

## The Sport Needs More Confidence Building Cross-Country Courses

This past weekend at the Walthour-Moss Foundation Horse Trials (March 1-3), I had the great satisfaction of sharing with over 200 other contestants the pleasure of jumping a superbly designed and constructed cross-country course. That satisfaction and pleasure was clouded, though, by the realization that such courses are becoming far too rare in the United States. What made both the Preliminary and Intermediate courses excellent was a combination of several factors. Both courses were essentially straightforward, with good footing on the approaches. There were few fences which did not either lean slightly away from the approaching horses or have clearly defined ground lines. The distances in the combinations were forward, galloping distances, not tight, difficult distances. The jumps were solidly made of pine logs, or brush, or bales of pine-straw, not spindly or flimsy. As a result, rider after rider finished the course fairly glowing with enthusiasm. "My horse gave me the round of his life." "My horse never jumped better." "What a blast it is to really run and jump." "This is what cross-country is really meant to be," and so on and so forth. One prominent international competitor who spends much of his time in England was heard to say that "This is what English courses are like. That's why their horses are so good in cross-country. They get confidence instead of punishment."

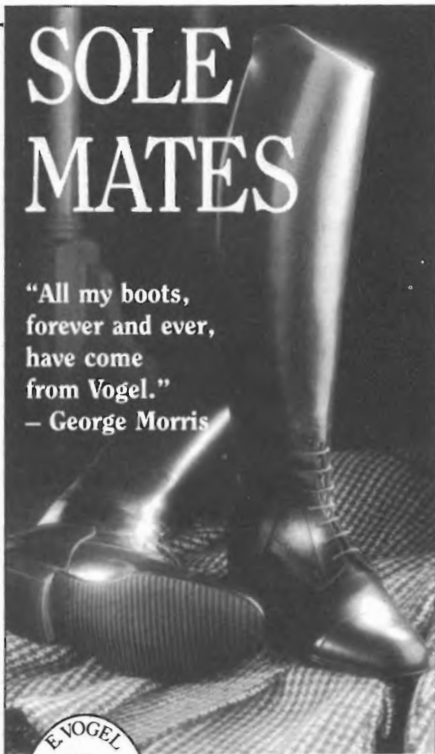
As the American eventing community, we all have to take a really hard look at what we are doing to our sport and to our horses and riders by building difficult, trappy, awkward cross-country courses which discourage positive, flowing, running and jumping. Now don't get me wrong. This idea should not be misconstrued, as some people do, as a license to race crazily at the jumps on the forehand, far too fast, and two thirds out of control. There is a world of difference between watching good riders ride forward in balance, with impulsion tempered by control, and watching "kamikaze" dangerous riding. But good cross-country courses reward good, positive forward riding, while bad courses penalize good, positive forward riding.

Since there are over 200 USCTA recognized cross-country courses in this country, as well as many others which are unrecognized, it becomes very apparent that the USCTA needs to educate many of the designers of those courses so that they know how to build fences which reward good cross-country riding. I have the sense that far too many course designers see themselves as being in an adversarial relationship with the competitors. They think, "What clever thing can I dream up that will be difficult for the horses and/or the riders in this event?" They don't see themselves as integral partners in the process of developing horses and riders by presenting them with fair, inviting, and well constructed obstacles. Horses and riders alike must develop confidence in order to progress. Confidence is built upon success, not failure. Especially at the lower levels, but really all through American eventing, it is critical that we get back to the realization that cross-country riding is based upon running and jumping, not racing, checking, yanking and turning. I am not an advocate of making everything too easy, or eliminating difficulty or challenge. But there are ways to build hard tests which are fair, and ways which are damaging and punishing. Jack Le Goff used to say that he could build a course three feet high which no horse in the world could jump around. It is absolutely essential to our sport that the USCTA, through correct and orthodox education, provide the advice and guidance needed by course designers to help them bring horses and riders through the various levels in ways that, although challenging, are also safe, fair and encouraging.

Footnote: The Walthour-Moss courses were designed by John Dillon, from Ireland. John gained much of his earlier experience as course builder for the Punchestown CCI. In the past four years he has designed and built many courses in the USA and Canada, learning from and working with Neil Ayer and Mark Phillips and, this year, will be the course builder for the European Championships.

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# USCTA NEWS



APRIL 1991

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## Advertising Deadlines

Dec. 15 for **Feb.** issue; Feb. 15 for **Apr.** issue; Apr. 15 for **June** issue; June 15 for **Aug.** issue; Aug. 15 for **Oct.** issue; Oct. 15 for **Dec.** issue.

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*The USCTA NEWS is the official publication of the United States Combined Training Association.*

**USCTA NEWS** is published bi-monthly in February, April, June, August, October, and December by the United States Combined Training Association, 292 Bridge Street, South Hamilton, MA 01982. Membership—United States Combined Training Assoc., includes **USCTA NEWS**, Dec. to Nov. \$45.00 yearly. Separate subscription to **USCTA NEWS**—\$15.00 yearly. Copyright 1991 United States Combined Training Association. No part of this publication may be reproduced without written permission of Editor. Address all subscription correspondence to: **USCTA NEWS**, 292 BRIDGE STREET, SOUTH HAMILTON, MA 01982. Second Class postage paid at South Hamilton, MA 01982, and at additional offices. POSTMASTER: send address changes to **USCTA NEWS**, 292 Bridge Street, South Hamilton, MA 01982. Address all editorial, advertising, and other news correspondence to **USCTA NEWS**, 484 Bay Road, South Hamilton, MA 01982.

ISSN: 0744-0103

## contents

- 4 **PRESIDENT'S LETTER—Denny Emerson**  
The sport needs more confidence building cross-country courses
- 6 **FIXING JACKIE'S BACK—Jan Snodgrass**  
An Event horse's problem was ultimately resolved through nutrition
- 9 **EVENTING IN THE '90s—Linda Bland**  
Summary of pertinent round table discussions from the Annual Meeting
- 12 **THE THREE-DAY EVENT VET BOX—Dr. A. Kent Allen**  
Veterinary suggestions for organizers
- 14 **THE BURKS OF BEEBE DRAW**  
A remarkable family's contribution to eventing in Colorado
- 15 **YOUNG RIDERS FUND-RAISING PROGRAM FOR 1990—Malcolm McFall**  
\$35,000 is raised by Area VI for its Young Riders Team
- 18 **AHSA DRUG AND MEDICATION RULES - 1991 UPDATE—Dr. A. Kent Allen**  
Competitors take note!
- 20 **MARK TODD CLINIC—Jennifer Wills**  
A two time Olympic Gold Medalist from New Zealand imparts his expertise
- 24 **NATIONAL AWARDS**  
Recognition of individuals who have made significant contributions to the sport
- 28 **RULE CHANGES FOR 1992**  
The final word!
- 38 **CLINICS**  
The 2nd USCTA Area IX Event College is an overwhelming success
- 39 **1991 AHSA-USCTA SEMINARS**
- 40 **PONY CLUB**
- 41 **EVENT CHECK—Eileen Thomas**  
Vital information from the National Office
- 49 **1991 PROVISIONAL CALENDAR OF EVENTS**

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