



RIDDEN

Ride over the poles in walk or trot, then make a transition to walk or halt after the poles.

This improves listening, balance and the horse's ability to stay organised after the effort of stepping over poles.

The transition should happen in balance, not as a collapse or abrupt stop.

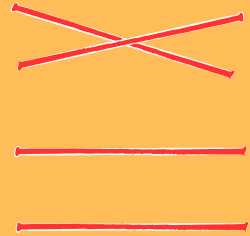
DAY 13 - GRID POLES

Improve organisation through a more structured sequence.

Set Up: Create a small grid of poles in straight lines, such as a simple boxed or channelled arrangement.

IN-HAND

Lead the horse through the line, using the poles to help create straightness and attention.



RIDDEN

Ride straight through the grid in walk or trot, keeping the horse centred.

The grid layout increases mental focus and body organisation. It is particularly useful for horses that drift or lose line.

The horse should stay in the middle of the exercise without falling onto one shoulder.

DAY 14 - POLE BOX OR SQUARE ENTRY AND EXIT

Improve accuracy and control in and out of a contained shape.

Use a square or box made of poles and ride or lead into it, through it and around it.

IN-HAND

Lead into the square, halt inside, then walk straight out.



RIDDEN

Ride into the square in walk, halt, then leave straight. More established horses may trot in and walk out.

This encourages precision, patience and straightness. It also improves the horse's confidence in working around poles without rushing away.

The horse should stay relaxed in the box and not feel trapped.

WEEK 3 CONTROL, POWER AND PATTERN WORK



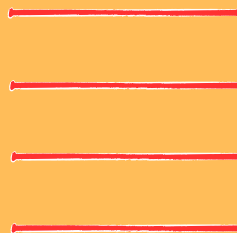
DAY 15 - TROT POLES WITH ADJUSTABILITY

Improve stride control while staying in rhythm.

Set Up: A line of trot poles.

IN-HAND

This is a less suitable in-hand unless long-lining or lunging. Otherwise use an energetic walk version.



RIDDEN

Ride the trot poles in a regular trot. Then repeat while slightly collecting before the poles and allowing forward afterwards, without changing the calm rhythm.

This helps the rider influence the trot without losing balance. It improves adjustability and connection.

Do not manufacture big changes. Small, organised adjustments are enough.

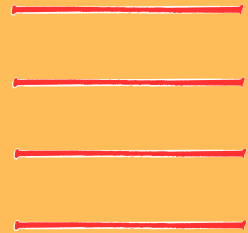
DAY 16 - CANTER POLES

Develop canter rhythm, balance and straightness.

Set Up: A line of canter poles on a straight line.

IN-HAND

For this day, use a lunge version rather than a traditional in-hand. Lunge quietly over one or more poles if the horse is experienced and settled.



RIDDEN

Canter through the poles on a straight line, focusing on even strides and quiet balance. Start with the easiest possible set up.

Canter poles improve rhythm, coordination and power in canter. They are very useful for horses that rush, flatten or lose balance.

The horse should not launch or quicken. Keep the exercise simple and only do a few quality repetitions.

DAY 17 - CIRCLE POLES IN TROT OR CANTER

Increase difficulty on a curved line.

Set Up: Return to the circle poles set up, but ask for a more advanced gait where appropriate.

IN-HAND

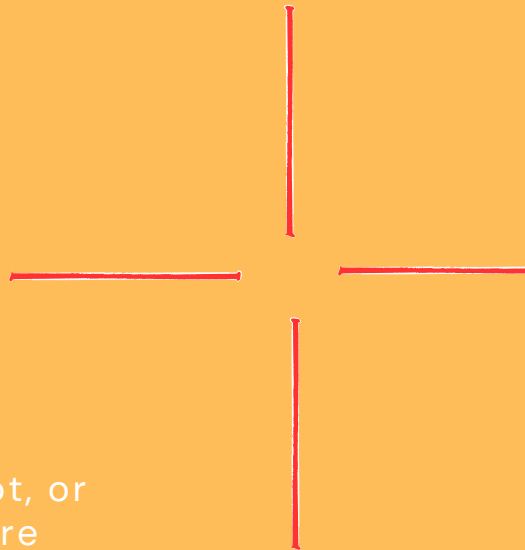
Lead in walk or use careful lunge work if appropriate for the horse.

RIDDEN

Ride the circle poles in trot, or in canter for horses that are established and balanced enough.

This develops strength, control and coordination on a curve. It is much more demanding than straight line poles.

The horse must stay balanced enough for the chosen gait. Do not push into canter if trot is not secure.



DAY 18 - SERPENTINE WITH POLES

Build full body suppleness and responsiveness.

Create a serpentine line using poles placed to guide changes of bend across the school.



IN-HAND

Lead through in walk with smooth changes of bend and clear lines.

RIDDEN

Ride the serpentine in walk and trot. Focus on accurate loops and smooth transitions between bends.

This is excellent for body control, suppleness and connection between inside and outside aids.

Each loop should be distinct but flowing. Avoid oversteering.

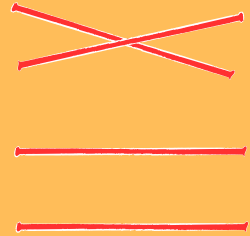
DAY 19 - GRID POLES WITH TRANSITION

Combine organisation with responsiveness.

Set Up: Create a small grid of poles in straight lines, with space afterwards for a transition.

IN-HAND

Walk through the poles and halt afterwards, aiming for a straight, balanced stop.



RIDDEN

Ride through in trot, then transition to walk or halt after the line.

This teaches the horse to stay attentive after the exercise rather than rushing away. It improves responsiveness and posture.

Do not make the transition abrupt. The horse should stay soft and connected.

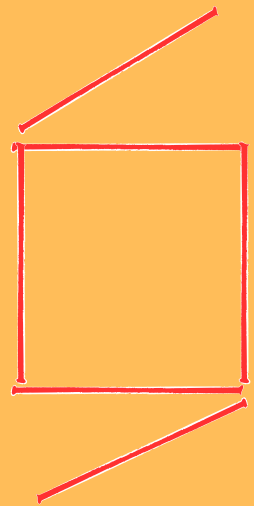
DAY 20 - MIXED LAYOUT

Combine several learned skills into one session.

Set Up: Create a small course using a straight line, a curved line and one shaped pattern such as a fan or square.

IN-HAND

Lead the horse through 2 to 3 parts of the layout in sequence, keeping the work calm and clear.



RIDDEN

Ride the small course in walk or trot depending on the horse's level.

This allows horse and handler to bring together rhythm, bend, straightness, steering and attention in one organised exercise.

Keep the course simple enough that quality is maintained. This is not about making it flashy.

DAY 21 - REVIEW DAY

Compare where you started to where you are now.

Return to a few of the simpler exercises from earlier in the programme such as;

Single poles
Double poles
Line of three poles

IN-HAND

Lead through the chosen set ups and observe how the horse now approaches, steps and balances.

RIDDEN

Ride the same exercises in walk or trot and compare to the first week.

Assessment is valuable because it shows progress in rhythm, confidence, coordination and understanding. Look for small but meaningful improvements.

CLOSING NOTES

This programme does not need to be performed perfectly to be effective.

It simply needs to be approached consistently, calmly and with attention to quality.

The best results will come from riders and handlers who:

- Keep sessions short and positive
- Repeat successful efforts rather than drilling mistakes
- Simplify when needed
- Prioritise rhythm and relaxation over difficulty

Polework is one of the most accessible and effective ways to improve a horse's strength, coordination, body awareness and understanding.

When used thoughtfully, it can benefit almost every horse.

Dont have access to jump poles?

Use wooden poles, fence posts (that are safe), wooden blocks etc.

No pole raisers?

Use anything that is not likely to damage your horse if accidentally broken. People use potty's, wooden blocks etc.

No arena?

Use an open field, yard or driveway.

