

# Keep Calm And Canter On!

## Five Tips For Nailing Your Next Catch-Ride

By **Jay Duke**  
Photo Courtesy Of **Jay Duke**



“Catch riding was always my favorite thing to do because I had total freedom with no preconceptions to get in the way,” says Jay Duke.

While I understand and appreciate how one great horse can spur on a career and shape a rider, the lessons we learn from catch riding certainly have merits. Most riders find climbing onto a horse they’ve never laid eyes on and cantering off to the first fence equal parts exhilarating and intimidating. In an effort to mitigate the intimidation factor, here are five tips to help you nail your next catch-ride.

### 1. KNOW YOUR TACK.

I teach clinics throughout North America, and I always ask each rider to name the bit they’re using and explain why they made that choice. After frantic looks toward

**E**arlier this year, I attended my first Intercollegiate Horse Shows Association National Championship in Syracuse, New York. Growing up with a show jumping trainer as a mother and a Canadian Rodeo Hall of Fame inductee as a father, I’ve spent my life around horse shows, but this was my first introduction to the IHSA system. Not only was I impressed with the concept—I have two daughters, and one has collegiate equestrian aspirations—but I also enjoyed witnessing how the “catch-ride” philosophy builds solid riders.

their trainers, only a small fraction of riders are able to answer that question.

Before getting on an unfamiliar horse, take note of the tack choices that have been made by the people who know it best. Does the horse go in a martingale? Is there a curb chain you need to be aware of when picking up contact? What type of bit is the horse going in—mild or strong? The answers to all these questions will help to identify if you have a hot or cold mount, so you’re prepared before you even swing a leg over.

This is the obvious time to make sure everything is adjusted and fits properly. To avoid any embarrassing moments, use this time to adjust your stirrups and check your girth. Don't dismiss it—it happens more than you think!

## 2. ASK QUESTIONS.

Think smarter so you don't have to work harder. Use the horse's connections as a resource, and ask questions before you even get in the tack.

I suggest:

- Does the horse peek at jumps or any particular fill?
- Does the horse tend to land predominantly on the left or right lead? How are its lead changes?
- Does the horse tend to drift in the turns or before the jump?
- Does the horse have any characteristic quirks or spooks?

## 3. MAKE EVERY SECOND COUNT.

In the IHSA system, catch-rides don't include the luxury of a warm-up. Horses are warmed up by a different rider, and your job is to get on and compete. While the horse may be supple and ready to jump, your first circle and the strides before the jump are valuable. Don't just be a passenger!

- a. Check your brakes and accelerator: Use the first moments on a new horse to accomplish as many transitions as possible. Judge the horse's responsiveness to your legs, the bit and your hand, and adjust accordingly. Does light pressure get the job done? Then don't overdo it on course. Are you getting run away with? Adjust your seat and hand to be stronger. You don't want to get on course and lack impulsion or be sitting on a runaway train.
- b. Learn your horse's stride: Before jumping into a line, you want to know what kind of stride length to expect. Lengthen and shorten the canter to get a feel, then pick a guide point in the ring and test your eye. Make it a banner on the wall, or a spot in the footing, and practice seeing a distance to it to judge the horse's stride. But remember, you only have a few strides to get this all accomplished, so work efficiently.
- c. Canter on. A good canter makes for a good jump. Don't let the above-mentioned intimidation factor destroy the most important element of a good round: rhythm and pace. Establishing a forward,

rhythmic canter will give you the momentum you need to find the correct first distance, as well as the balance required to land and ride to the next fence. If the options are a good canter to a bad distance or a bad canter to a good distance, choose the first!

## 4. UTILIZE THE WARM-UP RING.

Catch riding is common even outside the IHSA. The difference, however, is traditional catch-riders have a warm-up on their side. To those riders, I would say, "Don't underestimate flatwork." Use your time in the warm-up before the first jump to take a crash (please, not literally) course on your mount. While you have more time, use the same guidelines recommended for an IHSA rider:

- a. How does this horse react to my leg?
- b. Are my brakes working?
- c. Do I have a lead change in both directions?
- d. How adjustable is this horse?

Once you answer those questions, I recommended jumping a very small line set at an easy three or four strides if space permits. Start low and raise the fences as you both warm up, paying close attention to every aspect of the horse's style, stride, approach, landing and turns.

## 5. DO RIGHT BY YOUR HORSE!

My final tip is to remind you that your job is to ensure every effort that a horse makes is a better jump than the previous. If you take the time to soak in as much information about your mount as possible, you're armed with the tools you need to ride the horse well. Our job as riders is to train ourselves, not our horses, and the better we ride, the better they will perform.

But don't overthink it. Ride on feel and instinct; be open to the signals the horse is giving you. Catch riding was always my favorite thing to do because I had total freedom with no preconceptions to get in the way. There is only the horse and you, and there is no better feeling in the world.

*Jake Duke is a show jumping trainer, course designer, clinician and Canadian Equestrian Team veteran. Duke retired from competition in 2014 to put his extensive background training riders and horses of all levels to work as a clinician. Duke is also a popular course designer, holding his senior status with Equestrian Canada. For more information about Jay Duke, his clinics, and course design availability, visit [jayduke.com](http://jayduke.com).* 📍