



DAN BIZZARRO
METHOD

THE COMPETITION WARM-UP SYSTEM

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

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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
- Use a lot of 20m circles, as well as straight lines

Think: adjustable, soft, breathing.

STEP 4

Practice Your Test Movements (10 minutes)

- Transitions every few strides to keep the balance
- Lots of 20m circles and 20m squares
- A few steps of leg yield in both directions
- Play with lengthening and shortening of strides in trot and canter

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

STEP 5

Pre-Ring Routine (2-3 minutes)

- Keep doing transitions whilst going around the arena
- Keep playing with lateral movements, leg yielding in particular
- If horse is distracted, let them look at the judge's box or flowers
- After the bell rings, you still have 45 seconds to go in

6. DRESSAGE WARM-UP

QUICK FIXES

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

Behind the leg: quick upward transitions

Leaning or heavy: lots of holds; from trot, a few steps of rein back

Hollow: lots of smaller circles, serpentines and 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
- Work on bending your horse's neck both directions

STEP 2

Trot (5 minutes)

- Figure-of-eights
- Trot-walk-trot transitions every 6-8 strides
- Transitions within the trot - forward and back every 6-8 strides

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)

- Upright small
- Mid height with a good ground line from both reins
- Oxer: small, then 3-4 holes bigger behind (almost a square oxer)
- Last couple of fences at competition height

After every jump: Land, wait, straighten, ride away. This is the Dan Bizarro 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 speed without losing control.

STEP 1

Walk (5-10 minutes)

- Long reins if your horse is relaxed
- If excited or spooky: short reins, circles and lots of transitions
- Lots of trot-walk-trot + changes of direction to keep horse loose
- Practice straight lines and circles for competition turns
- Ask for a bigger trot and a smaller trot

STEP 2

Trot (5 minutes)

- Rising trot
- Lots of trot-walk-trot transitions
- Keep it loose and swinging

8. CROSS-COUNTRY WARM-UP

STEP 3

Canter (7-10 minutes)

- Canter, trot-canter, canter in a circle
- When canter feels good: ride it forward 4 secs, then bring it back
- Do a couple of decent gallop stretches
- Goal: go in and out of forward canter without losing rideability

You're searching for adjustability, not exhaustion.

This is where your XC ride is made.

STEP 4

Jump Warm-Up (10-12 minutes)

- Focus on jumping the centre of every fence from the very start
- Small fence (maybe twice)
- Medium fence
- One at competition height
- Practice a couple of fences on an angle or as a skinny/corner

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

Lots of transitions, smaller circles and serpentines. Give the horse lots of simple questions.

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: trot-walk-trot or trot-hold-trot until more relaxed.

Horse won't connect

Soften neck with lots of small circles, then trot-walk-trot and transitions within the trot.

Rider is stressed

Focus on breathing. Stay in a circle: short timed transitions walk-trot, then trot-canter.

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.

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