



Fast becoming one of the ‘must attend ‘ pre season fixtures, the 2011 International Eventing Forum took place recently, at Hartpury College in Gloucestershire. Organised as before, by Jean Mitchell, Karen McKeown and Eric Smiley and chaired this year by Ian Stark, the forum focussed on the theme “Risky Business”. Now acknowledged as a risk sport, the concept of the forum was to demonstrate how Eventing could be made safer with training and management.

The outstanding facilities at Hartpury were a fitting backdrop to the day’s events, which took the form of four ridden seminars presented by some of the most respected and influential trainers in the sport. The demonstrations by Ferdi Eilberg, Eric Smiley, Maria Gretzer and William and Alice Fox-Pitt were enhanced by some high profile ‘guinea pigs’ including international riders Mary King, Ruth Edge, Lucy Weigersma, Laura Collett and Harry Meade. The day also included presentations by FEI Veterinary Director Graeme Cooke, the Chairman of the British Eventing Safety committee Jonathan Chapman and British Eventing National Safety Officer Jonathan Clissold.

Having welcomed the audience, Ian Stark introduced the Chairman of the FEI Eventing Technical Committee, Guiseppe Della Chiesa, before expanding on the day’s theme of Risky Business. He explained that the FEI approach is now to accept that Eventing is a risk sport, but the key is to ‘manage the risk’ without compromising the spirit of the sport.

International dressage coach and former Olympic rider, Ferdi Eilberg set the ball rolling with a session demonstrating how riders can maximise their horse’s ability. Sticking to his theme, he encouraged riders to face up to the fact that that riding a ‘safe’ test is not enough these days, but also that to ‘risk the nine’ seriously requires solid foundations.

He began by explaining that the horse must be relaxed from the outset. “I am a big believer that relaxation is a great part of the horse’s training.” He said. “The horse that is tense in the back will resent the rider.” Working first with Mary King and the advanced event horse Fernhill Urco, Eilberg clearly and simply explained the importance of basics. He went through the stages of allowing the horse to stretch forward and down, and asking the ‘horse’ to connect with the bit. “The aim is to relax and gain a rhythmical gait.” He explained. “Sometimes a horse relaxes more in canter, so it’s important to be able to recognise the horse’s preferences - what does he find easy and what is difficult. Concentrate on the difficulties, but aim at all times for consistency.”

Transitions and the need to spend time on them were the next area of attention. “It is really important to focus on laying this foundation.” He emphasised. “This is where it goes wrong. Horses must not step into a contact, but stay in a contact. You have to work calmly and with clarity, creating black and white on which to build.”

Working on the position of the neck was another area that was covered in depth. He explained that by asking for more at home than at a competition, ultimately gives you the control over the horse's balance. “If they are capable of giving you more when you ask for more, then they will give you less when you ask for less.” Ferdi said. “If you are in charge of a horse's balance you can ride them to the maximum. If things go well you can push more towards the limit.”

His subsequent work with Ruth Edge showed the reality of taking the risk. Riding an advanced medium dressage horse, she thrilled the crowd with her response. “Riders need to find the limit.” He said. “If there is no challenge then there is no improvement. However, the risks must first be taken at home – to familiarise the horse. Horses need to be shown they can do it at home so that their confidence grows.” Summing up, Ferdi continually stressed the importance of being consistent and yet critical – and to be able to say. “This is right and this is wrong. Don't be afraid to identify and address the deficiencies in your horse, but also be aware of the danger of concentrating too much on these during a test and not highlighting the good points.”

Eric Smiley's jumping work with three 5 year-old horses and their riders Laura Collett, Dani Evans and Jess Elliott, was equally absorbing. Carrying the theme “Who owns the risk?” Smiley focussed on encouraging the young, green horses to take responsibility for themselves when jumping. “The approach to a fence is the rider's responsibility. “ He explained, “Then at take-off the responsibility passes to the horse.”

Starting with a simple cross pole from trot, Smiley first watched the horse's eyes and ears, on the approach. “They have to think about the job.” He said. “If they don't look, they don't see.”

Moving on a stage, the riders were then asked to do something on take off that tells the horse they need to make a quicker decision. “I want them to think quicker and jump.” Said Smiley. “I don't mind where they take off but they have to make a decision.” Building from this, but always with the same theme, different fences and bounces were now approached in canter. Riders were asked to keep the canter the same and do nothing - one of the hardest things to be asked to do! Calmness is vitally important here, as Smiley explained. “Decision making can only happen when the horse is quiet. The horse will then look after you because he is looking after himself.” It was fascinating to watch all three horses grow in confidence during these simple exercises, especially the two less experienced ones.

Towards the end of the session, Smiley built two fences that could be negotiated either on five or six strides. It was the rider's job to get a good quality canter, with enough energy to jump a fence. He then worked from a canter with pace, using the corners to balance the approach. Horses were encouraged to be allowed to go in deep

and take the responsibility. “The more riders understand that it is the horse’s job, the more you can leave them to it.” He concluded.

Prior to the lunch break, Graeme Cooke, the FEI Veterinary Director spoke about the FEI’s Clean Sport Initiative, and teamed up with Jonathan Chapman, Chairman of the British Eventing Safety Committee and British Eventing National Safety Officer, Jonathan Clissold to discuss clean sport, new rules and FEI initiatives to make Eventing safer.

Cooke emphasised the importance of clarifying rules and the need to keep the sport clean and fair. Summarising, he informed the audience that sanctions for the use of banned substances have been increased. There is now a minimum ban of two years (up to four) for the use of banned substances, while the misuse of controlled medicine carries a maximum two-year penalty. However the list of banned substances is now easy for people to access on the FEI web site, and will be updated on January 1st each year. The FEI now have the right to penalise the person responsible for the horse rather than solely the rider.

There will also be increased security in stables at events, with designated treatment areas. No vet will be admitted unless they have FEI approval to be there. “Our aim is to produce a sport with a strong image, with integrity and with better rules. “

Jonathan Chapman then discussed the formation of the new safety committee, which has on board individuals with a wide range of abilities. Among the notable rule changes for this year are a minimum “level 3 rating” for body protectors, while hats will be re-tagged. On the subject of hats, Chapman strongly advised that they should be replaced after every fall and at least every three years. Moving on to training and education he spoke of the highly successful cross country training and awareness days, which British Eventing have held in Newmarket and which he hopes, funds permitting, may travel around the country.

Finally Jonathan Clissold informed the audience that statistics for the past four years have stayed at a level. This information is made possible by a database that collects profiles and measurements of every fence, as well as every fall and allows a constant audit to be monitored. He also spoke of the development of reverse frangible pins and confirmed that both British Eventing and the FEI intend to keep fences solid in nature.

A name not so familiar to the British audience, but one whose demonstration really made an impression was that of Swedish trainer Maria Gretzer. A former multi Olympian, she presented a superb show jumping clinic with riders, Ruth Edge, Lucy Weigersma and Harry Meade, all of whom rode advanced event horses. Course designer Kelvin Bywater opened the session by speaking briefly of ways of creating influences within courses. He also accentuated the growing importance of the time allowed, which nowadays puts added pressure on riders to achieve the “zero” score. The course he built for Gretzer’s riders contained three entirely separate tests – setting the stage for a fascinating demonstration.

“Times have changed,” announced Gretzer. “The quicker time allowed has altered the way we ride and we have to risk more.” Initially she walked the course as a whole, explaining how she would approach the different fences. “You have to do your homework in advance.”

Riders were then asked to warm up over simple poles on the floor separated by a small vertical. By cantering through, they concentrated on keeping the rhythm and towards the end they adjusted the number of strides between each element. Some found it easier than others. Maria moved on to ask a different question in which a small fence had to be jumped on a very tight circle. She emphasised that the landing is as important as the approach and that this exercise was ideal to practise taking risks without risks.

The session continued by jumping three separate parts of the course in turn – each with their own questions. The key to success throughout this was to, “get a better canter on the approach in order to produce the better jump.” The course was finally jumped as a whole. Energy and rhythm were again the key factors. Gretzer constantly asked for a ‘punchier’ canter, encouraging riders to open up the canter before starting to jump. Her clear and straightforward approach with three very different horses was refreshing and produced a noticeable improvement. Kelvin Bywater closed the session by discussing the course, where the problems occurred and how he could add to them.

The day drew to a close with a fascinating insight into the workings of ‘Team Fox-Pitt.’ William and Alice, who were accompanied by Irish rider Louise Bloomer, combined general discussion with a demonstration over a few small fences for which they used horses kindly borrowed from Nikki Ryan. William’s vast experience of competing on horses from a wide range of bloodlines made him an ideal candidate to discuss the theme “Nature of Nurture”. Perhaps rather than sticking to this entirely, he spoke at length about the factors he considers important when choosing a horse, his training methods and anecdotes. He opened by saying, “It is important to enjoy riding the horse you are working with and to find one that suits your way of riding and who will help you with your weaknesses.” He went on to discuss how the changes within the sport have in turn altered the type of horse he looks for. He continually challenged his own statements. He questioned that now dressage has become so influential, are we looking for dressage horses that we can teach cross-country or should it be vice versa. He cautioned about being taken in by a flashy mover, when sometimes these horses don’t gallop and stay. He then related stories about some of his own horses. “Idalgo is the most phenomenal horse I have ever sat one.” He said. “However when I tried him, I couldn’t ride him either on the flat or over fences, but I wanted him. I still can’t really ride him!”

Alice’s input was equally informative. Throughout the session she put relevant and sometimes amusing questions to William on a wide variety of issues, while sharing her own insight into running of their yard at home, and the importance of keeping the horses happy and relaxed. Another ‘constant’ was the significance that the Fox-Pitts put on attitude. “Attitude, approach and athletic ability are more important than jumping ability.” Said William. When asked about his preferential type of event horse, he admitted that the thoroughbred was probably his first port of call, but, “as long as they have an athletic body, I don’t think there is one type for Eventing.”

On the subject of training, he said that it was possible to produce one that was not natural, but on a personal level he would like a good brain and a horse that thinks for itself. “I like to see a horse looking at a fence; judging a fence - and having a good tight front leg is a bonus.”

Early training over fences is from trot – then they can learn from their mistakes. Although it's caused him to be the butt of many jokes over the years, William always rides with a neck strap. "I can put a finger through it when jumping or when one bucks." He said. "It also keeps me from interfering with the reins. A rider interfering with the reins on the way down to the fence is fundamentally dangerous."

William progressed to sharing further ideas. He is against producing a horse too quickly, preferring to event them very lightly in their five year old season. "The longer a horse stays in novice the better." He explained. "Taking time is very much a priority with me. If you cut corners or progress too quickly part of his vocabulary is missing. Education first – results second, and it's important not to lose sight of that." William voiced his opinion that riders today have a more difficult time learning to ride cross-country because they don't go hunting or ride in long format three-day events. He said that mixing training with hacking or hunting is a most important thing for horse and rider, despite the high demands of dressage in today's Eventing. "Get the horses out of the arena and enjoying themselves. I lived for hunting and believe it is still the most effective training ground for riders."

William also emphasised the importance of the fitness of horse and rider, while Alice pointed out that William conducts all his own cantering work. "Have a system and stick to it." He said. "It's so important that at the end of a course both horse and rider have the energy to be safe. It still happens that too many horses are tired. I do pretty much the same fittening work for short format as I used to do for long, but include a little more 'faster' work within cantering. Horses probably have to be mentally sharper and more alert for modern tracks."

One interesting discussion was based on conformation. "You would all be horrified by the conformation of a large proportion of horses at either Badminton or Burghley." William stated. "I want to see a horse walk out comfortably and have nothing that is too glaringly wrong with him. I do however hate sloping pasterns and turned out feet. We would not have the top five horses in the yard at the moment if we had listened to the vet!" He went on to note however, that Moon Man, who had perfect conformation, always remained sound while Alice commented that some other superstars were able to run far less. An interesting thought.

Ian Stark closed the forum by noting that all four speakers from the varying disciplines were united that balance, rhythm and feel enable horses to look after themselves, thus minimising the risk. Once again, this invaluable forum achieved its aim in offering riders, trainers, coaches, owners and supporters a learning opportunity from which they can enhance their own skills to further the aim of Safer Eventing at all levels.

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