

## WHAT IS A POCKET?

Everyone will tell you to put your horse in the pocket of a turn. What is the pocket? Where is this pocket? Is it the same every time? Lots of questions that all make a big difference in a Gymkhana event.

The “Pocket” is different for every event and every horse and rider. That alone makes it hard to understand and learn. The pocket in a barrel race is where you and your horse make the fastest turn on each barrel.

The tightest turn can be your worst enemy. The tight turn will surely slow your horse down. The trick is to make the turn as tight as possible, losing the least speed you can, and not tipping over a barrel. This could mean coming in wide and leaving tight. Or it could mean just the opposite. The best turn carries speed.

To teach a horse a pocket, always ride the turn wide. Don't go excessively wide, just wide enough that the horse gets used to coming in wide to make your turn. In competition, you will come into the turn faster, and then as you turn and the horse leans in a little tighter, you will have room to work a fast turn without tipping a barrel or pole.

The pocket for each event is different. The pocket for barrels is tight with one in one direction and two in another. Your horse needs to learn when and where to set up for these turns. This is called rating a turn. Remember a horse has to slow down for the tightness of the turn. Where do you want to do that? It is your job to teach your horse how to rate a barrel and then cue for it in competition. Once again it will depend on the horse and rider as to where and when. Normally about 1 or 2 strides from the barrel, you will want to cue your horse verbally, using a body shift, or picking up hard on the rein, probably a combination of these.

The pocket for pole bending needs to set you up to be able to come in close to the end pole and start weaving quickly. The pocket on the timer end needs to be very tight. The pocket coming off the last pole can come out a little wide to pick up the speed needed for the home stretch.

Is there a pocket for the flag race? I think there is. Watch the horses that work that pattern tightly. They are working hard to make a very tight turn on the point barrel. The proper pocket would let your horse carry speed through a wider more natural arc around the point barrel and back close to the last barrel and bucket. That arc will differ again with each horse and rider.

The simple Plug Race has only one barrel. Is your horse capable of going directly to the barrel, turning it, and getting back quickly. That takes an excellent turn and excellent acceleration off of the barrel coming back. A wider pocket will allow your horse to carry the speed through the turn and back across the timer. Again each horse and rider are different and will have to set the pocket for themselves.

Each horse will turn differently. Teach your horse to bend properly and comfortably. You should be able to pick up a rein and have your horse follow the rein around easily in both directions at a walk, trot and canter. Then when you ask with that rein at top speed the horse will follow with ease.

If you know where your pocket should be for your horse, and it has been trained to bend properly, then the rest is up to you. **Look at where you are going.** If you are looking at your pocket, you can ride the pocket. If you are looking at a barrel, or pole, you will ride over that barrel or pole. When your horse is having trouble with a turn, or fighting for any reason on a turn, **Look Where You Want To Go.** Don't just use your eyes, turn your shoulders in the direction that you want to go. If you could see this work just once on a video, you would be a firm believer.

# TRAINING FOR GYMKHANA

Gymkhana is a name for games on horseback. There are many forms of these games. I personally have put together a book of 58 games that I have either participated in or announced over in my career. Gymkhana is an excellent example of horse and rider working together on concise patterns at top speed. The basics of gymkhana are training for turning, stopping, and starting.

To excel at gymkhana, you and your horse must be a team. I have always taught that if you can't ride a pleasure class for 15 minutes, you will not do well on a gymkhana pattern for 15 to 30 seconds. Your horse has to know how to flex and turn; rate speed coming into turns, and stretch out in between. For a good horse to do all of this, it needs to also know and trust you. That means you need to know how to do all of this so that you can help the horse through the pattern. There are very few passengers on gymkhana horses.

First I am going to talk about riders. Do you know how to cue your horse? Do you know how to help your horse through a turn? Where should you be in the saddle at any certain time? Lets talk about that.

Balance is the biggest thing that I work on when teaching a rider, and training a horse. With your horse on a lunge line, you should be able to sit in the saddle with your arms straight out to the side, and your legs lifted as far forward as possible. Sounds easy until I tell you that you should do it at a full gallop. If you do this, start at a slow jog and work your way up as you get comfortable. It will teach you how to sit down. With your arms and legs out like this your bottom is where it should be. It is down and following the horse. Now that we have you balanced, your hands are free to use. You should use both hands to help the horse on every turn. One should direct rein, the other should neck rein. Your legs are now free to cue properly. These will also help the horse move its body around the turn.

As you ride, look where you are going. This sounds sort of silly to say, but watch and see how many people are looking down at the horse. As you turn your head and shoulders to look where you are going, your spine turns. When your spine turns, your hips give and follow; this helps bring your legs along with the turn. Now you have your whole body working to help the horse and it can feel everything that you do.

Training the horse for gymkhana can be a lot of fun. A good gymkhana horse can flex its body while maintaining speed. Think about trying to ride a plank around a barrel. It doesn't turn unless the whole board moves sideways. You need to train your horse to flex. The horse should be able, while standing still, to turn its head and touch your boots. This is a good flexing exercise to use every time you ride.

To teach your horse to turn properly, start by getting it to work in a circle at a jog. Keep direct pressure on the horse's head so that it follows its head. Be sure to use any cues that you will always use to turn this direction at all times during this exercise. Start with nice wide circles where the horse is comfortable. Keep circling in until you feel the horse getting uncomfortable. Hold that size circle for 4 or 5 laps. Then let the circle get slowly bigger again until you are back where you started. This needs to be done in both directions. As you progress, you will be surprised at how small you and your horse can make these circles. You need to step this up to a lope when your horse is comfortable at a jog. While you are circling, your horse will learn that it can carry your weight and keep going without problems. It will learn how you ask, and how you sit for a turn. Now when you come into a barrel at a gallop, the horse will only slow down enough to make a comfortable turn. If it is flexing and you are on top helping, there will be a good amount of speed to work with.

Does your horse have a good stop to it? This is also important to gymkhana. Without brakes how do you control speed? A wide-open horse cannot rate itself for a turn. To get a good stop on your horse start at a walk. Every time you stop, back up 3 steps. Do the same thing at a jog, and eventually at a lope. Your horse will start to learn a new set of cues from you. How are you sitting when asking for a stop? This will be part of the cue you will use when slowing for a turn in a pattern. Some patterns require that you stop and stay in one place. Learning how to stop your horse is as important as anything else.

Teach your horse to rate a turn. In other words change your rate of speed. If you are in control you need to slow down for the turn. As you approach a turn you let your horse know that this is what you will want. You and the horse need to rate the turn. This will be at a different spot for every horse, but usually it is about 2 strides from the turn.

Do not over practice on patterns. Your horse will learn the patterns very easily. If you want the horse to enjoy running the patterns, only work on them 3 to 5 times a night on a beginning horse. A more finished horse should see the patterns as little as 2 times a week. Think of it this way. If you had to go out on a weekend and do what you do at work, what fun is it.

How much do you enjoy doing the same thing over and over again? We can train the horse to do what we need doing other things. Go out on a trail, and make a turn on a tree, bush, or weed. Work cattle, this gives the horse a reason to turn, stop and go again. Keep it fun for the horse. You will learn more about how to sit a new horse on a trail, than you will in an arena. Then when you get to the arena, you and the horse are a team. You know how the horse will work, and it knows what you are asking.

