

April 9, 2008

Equestrians' Deaths Spread Unease in Sport

By KATIE THOMAS

A failed jump by one of the world's finest riders and a spate of deaths have unnerved the equestrian community.

Darren Chiacchia, 43, who helped the United States Olympic team win a bronze medal at the Athens Games and was considered a favorite for this year's team, was training a horse on an intermediate course in Tallahassee, Fla., last month when the stallion crashed over a fence, crushing — and nearly killing — its celebrated rider.

Mr. Chiacchia spent a week in a coma and is now recovering at a rehabilitation facility near his home in Buffalo. Meanwhile, the sport he devoted his life to faces an identity crisis. Considered alongside the deaths of 12 riders worldwide over the past year and a half, his crash has reignited a fierce debate over whether the risks involved with the equestrian discipline known as eventing — an arduous three-phase competition — have become too great.

Top competitors and coaches argue that the sport's growing popularity has attracted inexperienced riders who take too many risks, and amateur riders complain that courses are being designed beyond their skill level in order to challenge elite riders. There is also frustration that the governing bodies for eventing have not mandated the safety improvements they identified after another cluster of deaths nine years ago.

A target of criticism is the former husband of England's Princess Anne, Mark Phillips, who is coach of the United States Olympic eventing team and designs many competition courses, including the one at the Red Hills Horse Trials, where Mr. Chiacchia's fall occurred.

The riders who died ranged in age from 17 to 51. Some, like Sherelle Duke, 28, of Ireland, were considered to be top riders. Others, like 17-year-old Mia Eriksson of Tahoe City, Calif., were just starting out. Three riders died during competitions in the United States.

In a letter to members, Kevin Baumgardner, the president of the United States Eventing Association, wrote: "The overall trends, particularly over the last three years, are unmistakable and, in my view, totally unacceptable. I know that my concern that the sport has gotten off track is shared by many of our members, amateurs and professionals alike." Mr. Baumgardner's letter generated 500 phone calls and e-mail responses.

An Olympic sport since 1912, eventing originated as a way to test the ability and endurance of military horses. It is often called a horse triathlon because participants compete in three events over one-, two- or three-day competitions: the delicate footwork of dressage, the beauty and control of show jumping, and the endurance and daring of cross-country racing. The winding courses of up to two and a half miles are designed to mimic the natural obstacles of rural landscapes.

"It's considered by many to be the ultimate test of horse and rider," Mr. Baumgardner said.

The cross-country phase is the most dangerous, as horse and rider are required to clear 20 to 40 jumps in an established time period. Penalties are assessed if the horse balks at a jump, if the horse or rider falls, or if

their time is too slow. Riders look for courage and well-roundedness in eventing horses, which can cost anywhere from \$25,000 to \$1 million each.

All 12 of the recent deaths occurred during the cross-country phase as riders attempted to clear obstacles, including some that were startlingly simple. Most of the deaths resulted from what are called rotational falls, somersaulting flips similar to Mr. Chiacchia's.

Beyond that, Mr. Phillips said, "There isn't any common thread."

As courses designed by Mr. Phillips and others create new challenges for elite competitors, amateur riders say that lower-level courses have also become more difficult in order to prepare aspiring riders for the next level.

"It's not galloping cross-country over natural obstacles anymore," said Ilana Gareen, an amateur rider and assistant professor of community health at Brown. "I liked the fact that you could go to eventing and just be a good rider, do well, and have fun."

Mr. Chiacchia's fall, said Anastasia Curwood, an amateur rider who teaches African-American history at [Vanderbilt University](#), "was kind of a tipping point for a large number of people to get active and try to make some change."

Commenters on equestrian online message boards have focused much of their venom on Mr. Phillips, calling for him to step down. Mr. Phillips posted a response on the eventing association's Web site, accusing his critics of being in "a frenzied tailspin using the anonymity of cyberspace to cast a dark shadow over the future of the sport."

Mr. Phillips holds much sway over who is selected for the Olympic team. According to event organizers, riders make a point of competing on courses he designs.

As an existing safety precaution, competitors are encouraged to review the courses in advance and communicate any concerns they have to "rider representatives," who then inform event organizers. Mr. Phillips said he received no complaints on the Red Hills course, only compliments, and said he considered Mr. Chiacchia's crash a fluke.

Top competitors, coaches and course designers argue that the sport's death and injury toll is most likely related to an influx of new riders to the sport. Participation in eventing competitions in the United States has grown by 36 percent over the past decade; riders filled roughly 46,000 competition slots in 2007, according to the association.

"You have people who didn't grow up fox hunting or going on wild rides the way we did," said Mick Costello, an event rider who builds cross-country courses. "They haven't been used to tumbling falls. They get a thrill out of going fast, and a lot of them aren't ready."

Mr. Costello and others acknowledge that the increasing skill of top riders has pushed them to create more complex courses. They have recently been designing "speed bumps" to slow the riders, to little avail. "These people are so good, they just take it in stride," he said.

The current debate over safety comes nine years after another rash of deaths shook the eventing community. In 1999, five British riders died in a matter of months and calls flooded in to make cross-country courses safer.

In response, British organizers developed frangible pins that can be inserted into certain fences to allow the

rail to drop when a horse hits it. Although the pins have been available since 2001 and have been shown to be effective in helping to prevent rotational falls, they are used in only 4 percent of obstacles in Britain, where they are mandatory on certain fences. They are even scarcer in the United States.

Some eventing organizers say the use of frangible pins is not widespread because they cannot be used on all fences and are perceived to be too expensive to install.

"I know that they're quite expensive, and your average organizer finds the cost prohibitive," said Katie Lindsay, the competition director for the eventing association's 2008 national championships. "So they will avoid building the type of fence where you can use the frangibles on." The pins cost about \$70 per fence, according to Mr. Costello, who is the United States distributor for the pins.

British Eventing, the governing body of the sport in Britain, is working with an engineering company to develop new mechanisms that can be used in a wider variety of fences.

Scant data exists on how often accidents happen, and why. The Fédération Equestre Internationale, the sport's international governing body, has only recently begun to require member countries to collect the same data. Safety information on the U.S.E.A.'s Web site includes detailed injury data for 2005 and 2006, for example, but provides only fatality data for other years.

Mr. Chiacchia has been active in the safety debate. In December, he was named chairman of a task force created to address safety issues. The group is expected to propose changes later this month to the United States Equestrian Federation, the rule-making body for all equestrian sports. In January, the international federation held a convention in Copenhagen on safety in eventing.

Like many equestrian athletes, eventers say they accept a certain level of risk, given that their fate is linked to a 1,000-pound animal with a mind of its own. The chance of falling off a horse was less than a tenth of 1 percent for riders who competed in 2005 and 2006, according to the eventing association's data.

Watching a prominent rider like Mr. Chiacchia fall shook many others, especially when they learned he was competing on an intermediate course because his 7-year-old horse, Baron Verdi, was not experienced. The horse was not hurt.

His friends in the eventing community are helping run his farm in Ocala, Fla. Mr. Chiacchia makes a living through teaching, training horses, corporate sponsorships and by riding breeders' horses, which improves their value. Prize money is not as significant — the winner at Red Hills won about \$6,000, plus the use of a Mercedes for a year.

Mr. Chiacchia sustained rib, lung and head injuries and has made slow progress. He can stand for short periods and hold brief conversations, said his brother, Daniel Chiacchia.

Although the family says it is encouraged by his progress — especially the return of his sense of humor, they say — it is unclear if he will make a complete recovery, let alone ride again. The family knows Mr. Chiacchia believes in improving the safety of the sport but considers his a "freak accident."

Mr. Chiacchia does not remember the fall, and his brother said he still refuses to believe that it was true. "That's almost insulting," he said, "to tell my brother that he fell off a horse."