

Ride like...

AUSTIN O'CONNOR

AUSTIN HAS REPRESENTED IRELAND IN NUMEROUS INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIONS ON THE JUNIOR AND YOUNG RIDER TEAMS WHICH INCLUDED A GOLD MEDAL WIN IN THE YOUNG RIDER WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS IN 1995. HE WENT ON TO REPRESENT IRELAND AT SENIOR LEVEL SEVEN TIMES INCLUDING TWO OLYMPIC GAMES.



With the eventing season just around the corner, everyone is busy preparing their horses for competition. Designed to test the accuracy of horse and rider, narrow or 'skinny' fences are common questions on the cross country course and, particularly at higher levels, are often placed as part of a combination. These fences

can be harder for horses as they can see less, if any, of the fence in their line of vision at the point of take-off. Therefore, it's really important to practise skinny fences to build confidence and perfect technique.

Introduce skinny fences in the same way that you would ask anything new of your horse, keep the

task for them obvious and straightforward so that they can understand what you are asking of them. Where possible, incorporate them into

your horse's training and education early so that you can introduce them gradually and consistently over time. A lot of work to introduce skinny fences can be done in the school, especially for very young or green horses, you don't need to go out cross country schooling initially.



PERFECTING SKINNY FENCES

Straightness

The approach to a skinny fence is hugely influential. Riding a straight line on the approach and landing is vital; being focused on your straight line will help direct your horse to the skinny fence. Keep your hands slightly wider apart on the approach so that the horse is between both hands and both legs. It will also allow you to open the rein quickly to correct any loss of straightness. Create enough energy to give you a controlled, balanced and rhythmical approach. Using poles on the floor as tramlines (approximately 1m apart) can help you to maintain straightness.

“Don’t jump your skinny and give yourself a pat on the back! Finish the jump and maintain the straightness after the fence – staying straight after the fence is as important as staying straight before the fence,” said Austin.

Jumping a skinny fence

Start with a pole that is shorter than usual and then gradually reduce the width until jumping



something narrow such as a filler or barrels. It’s important not to introduce too much too early, so

keep the jump small whilst your horse gets used to the new style of fence. This will help them to understand the question and build their confidence. Initially for a green horse, or a rider inexperienced

with riding skinny fences, approach the fence in trot. Austin is an advocate of jumping from trot as it gives the horse a little bit more time to assess the situation and gives the rider a bit more control, plus there is less

tension. If either horse or rider are unbalanced, coming from trot will mean the partnership are much more collected. If you start doing things in canter initially it can allow the horse to get too long and unmanageable. You can use wings or poles to help focus your horse on the fence; keep these either side of your skinny until you feel your horse is very secure jumping the narrow fence. If there is any deviation or a bit of uncertainty might be setting in, drop back a level until your horse is confident at that stage. This will help to eliminate any unwanted behaviour, such as running out. The introduction stage is often the most important in creating positive experiences for horses, so that they can understand and enjoy what they do.

“Don’t get over ambitious and keep practising! Once you can happily jump a skinny without any directional aids in the school, don’t automatically assume your horse will make the connection when you ask him to jump skinny fences out cross country schooling,” said Austin. *“When you do go out, almost start over again, keeping the question clear for your horse and if you need to use poles to guide you then do!”*

Take small progressive steps, keeping it manageable and

asking the horse reasonable questions as you go along. Every step is a new task for your horse - all of the initial work in the school with the wings and poles will naturally set you up for the next steps. Once your horse is happy and confident jumping skinny single fences you can progress to adding in other fences to make combinations as you might find in competition.



Austin has fed his horses Connolly’s RED MILLS for several years and is one of their eventing brand ambassadors. He is now based at Attington Sport Horses in Oxfordshire, a state-of-the-art equestrian facility that includes gallops and an all-weather surfaced cross country schooling complex. From here Austin produces, competes and also offers training and clinics.

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