

By David A. McLain, M.D.

# TIPS FROM THE EXPERTS FOR A SAFER EVENT SEASON

*Denny Emerson is frequently heard to say, "Experience is something you get a few minutes after you needed it." In eventing we might say "double ditto" to that. I have asked a number of active riders and officials to enlighten us on how to avoid the common mistakes that are made year after year which can lead to accidents and injuries. Here are their comments:*

## UNMOUNTED

**Wash Bishop** highly recommends reading the rules of combined training before you head to an event. Wash notes that needless mistakes (that can lead to injuries) are made by riders who don't know the rules. This year there are many new rules and all competitors should be familiar with them, as rules frequently are formulated with safety in mind. **Jan Conant** relates that the rule requiring riders to leave the cross-country course at a walk after elimination was devised after an eliminated rider jumped a fence backwards, fell off and was injured—which also caused a needless long hold on cross-country at a major event. **Jimmy Wofford** reminds eventers that there are two athletes out there, not just the horse. He recommends a conditioning program for eventers, as an unfit rider, like an unfit athlete in any sport, is more likely to be injured. **Sally O'Connor** recommends checking your tack in the off season to make sure that the stitching and leather are still good. The girth and stirrup leathers particularly should be inspected as a break on course would be dangerous. **Jim Graham** recommends investing in an overgirth that gives extra protection on cross-country in the event that your girth breaks. **Karin Bjorgen** reminds us that a helmet that has taken a substantial blow from a fall should be sent to the manufacturer for inspection. The new ASTM/SEI helmets are not designed for multiple blows and damage may not be detected easily. Some manufacturers such as Troxel provide for lifetime replacement in case of impact. **Dorothy Trapp** recommends planning your event schedule with the help of a knowledgeable person in your area who knows which courses are straightforward and which ones are challenging, so that there is a natural and logical progression for you and your horse. If you haven't been to an event, talk to someone who has been there.

## MOUNTED AT HOME

Making sure your horse is fit is one of the best ways to insure your safety, notes **Grant Schneidman**. As a horse tires he is less able to compensate for rider error. Grant recommends developing a conditioning program for your horse, with the help of a coach if necessary. He reminds us that you can't sort out problems at a show. The problems a rider is having at home will not miraculously disappear in the heat of competition. Grant also warns us that the most dangerous thing a rider can do is to get ahead of his horse and "jump" before the horse does, a process he calls "human sacrifice." **Jimmy Wofford** recommends the use of gymnastics at home. Gymnastic exercises will help your horse's balance and reflexes as well as your own position, timing and balance. Schooling fences can be set up by themselves or in combination with fixed obstacles such as ditches, banks or water. The size is not as important as the striding, timing and balance. **Phyllis Dawson** recommends getting your horse out of the ring at home. Many riders spend all of their time in a ring and only gallop at events, and when they get to the competition, they are out of control. Hacks and gallops at home will help you and your horse feel more comfortable on cross-country. **Denny Emerson** recommends learning "how" to gallop as most lower level riders don't know. Denny has produced a videotape with Captain Edgar's Video Works on "How to Gallop Your Horse." Learning how to control your horse's pace and how to position yourself to keep from interfering with and tiring your horse is very important from a safety standpoint. Wear your helmet at home when mounted. Sixty percent of equestrian injuries occur during casual riding at home. **Denis Glaccum** relates how a close friend of his always wore a helmet at competitions but was killed from a head injury when he fell off galloping his horse at home without a helmet.

## AT THE SHOW GROUNDS

Many accidents occur unmounted in the stable area at events. Watch where you're walking and remember that your horse may be more likely to kick around unfamiliar horses and surroundings. At three-day events, a particularly dangerous area is the warm-up for the vet check. **Michael Godfrey** said that almost every year someone gets kicked in this circus-like atmosphere as people are walking, jogging and lunging their extremely fit horses to get them ready for the vet check. Many three-day events have an ambulance on grounds during the vet check because of incidents in prior years. **Jimmy Wofford** said, "Every year I recommend less and less warm-up for the vet check because of the risk of injury to rider and horse." **Ralph Hill**

has seen novice riders come out and jump fences set for training or preliminary with bad results because the riders didn't know that they can ask for the fences to be lowered. If the footing gets bad on the approach, **Dorothy Trapp** recommends asking to move the warm-up fences to avoid muddy ruts that may develop. Don't imitate upper level riders if you don't understand what they're doing, suggests **Wash Bishop**. Wash has seen a novice rider try to trot a vertical after watching an upper level rider do so. After several stops in the warm-up, the novice rider went in and was eliminated in the ring. New problems can be caused by using the wrong exercise at the wrong time. **Kelli McMullen Temple** warns about not over-warming up your horse so that he's not tired before cross-country. **Jane Sleeper** recommends setting goals for the event. Your goal should not necessarily be winning the event. She recommends, for example, focusing on having a better pace on cross-country or being more relaxed, etc. By being focused on your goals, you can stay better organized and in control.

#### ON COURSE

When walking the cross-country course, don't be afraid to ask your local active riders

for advice, **Phyllis Dawson** notes. Most are happy to help if there is a question. If more extensive coaching is required, expect to compensate the coach. But having an experienced rider point out the questions being asked by particular fences can make your ride much more educated and safe. Grant Schneidman said more riders need to learn about traction and footing and the correct use of studs. If the footing is greasy and your horse is not correctly shod for the conditions (e.g., racing plates), you may even have to withdraw. Grant notes that there is always another day to compete if conditions aren't right. He also said that good basic knowledge of cross-country riding is important. Too many riders feel pressured to move up and don't realize their limitations. Their horses don't jump straight or riders can't see distances; when they move up, they have problems. Their horses start backing off the fences. You might get away with it once, Grant remarks, but these problems usually come back to haunt you. He recommends cross-country schooling days with a coach. **Roger Haller** finds excessive speed on cross-country to be one of the biggest faults of lower level riders. Riders who come in a minute or more under optimum time at novice or training have nothing to gain and

are needlessly increasing their risk. Roger notes that most cross-country fences are not built to be jumped at high speed like steeplechase fences. **Ann Hardaway Taylor** says that depending on how your horse is going on course, be prepared to change your plan at a fence. If you had a bad ride at the previous fence, take the easier option at the next fence to get your horse's confidence up. And if it's not your day, don't feel bad about pulling up and going back to the drawing board. At the last fence, don't be **Dorothy Trapp's** "shotgun fodder." "I tell my students that if I seem them jumping the last fence on cross-country from a long spot on a loose rein, I'll be watching with my shotgun, and if they make it, I'll pick them off. More than one rider has ridden to the hospital after seeing a long one, and not riding the last fence on cross-country when their horse was getting tired. Remember to balance your horse and ride each obstacle as if it were a potential problem. **Kelli McMullen Temple** suggests that you remember the big picture. Competing in one event is not all important; there is always another event. Consider going slow or not going at all. It is better to write off one day than to risk injury and have a bad season or no season at all. Make this a safe and successful season! □

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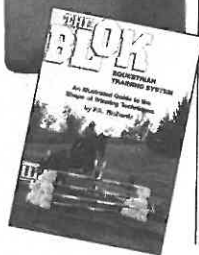
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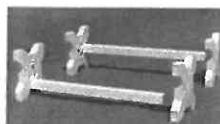


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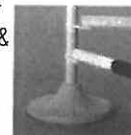


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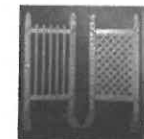


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