



# A Guide to Your First Event

## Part I: Preparation

By Amber Heintzberger

**So** you're the latest victim bitten by the eventing bug. Maybe you watched the riveting competition of the Olympics on TV, or were lucky enough to see top horses and riders in action at an event like Rolex Kentucky. Or maybe you've got friends competing at novice level and are ready to move up from being a member of their pit crew to becoming a competitor in your own right. However you've gotten here, you've decided it's time to get in on the action. Have you spent hours memorizing and mastering your dressage test? Are your fingers developing calluses from honing your braiding skills? Have you overcome your anxiety when it comes to galloping across a field at obstacles that don't fall down, and cantered countless practice show jumping rounds? Then maybe you are ready to enter your first event.

### Test the Waters

Spending time at events and around event riders will help you understand what you are getting yourself into. Competing in your first horse trials can be overwhelming, and having some experience with how things work helps in preparing for the challenge.

First and foremost, get as much qualified professional guidance as you can. One place to check for an instructor in your area is the USEA website ([www.useventing.com](http://www.useventing.com)), which lists all instructors certified by the USEA's Instructors' Certification Program. Just click on the Education and Instruction tab on the left menu bar of the home page.

Word of mouth is also very effective. Ask around to see which instructors in your area have developed good reputations, and if possible, meet with them and observe some lessons to see if you think you'll make a good fit.



Eventers are very independent minded folks, which is part of what draws us to the sport, but it is very important that you find someone to work with, even if all your budget can cover is an occasional clinic or camp. You need qualified eyes on the ground to help you assess where you and your horse are in your development. This person can help you decide when you're ready to make your competition debut.

Katie Rocco, 46, of Sandisfield, Massachusetts, is a Level II certified instructor with the USEA, and an "L" judge with the USDF. She has competed to FEI level dressage, evented to the preliminary level, and shown in hunt-

Above: Students watch the action at a local event, preparing for the day when they'll make their competition debut. Previous page: Helping a friend groom at an event is a valuable experience before you compete yourself.

ers, jumpers, and equitation. She and her husband, Doug, a professional race car driver, own and operate Dragonfly Farm where Katie teaches riding and imports sport horses from Ireland. Their 18-year-old daughter Cailin, a B Pony Clubber, events at the preliminary level.

"When a student has displayed strong riding skills and a sense of self, they are ready to compete," Rocco explained. She encourages her students to experience

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the three phases of eventing individually before putting them together at an event by competing in hunter/jumper and dressage shows and going to hunter paces and the occasional fox hunt. She also expects them to ride in the open, maintaining a correct and consistent balance.

According to Rocco, “It is important that an instructor takes their students to some events prior to the competition so that they can see how it works without the added stress of competing. They can groom, volunteer, fence judge or whatever. Once you add the stress of competition, you really want the student to be comfortable with the whole scenario.”

Molly Rosin of California, the 2006 Wellpride AEC Open Preliminary division champion aboard Havarah’s Charlie, currently trains with Danny Warrington in Maryland. A Level II ICP certified instructor, Rosin also travels home almost every month to work with a large group of students, many of whom plan to compete in their first event soon. She encourages her students to volunteer and/or groom before they compete in an event themselves.

“I’m in charge of getting volunteers for Ram Tap, and I think everyone should volunteer before they ride,” Rosin said. “I will also send them as a groom with another kid; without the show pressure they can soak up a lot of information. I like them to be a dressage scribe at least once too, or at least run the scores, so they’re forced to watch what’s going on in dressage all day. I can tell my students what to expect, but they need to see it and hear it and write it down, if necessary.”



Photo courtesy of Ritch and Kelli Temple of Wydenere Farm.

Above: You need qualified eyes on the ground to help you assess where you and your horse are in your development. This person can help you decide when you’re ready to make your competition debut. Below: Daily grooming will create a bond between you and your horse, and give you a chance to check for any worrisome cuts, bumps, and bruises.

### The Right Partner Is Essential

You will be nervous enough at your first competition without worrying about whether your horse will trot past the judge’s box in dressage, or even leave the starting box on cross-country. While many newbie eventers do not have the means to purchase a seasoned event horse, a steady and reliable partner is certainly an asset.

Sarah Soto, 24, of Torrington, Connecticut, grew up riding in hunter/jumper

classes. Last August she purchased her first event horse, a 15-year-old Thoroughbred named Nickelodeon (“Nick”), and competed in her first beginner novice horse trials at the Ethel Walker School in October.

Soto said that she purchased Nick, who’d previously competed through training level, because he was reliable. “I wanted a horse with some experience—I would never have the confidence to do cross-country on a horse that had never done it before. Nick helps me get around.”

While it is certainly an advantage to have a “been there, done that” partner to get you through your first events, there are ways to cope if both you and your horse are new to the sport. If you have access to a trainer, ask her to introduce your horse to his first few events. You can go as a groom, and watch as your horse gets his feet wet, literally. Hopefully he’s a fast learner and within an event or three, you’ll be ready to take the reins.

If professional help isn’t an option, then make sure that you expose your future event prospect to the competition experience without the pressure of actually competing. Try out a local show or two with both of you acting purely as spectators. Stroll around the grounds, hang out near (or in, if possible) the warm-up area, making sure not to disturb the competitors.



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Tie him to the trailer for a while and let him get used to the chaos and traffic.

When you think you're ready to head down center line, pick a low key unrecognized event, maybe even a combined test if you're not quite ready for the challenges of cross-country. These can be wonderful, inexpensive venues to gain experience and test the waters.

Once you both feel secure in that environment, check out the USEA *Omnibus* (sent to all members and also available on the USEA website under Competitions, then Calendar/Omnibus) and start planning to make your debut at a USEA recognized horse trials. Who knows, you might eventually see your name on one of the USEA's leaderboards, or even qualify to compete at the Wellpride American Eventing Championships!

## Plan Ahead

So you've skimmed through the *Omnibus* and found an event that fits your schedule. Now come the parts many eventers find the most irritating—paperwork and deadlines.

If you're making the transition from dressage or hunter/jumper classes, keep in mind that the competition experience and entry system in eventing is very different. "In hunters you could enter about a billion classes in a day," Soto said. "But in eventing you have your time and that's it."

We eventers deal with something called the "Open Date." This date is listed in the *Omnibus*, and is the day on which the event will begin to accept entries. Depending on the level of eventing activity in your area, it may be the only day they'll accept entries because many events, especially those on the East Coast, fill quickly, and organizers will take those entries that arrive first.

To give yourself the best chance of having your entry accepted, if you submit your entry by snail mail, in a perfect world you want it postmarked on the open date, definitely not before, and hopefully not after. Or if you enter online, you want to enter on the open date.

As far as the actual contents of your entry, it is important that you submit a properly filled out entry form. If you're filling the form by hand, leave no areas blank—mark N/A if they don't apply. Don't forget to mark the level, and division within that level, that you want to enter (for more information on fill-



Above: At least a week before the event, arrange to have your horse shod. If you wait until after the event to have an old set of shoes reset, you may lose a shoe on course and damage the horse's hoof. Below: Get organized by packing your trailer in advance with equipment, feed, and bedding, which will help ease stress as the competition nears.



ing out the entry form, see "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the New Eventing Amateur Rule: A Preview of the USEA 2007 Entry Form" in the November/December issue of *Eventing USA* and also available on the USEA website).

When sending your entry, make sure to include your signed check (for the correct amount, double check your math), copy of Coggins test if required, and stabling form to the secretary at the address listed in the *Omnibus*. It's agonizing to assume that you're entered in an event and then discover that you ended up on the waiting list because your entry was incomplete, or late. For easy registration check out [www.evententries.com](http://www.evententries.com)—many events now offer online entry through this site.

Not sure what level to enter? Keep in mind that while it may be possible to pass an exam at school or put together a project for work the night before it is due, preparation is essential to a successful and stress-free eventing experience, especially your first competition. This begins well in advance. When you send in your entry form, you should already be schooling very confidently at the level you've entered, and preferably you should be schooling at the next higher level.

Regarding which division to enter, the qualification criteria can be found in Appendix 3 of the rule book. After deciding which divisions are most appropriate for you and your horse, rank them in order of preference in the Eligible Sections portion of the entry form. Do not forget this step, otherwise you may find yourself in an Open division full of much more experienced riders.

## Get Organized

Make sure to maintain your equipment's condition: the leather should be clean and supple, free of loose stitching and tears, especially on the reins and stirrup leathers. Polish all the metal and scrub off rust and matted dirt. It can take some time to repair tack, so you should not wait until the last minute. Pack extra stirrup leathers and an extra bridle and halter for last-minute emergencies. If you aren't already using them, consider a breast plate to help keep your saddle in place while on course, and galloping boots to help protect your horse's legs.

At least a week or so before the event, arrange to have your horse shod. If you wait until after the event to have an old set of shoes reset, you may lose a shoe on

course and damage the horse's hoof. If you have your horse reshod right before the competition, a close nail or short trim may cause lameness.

Test the condition of your towing vehicle and trailer. Check the tires, change the oil, and make any repairs well in advance. For more details on trailer safety, read "Happy Trails: Safe Travel With Horses" in the January/February 2007 issue of *Eventing USA*.

Before the event, make sure that you have any necessary travel forms and/or health certificates, especially if you are crossing state lines.

To help prevent stress the day before the event, Rosin asks her students, especially kids who are in school all week

and adults with busy work schedules, to organize their equipment and pack their trailers the weekend before the event. At the event it also helps to arrange for an extra stall to use as a tack room so you can organize your equipment. To help keep the cost down, try splitting one with another competitor.

The USEA offers a handy checklist for competitors on the website ([www.useventing.com](http://www.useventing.com)). Click on the Resources section and then go to "USEA Event Checklist for Competitors." Look over this list in advance, add any other items that you may need, and then tick each item off the list as you pack. If it's a fall or spring event, pack plenty of blankets and coolers to keep your horse warm; in

the summer, consider bringing a fan. Portable stabling can be uncomfortably hot, particularly in tight quarters.

If you get to an event and discover that you left a vital piece of equipment at home and there's no tack shop available, ask around. Most eventers are very supportive of their fellow competitors and would be happy to loan you a piece of extra equipment. Just make sure that you return it in perfect condition before the end of the weekend!

## Keep Your Training on Track

After sending your entry form in on time, keep your training on track until the event. Now is the time to tap into your competitive side and aim for peak performance the weekend of the competition.

If you don't have a cross-country course at home or the facility where you board your horse, you can simulate jumps by taking natural materials like hay bales or pine boughs and placing them under show jumps that you have moved into an open space.

Look for a farm or event site in your area that offers schooling over their cross-country obstacles. Often times the fee is very reasonable, and this gives you the chance to quietly introduce your horse to all sorts of obstacles, at various heights, and gets him used to the idea of performing away from the security of home.

You should also learn to maintain a steady pace as you go cross-country. There is a window of time for completing the cross-country course, and if you are too fast or too slow you will receive penalties; extreme speed or slowness will result in elimination. It is in your best interest to practice maintaining a steady pace and learn to check your watch to see if you are on target. The speed for cross-country at beginner novice is 240 meters per minutes, which equates to a brisk trot or slow canter. At novice the speed is 350 meters per minute, which is a steady canter. If you want to be really accurate, mark off 240 or 350 meters in a big field and learn to canter it in one minute. Get used to that pace so that you can maintain it on course.

Don't forget to practice your dressage test at home before the event. If you don't have a regulation size (or marked) dressage ring, you can draw letters on



Don't forget to practice your skills over the colored poles. Set up some practice courses at home so that you're ready to face the challenge of memorizing your show jumping test and put in a smooth, rhythmic performance.



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Above: Before your first event, memorize your dressage test and practice it rain or shine. At all horse trials tests must be carried out from memory, and all movements must follow in the order laid down in the test (see article EV134 in the rule book). Right: Schooling cross-country is fun and will give you confidence at your first event.

buckets, place traffic cones, hay bales, or whatever markers you have handy at strategic points around a level area in a field, arena, or paddock. Do your best to make the size of the arena as accurate as possible, so you can get the real feel for how quickly the letters can come up when you're riding the test, and what a true 20-meter circle feels like.

If you have difficulty learning the test or remembering where the letters are, make a 'mini dressage arena' on your living room floor, with the letters drawn on pieces of paper, and walk through the pattern a few times. Or draw an arena on a piece of paper and "ride" it using a pen to mark the test pattern. Many competitors, especially children, also make up rhymes to remember the order of the letters in the arena. Ask your dressage instructor or any seasoned eventer, and they'll have a few tricks to share.

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comfortable and confident. At the show they need to be able to go it on their own. We do dry runs at home so when they get to the show it's not as daunting," said Cailin Rocco, who often teaches Pony Clubbers.

It is also a good idea to put on all your show attire and practice riding in your coat and stock tie, helmet, tall boots and gloves, exactly as you will wear them

in the show. This way if anything is uncomfortable, you can alter or replace it in advance rather than suffering through the event in discomfort. You will also know if you need to rip a tag out of your shirt, replace an item that is stained or has a tear, get thicker or thinner socks, or other little adjustments that will let you focus on your riding instead of wardrobe malfunctions. Double check to make sure your boots fit, and that you have boot pulls and a boot jack; no one likes to get stuck with a boot half on!

Decide in advance whether you will wear formal or informal attire. Formal attire includes a black or navy blue jacket, white or buff breeches, tall black boots, black or white (for dressage) gloves, and a dark hunt cap (top hats and tails are reserved for the FEI levels). You will need to wear a stock tie and pin with formal attire, so learn how to tie it properly before the event or get a pre-tied one.

Informal attire is perfectly acceptable at the lower levels and includes either a navy or light colored jacket (not black)

or tweed hunt coat, ratcatcher shirt or turtleneck, tan, buff, grey, or rust colored breeches (not white, and not black or navy with tall boots) or jodhpurs with jodhpur boots. Half chaps (referred to as a leather leg piece in the *2007 USEF Rules for Eventing*, i.e. "rule book") are now allowed, though the half chaps and paddock boots must be leather.

If jackets are excused due to hot weather, you should wear a white, short-sleeved polo shirt with a collar.

Your most important piece of equipment may be your ASTM/SEI approved helmet. Make sure that it fits properly. Especially for women with long hair, practice the hair "style" you will wear with your helmet. Tucking thick hair under a helmet can have an effect on fit and comfort.

For jumping, don't forget your medical armband, with all your updated information on the card insert, and your correctly fitted safety vest for cross-country.

For more information on dress, see rule EV113 of the rule book. In fact, make sure you read this tome from cover to cover. It is your responsibility

to know the rules of the sport, and the last thing you want to experience is a disqualification or elimination for something as easily avoided as incorrect dress, or using improper warm-up fences.

With that in mind, *Eventing USA* has run an "Eventing for Dummies" series in the last several issues. Go to page 61 for the final installment, and check out the previous three issues for earlier columns.

An infectiously energetic person, Rosin makes riding fun for her group of students. "I don't like my students to get panicky. I try to make it a super fun environment so they don't get stressed out, and I am big on organization," she said. "About a week before the event I ask them to write a time schedule, starting with their dressage time and going backwards including warm-up, time to walk to warm-up, tacking up, getting dressed, braiding, stall cleaning, right down to leaving home in the morning, with some spare time included."

### Notes on Conditioning Horse and Rider

Your mind may be ready for eventing, but how about the rest of your body? While you do not have to be marathon-fit to survive a weekend competing at the

beginner novice level, you may feel like you have run a marathon by the end of the weekend. All that running around the show grounds and walking cross-country courses (plan for at least three trips around) combined with the energy drain from competition nerves, can be exhausting. Whether you go for a sweat-drenching run or swim laps, take a yoga class or hit the gym, some combination of strength and cardio training will help prepare you for the physical requirements of competition. For most everyday riders, time spent in the saddle is not quite enough. You need to put as much effort into keeping yourself as fit as your horse—the two of you are a team.

While you don't have to have a super rigorous conditioning plan for your novice level horse, it does pay to do some trot sets and hill work so that they are fit for the big day too. Basic trot sets might consist of trotting for three minutes, walking for a couple of minutes, then repeating the process three times. When this is comfortable, increase the sets to three five-minute trots with a few minutes of walking in between. Shorten your stirrups to work on your own balance and fitness.

"It's about being safe and having a

good time," said Rosin. "You need to be able to jump the course, and you need to be fit enough. A lot of trainers don't realize how exhausting it can be for an inexperienced rider to go cross-country; cross training is definitely encouraged for horse and rider, at any level. It's not too early to have a little conditioning schedule for your horse—that's part of what eventing is all about. Trot sets are a good way to get out and ride in the open, too. You have to have fun, not just drill that dressage test every day!"

Hopefully you've found this article helpful and enlightening, and are well prepared for the exciting world of competition. Since this topic could take up countless more pages, we're asking our members to get involved and add their thoughts, advice, and words of wisdom on the USEA's new blog, which can be found at the top of the home page at [www.useventing.com](http://www.useventing.com) or found at [www.eventerusa.org](http://www.eventerusa.org). We'll be mentioning this article on the blog and invite everyone to offer advice based on their experiences as rookie eventers. 

*In the next issue:* Part II, At the Event!



While you don't have to have a super rigorous conditioning plan for your lower level horse, a basic plan can help keep you focused and develop your balance and confidence in the open.