

ROLLEX 2010

Photos and text by Derith Vogt

Once again I made my pilgrimage to Kentucky for the Rolex Three Day Event, considered by some to be the ultimate athletic challenge for horse and rider. Dressage competition, which sometimes takes up to two days, is followed by the Cross-Country test on the second competition day. This phase proves the speed, stamina, courage, boldness and jumping ability of the horse and the rider's knowledge of pace and use of the horse across country. Horses fly over ditches, leap up and down banks, drop into and gallop through water, all proving athletic prowess and trust between man and animal, that can be seen in no other sporting event. While the rider walks the course beforehand, the horse doesn't see any of the course until it leaves the start box.

Jumping in an arena on the third day of competition provides the final test of the horse's athletic ability, conditioning and training. A matter of jumping the obstacles cleanly, its significance is that it comes the day following the test of cross-country jumping at speed and clearly illustrates the horse's willingness to listen to its rider. It must now move at a more sedate pace and not touch the obstacles, which are not solid and will fall down. A single rail knocked down can make the difference between winning and finishing far down in the placings.

While the weather forecasts for the weekend were not promising, Thursday's dressage was to be the only clear and sunny day. Karen O'Connor, on Mandiba, finished the day in first place.

Friday started well enough, but by 11:00 the rains had arrived. Allison Springer had a gorgeous ride in statement-making head gear (see photo, above), which tied her for second place. Springer was the only competitor riding in a helmet instead of a top hat. "I drew a lot of attention by my decision to wear a helmet in the dressage arena. It is obviously something I feel strongly about and the decision was very personal. I lost my brother to head trauma... A person whose opinion I respect very much and is not from the eventing world later made the comment: "You looked like an athlete in your helmet; everyone else looked like cartoon characters." This is something that the USEF and USDF could change with a stroke of a pen. If everyone wore a helmet, it would become the norm in a matter of weeks.



Becky Holder rides Cross-Country

William Fox-Pitt, on Cool Mountain, later moved into first place on his Dressage score.

Cross country day arrived and wisely, after word that thunderstorms and a tornado would be coming in the afternoon, organizers decided to skip the scheduled two-hour lunch break, compress the schedule, and get on with the cross-country before the rains came.

Sadly, there were six falls on cross country with five of them being rotational. (A rotational fall happens when a horse's front legs do not clear the obstacle and they end up flipping all the way over.) All involved a vertical as the first element of a combination. All were on frangible pins that did not break away. The pins are meant to give way with enough downward force, but rotational falls involve more forward than downward force. Three of the falls occurred at fence # 20/21 AB, the Hollow. Competitors jump the vertical, land, and jump down the two steps. Another fall was at #6, the duck pond, a vertical with three strides to a duck in the water. Another was at #10, the Park Question where they jumped the vertical, took a stride to a coffin, and another stride to a big brush corner. Course designer Mike Etherington-Smith said he was going to look at videos to see what happened. The pins have to be loaded a certain way to break, but he noted that they only help reduce the likelihood of a rotational fall. "No one has ever claimed they will prevent a rotational fall," he commented.

Another innovation is the Styrofoam log which was used at the Head of the Lake, the signature obstacle at Rolex. I got a chance to see it in action when Capt. Geoff Curran of Ireland had a half-jump/half-stop there on The Jump Jet. The horse put his knees into the log, which graciously snapped in two on impact. It looked awful, but the gelding was unscathed. It was fascinating to see course builder Mick Costello and his crew take the two pieces of the log off to the side and install a new one, all in a matter of minutes. It was all no fuss, no muss, no bother, no damage (to the horse.) The log can take the general brushing and small impacts that accompany drop fences and hold up well. When hit with enough forward force it snaps. While the horse may still fall into the water, I doubt there would be a rotational fall. Of course there are opinions of what the long term effects of using foam logs might be. Fox-Pitt said, "It's very hard to say whether we should have (breakaway) rails on every jump ... or whether they will just encourage horses to be more and more clumsy." It does make me wonder, though, if they had been used in the other three places where the falls occurred, what the outcome would have been.

“Rolex;”

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Alison Springer chose to make a statement by wearing her safety helmet in the Dressage portion of the competition.



Kim Severson had a strong showing in Dressage, and then on the Cross-Country course. But her horse's jumping on the third day fell short.



William Fox-Pitt competes in the Stadium phase of competition at ROLEX 2010



The broken styrofoam log on course was replaced in mere minutes.



William Fox-Pitt, showing winning style in Cross-Country.



Top three finishers: Phillip Dutton, 2nd; William Fox-Pitt, 1st; and Becky Holder, 3rd

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Yet another innovation is an inflatable vest for the rider. It functions like an air bag in a car. The rider's vest is attached to the saddle by a cord and if they part company from the horse it deflates. After looking at shots of Oliver Townend's fall at the hollow, it was clear to me that his helmet was the critical piece of equipment that kept his injuries from being fatal. He was knocked unconscious at his fall at the Hollow when his horse landed on him and continued down the two steps. Townend was flown to UK hospital and was released with very minor injuries the following day. All other horse and riders who fell were uninjured. While there has been much hype around this type of vest, there is not enough data out there to give a definitive answer about its success in preventing crush injuries. External skeleton vests do prevent them but are not as widely known or advertised yet.

Stadium rounds started at noon and the top five places were so close that no one had much more than a rail in hand. There were surprises like Kim Severson's horse coming into the day in second place and then deciding that he did not want to jump very badly. And Becky Holder having one rail, allowing Philip Dutton and Woodburn move into second place. In the end, William Fox-Pitt won the day on his dressage score and simply oozed class in his acceptance speech saying what an honor it was to win organizer Janie Atkinson's final Rolex. "To be on Cool Mountain sitting on top of Woodburn and Courageous Comet - they are fantastic horses so to pip them to the post was a real thrill. Thank goodness I finally managed to win it," he said. It was his sixth try. With Janie's retirement, it feels like the passing of the guard. She has dedicated more than 30 years of her life to the event. "It's really very difficult for me to imagine not having it in my life," she said. "After all, it's the only child I have ever had!" All I can say is well done Janie and thanks from the bottom of our hearts!