

DAN BIZZARRO



METHOD

# THE EVENTER'S WARM-UP SYSTEM

---

A simple, reliable warm-up routine for  
Dressage, Show Jumping, and Cross-Country

**By Dan Bizzarro**

International Event Rider & Coach

<https://danbizzarromethod.com>

# 1. INTRODUCTION

---

Warming up shouldn't feel chaotic. Yet for most riders, it does. Busy arenas, tight timings, nerves, and a horse who may feel nothing like the one you had yesterday.

This guide gives you a system you can repeat every time you compete. It keeps things simple, practical, and effective - even when you're stressed or short on time.

**Everything in here is built around one main idea:**

**Transitions are the engine of a good warm-up.  
Done often and done lightly, they change your horse  
more quickly than circles or drilling tests.**

If you only changed one habit in your warm-up, let it be this:

**More transitions, spread throughout the whole routine.**

## 2. HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

---

Use this guide on competition day as a clear plan you can follow step-by-step.

### You'll find:

- 1 A repeatable structure for each discipline
- 2 Simple explanations for why it works
- 3 Quick fixes for common problems
- 4 A printable one-page summary
- 5 The core Dan Bizarro Method principles woven throughout

### THE GOLDEN RULE

**If in doubt, do a transition.**

**If it feels wrong, do a transition.**

**If it feels right - reward, breathe, carry on.**

### 3. WARM-UP PRINCIPLES

---

1

#### **Keep everything repeatable**

Your horse should recognise the structure. It creates confidence.

2

#### **Create a soft neck first**

A relaxed neck gives you access to the shoulders, back, and hind legs.

3

#### **Don't chase a shape**

Let rhythm and relaxation give you the outline - not pulling or forcing.

4

#### **Use transitions early and often**

They're the quickest way to build balance, connection, and focus.

5

#### **Don't over-school before competing**

You're preparing the body and brain, not re-training.

6

#### **End on a good note**

Finish with softness, straightness, and one clear positive feeling.

## 4. WHY TRANSITIONS MATTER

---

Most riders know transitions are important, but very few actually use them enough - especially when warming up. Here's what transitions give you:

- Balance without tension
- Engagement without speed
- More control in busy warm-up rings
- A quick way to soften the back and neck
- Better straightness instantly
- A more adjustable canter for jumping
- A focused mind for spooky or sharp horses
- A better connection with fewer aids

**Transitions are the quickest, kindest,  
and most effective tool you have.**

# 5. WARM-UP OVERVIEW

Phase	Dressage	Show Jumping	Cross-Country
Walk	8-12 mins	5 mins	5-10 mins
Trot	8-10 mins	5 mins	5 mins
Canter	5-7 mins	5-7 mins	7-10 mins
Specific	10 mins	10-15 mins	10-12 mins
Final prep	2-3 mins	2-3 mins	2-3 mins

Transitions are woven into every phase, not just at the end. Use them to check balance, wake the hind legs, or settle the brain.

## 6. DRESSAGE WARM-UP

### Goal

Soft neck - Rhythm and relaxation - Straightness - Horse in front of the leg - Rider breathing and centred

#### STEP 1

#### Walk (8-12 minutes)

- Free walk to begin
- Big bending lines
- A few steps of leg yield each way
- 3-4 walk-halt-walk transitions
- One or two rein-back then walk on

*Purpose: establish boundaries, softness, and a calm rhythm.*

#### STEP 2

#### Trot (8-10 minutes)

- Large circles
- Serpentine
- Frequent changes of rein
- Trot-walk-trot every 6-8 strides
- A few 3-second releases

*Let the trot find its own swing before you organise anything.*

## 6. DRESSAGE WARM-UP

---

### STEP 3

#### Canter (5-7 minutes)

- Canter-trot-canter transitions
- Gear changes: go forward, bring back, soften
- One 20m circle each way

*Think: adjustable, soft, breathing.*

### STEP 4

#### Specific Work (10 minutes)

- Transitions every few strides to keep balance
- 20m circles
- A few steps of leg yield
- A couple of lengthened strides
- Tighten the edges of the connection

**Rule: Never ride a movement until the transition before it feels good.**

### STEP 5

#### Pre-Ring Routine (2-3 minutes)

- One upward, one downward transition
- Stretch the neck down
- Straighten on a long side
- Walk towards the ring calm and organised



## 6. DRESSAGE WARM-UP

---

### QUICK FIXES

Tension: 20m circles + trot-walk-trot transitions

Behind the leg: quick upward transitions

Leaning or heavy: upward transition then release

Hollow: bigger lines + soft neck + transitions

## 7. SHOW JUMPING WARM-UP

### Goal

Adjustability - Balance before and after fences - Straightness - A canter you can ride forward or bring back

### Why Transitions Matter in SJ - They create:

- ▶ The canter you jump from
- ▶ Control in a busy warm-up
- ▶ Softness without losing power
- ▶ Straightness without fighting
- ▶ A "thinking" horse rather than a reactive one

#### STEP 1

#### Walk (5 minutes)

- A few walk-halt-walk transitions
- One or two rein-back then walk on
- Gentle bending

#### STEP 2

#### Trot (5 minutes)

- Figure-of-eights
- Trot-walk-trot every 6-8 strides
- Softening the neck

## 7. SHOW JUMPING WARM-UP

---

### STEP 3

#### Canter (5-7 minutes)

- Canter-trot-canter transitions
- Gear changes: "wait" 3-4 strides then "go" 3-4 strides
- Straight lines with a soft neck
- Keep hands soft after each transition

*This is the most important part before fences.*

**No horse should jump until you have had  
three good transitions in a row.**

### STEP 4

#### Jump Warm-Up (10-12 minutes)

- Crosspole twice
- Upright small, then mid-height
- Oxer small, then at competition height
- Optional: 1-2 bigger for confidence

**After every jump: Land, wait, straighten, ride away. This is the Dan Bizzarro Method - balance before and after the fence.**

## 8. CROSS-COUNTRY WARM-UP

### Goal

Controlled engine - A soft, long neck for balance - A "thinking" canter - Confidence at the first fence

### Why Transitions Matter Even More in XC:

Because XC creates more adrenaline, more forward desire, and more need for adjustability and a balanced gallop.

**Transitions give you access to the hind legs without killing forward.**

#### STEP 1

#### Walk (5-10 minutes)

- Long rein
- Let the horse look
- Walk-halt-walk
- A few steps of leg yield

#### STEP 2

#### Trot (5 minutes)

- Rising trot
- One or two trot-walk-trot transitions
- Keep it loose and swinging

## 8. CROSS-COUNTRY WARM-UP

---

### STEP 3

#### Canter (7-10 minutes)

- Forward canter, then transition down, then forward again
- Canter-trot-canter
- One decent gallop stretch
- Bring back, soften, breathe, repeat

*You're searching for adjustability, not exhaustion.*

**This is where your XC ride is made.**

### STEP 4

#### Jump Warm-Up (10-12 minutes)

- Small fence (maybe twice)
- Medium fence
- One at competition height
- Land, wait, straighten, ride away

**Before you start XC, ask yourself:**

**"Can I ask my horse to let the fence come to me?"**

**"Can we jump the fence exactly how I want to?"**

**If the answers are yes and yes - you are ready!**

# 9. TROUBLESHOOTING

---

Common Warm-Up Problems and Fixes:

## Horse is tense or spooky

Bigger lines, more transitions, longer walk phase. Avoid corrections - use redirection.

## Horse is behind the leg

Quick upward transitions, then soften. Walk-trot-walk-trot until sharp.

## Horse is rushing or strong

Down transitions every few strides. Canter-trot-canter. Keep your body soft.

## Horse won't connect

Soft neck first. Transitions to the hand, not pulling.

## Rider is stressed

Breathe out. Simplify the plan. Focus on one good transition.

## Short on time

Transitions from walk, straight to canter work. Skip trot if needed.

**Every warm-up is different. Trust the structure - but stay flexible with the details.**

# 10. ONE-PAGE SUMMARY

*Print this page and keep it in your lorry.*

## DRESSAGE

Walk (8-12 min): Free walk > leg yield > walk-halt-walk

Trot (8-10 min): Large circles > serpentines > trot-walk-trot

Canter (5-7 min): Canter-trot-canter > gear changes

Specific (10 min): Transitions > 20m circles > lengthen

Final (2-3 min): One up, one down > stretch > straighten

## SHOW JUMPING

Walk (5 min): Walk-halt-walk > rein-back

Trot (5 min): Figure-of-eights > trot-walk-trot

Canter (5-7 min): Canter-trot-canter > gear changes

Jumps (10-15 min): Crosspole > upright > oxer > height

Key: Land > wait > straight > ride away

## CROSS-COUNTRY

Walk (5-10 min): Long rein > walk-halt-walk

Trot (5 min): Rising trot > trot-walk-trot

Canter (7-10 min): Forward > back > gallop > collect

Jumps (10-12 min): Small > medium > height

Test: Can horse let fence come to me? Jump how I want? Yes + Yes = Ready!

# FINAL THOUGHTS

---

A good warm-up isn't about making the horse perfect - it's about making the horse ready.

If you can leave the warm-up ring with a horse that is:

- Soft in the neck
- Listening to the leg
- Balanced in the transitions
- And still breathing...

**...then you've done your job.**

Good luck, ride well, and trust your training.

## Dan Bizzarro

International Event Rider & Coach

<https://danbizzarromethod.com>

### Ready for More?

Book a clinic or private lesson to work on your warm-up in person.

Visit: <https://danbizzarromethod.com/coaching>