

BY NATALIE DEFEE MENDIK

PHOTOS BY SHERYL VERBITSKI PHOTOGRAPHY

MIX IT UP: cavalletti style

Looking for improved rhythm, regularity, balance, stride adjustability, and stretch over the topline, all on a mount interested in his work? Who isn't?

For all this and more, simple cavalletti exercises may just be your winning ticket. First developed by Italian cavalry officer Federico Caprilli in the late 1800s, the use of cavalletti (Italian for "little horses") to athletically develop the horse has certainly stood the test of time.

The Basics

In a nutshell, cavalletti exercises utilize poles—ground-level or raised, evenly spaced, on a straight line or curved line—to gymnastically develop the horse's athleticism. Cavalletti generally come in three forms: plastic blocks on which the poles rest in a cupped groove, the classic arrangement of poles attached to an "X" frame, and a newer type with square ends. All are adjustable at three different heights: ground level, slightly elevated, and the most elevated, usually at about 12".

In a pinch, you can use jumping poles on the ground; the drawbacks to this arrangement are that the poles can present a hazard by rolling if the horse touches them, and it's not possible to set them with elevated height.

Bang for Your Buck

Adding cavalletti work to your schooling agenda offers both physical and mental benefits. As the horse negotiates the poles, he engages the hindquarters, bends the joints, and shows a greater range of motion. The horse also lowers his head and neck, raising his back and using his abdominal

muscles. This lengthens and strengthens the horse's topline, bringing lift and swing through the back, which is particularly useful for horses with tight backs. The spacing of the poles improves rhythm and cadence. These effects work together to develop the horse's natural gaits.

Mentally, using cavallettis makes the work more interesting. Including cavalletti is a great way to add variety and give the horse something to think about. It trains the horse's mind and makes him think 'Where am I going to put my legs? Where am I going to step?' This is useful for both smart horses that need mental stimulation, and horses that are easily distracted.

Start it Simple

Before beginning any cavalletti sessions, warm up with your normal routine. For horses starting cavalletti work from scratch, simply walk the horse over one cavalletti on the lowest height. Warm up over this single pole on a loose rein if possible, approaching straight and centered in a relaxed, rhythmic walk. Once the horse is comfortable with the single ground rail at the walk, move on to a rising trot over the rail. From there you can begin to ride single poles placed throughout the arena, first at

Cavalletti work encourages the horse to step under himself more and also improves rhythm, balance, and stretch over the topline.



the walk and then at the rising trot.

For riders with a jumping background, the technique to riding cavalletti will feel like old hat: approach straight, maintain rhythm, ride to center, and keep your eyes up. Horses new to the game may make a larger effort than necessary; just quietly ride what they give you.

The key to all cavalletti work is that the horse stay relaxed, working with a low neck and rhythmic gait. Approach this simple exercise in an easy-going, playful way.

Moving On

Once the horse has the hang of individual poles, the real fun begins with cavalletti set in sequence. Like the single-pole exercise, poles in a series should be ridden with rhythm and relaxation. A good starter exercise begins with a series of two, and then three, and then four low cavalletti poles positioned along the wall.

Spacing for sequential poles varies by gait, length of stride, and height of cavalletti, but a good rule of thumb for distances between ground-level poles would be about 2'7" to 3' at the walk and 4' to 4'5" at the trot. With a bit of pole

adjustment, you'll find just the right distance for your horse. You can also start him with a "double distance" spacing, meaning you'll set the distance so he takes two trot strides between each pole.

First negotiate the ground-level line at the walk, just like you rode the single poles. Once the horse is comfortable, move on to the trot, establishing a good working trot before approaching the line. Ride this exercise several times until your horse has mastered the series with a round, swinging back and clear tempo.

Over time, you can add more simple challenges that still shouldn't overtax your horse:

- Add more cavalletti into the sequence—up to four.
- Gradually introduce short periods of sitting trot if your horse is strong enough to carry your weight while making the extra effort to lift his back as he negotiates the rails.
- Raise the cavalletti to the first elevated position in the trot, not the walk.
- Increase or decrease spacing a bit between the poles to encourage a longer stride or a more collected stride.


- Ride bending lines with cavalletti set on a circle; normal distances are in the center of the poles, with shorter distances to the inside of the circle and larger distances to the outside.

Rider's Role

As a rider, you'll want to be sure you are following the horse and allowing the bigger movement. This means you'll need a strong core that can absorb the bigger stride along with quiet hands that don't interfere. Be sure to ride the cavalletti straight, as deviating from the line throws your distances off.

Get Going!

Western or English, dressage or jumping, green or advanced, incorporating basic cavalletti exercises into your regular schooling provides physical development, mental stimulation, and training benefits. The genius of cavalletti is that the horse's movement becomes rhythmic and elastic without rider intervention. This gymnastic training makes the horse stronger and more consistent as he learns to use his body to

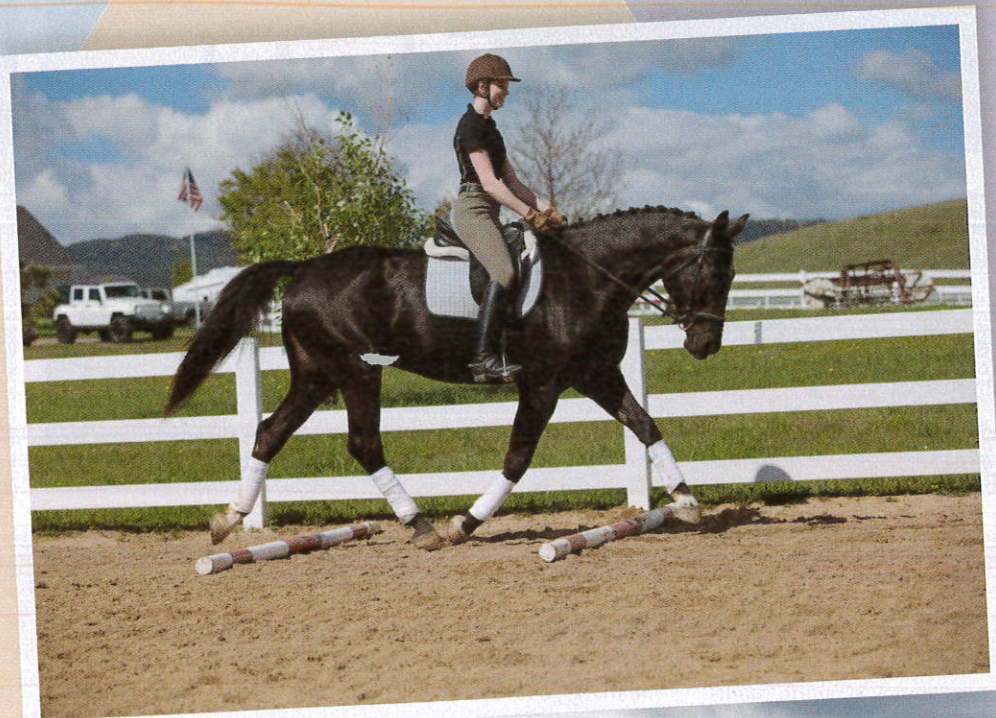
a greater degree. So go on, mix it up—cavalletti style! 

NATALIE DEFEE MENDIK is an award-winning journalist specializing in equine media. Visit her online at MendikMedia.com. The rider and horse in the photos are Veronica Brennan and El Capitan, a seven-year-old Hanoverian owned by Debbie Scripture.

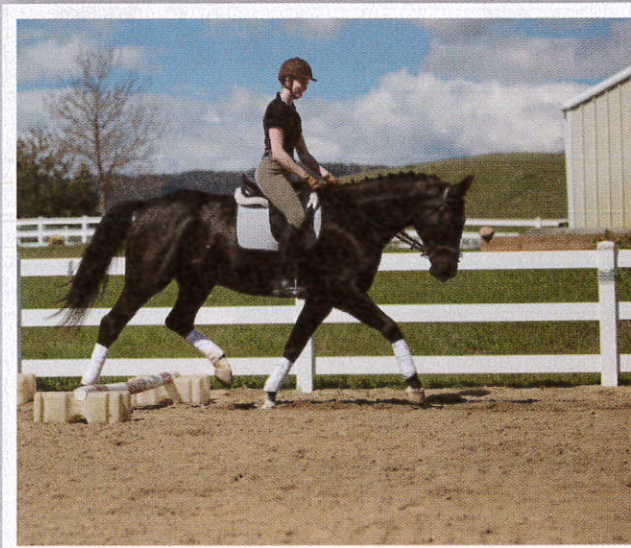
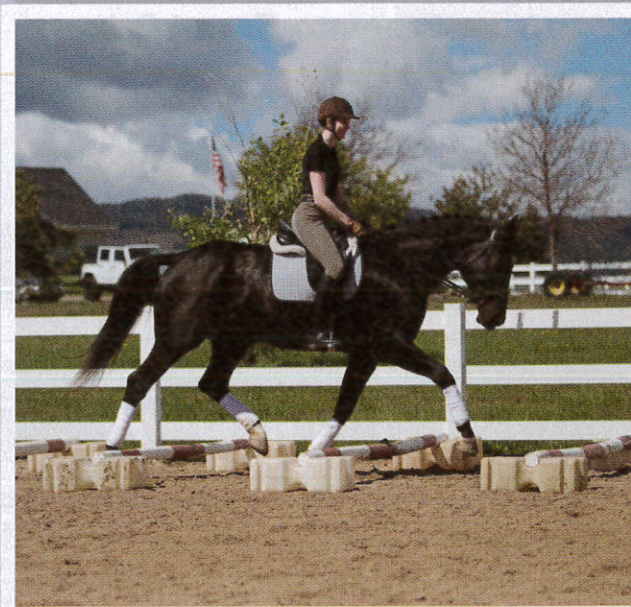
THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE TRADITION

A recent study conducted at Michigan State University concluded that horses working at walk and trot over poles demonstrated greater joint flexion, thereby improving range of motion, without adding stress to soft tissues.

Once your horse is comfortable walking and trotting over a single cavalletti, you can begin to introduce a sequence of them, first at the walk and then the trot, making sure your horse is relaxed and attentive throughout the exercise.



Cavalletti can be set at a double-distance so the horse has to take two strides between each pole.



In the photos above, the horse is showing a relaxed, confident, straight approach to the line, in front of the rider's leg. The rider is light as the horse learns to work over his back.

THE EXPERT TALKS

Like her late father, the legendary Reiner Klimke, Ingrid Klimke is known throughout the dressage and eventing worlds as a rider who has mastered it all, including the use of cavalletti in horse training, which the pair has outlined in great detail in their comprehensive book on the subject, *Cavalletti*. Originally published by Reiner nearly five decades ago, *Cavalletti* has been continuously revised: first as *Cavalletti: The Schooling of Horse and Rider over Ground Poles* (1969, 1985, 1999, 2008), then as *Cavalletti: For Dressage and Jumping* (2014), as well as Ingrid's *Success Through Cavalletti* DVDs. Always relevant, these are the timeless go-to resources for horses and riders of all levels and disciplines to incorporate cavalletti in their training.

Equine Journal caught up with Ingrid Klimke, who took time out of her busy training schedule to share her thoughts for riders interested in schooling with cavalletti.

Equine Journal: How is integrating cavalletti into your schooling beneficial to your horse?

Klimke: You improve balance, cadence, muscles, strength, and motivation. Fun for each horse, and for each rider a must!

EJ: What advice do you have for riders who are starting cavalletti work with their horses?

Klimke: Start with one cavalletti in a walk on the straight line. You can also have a schoolmaster in front. You yourself need to know the theory and the distances before you ask your horse to understand it. See the book or the DVD to get more information.