CROSS COUNTRY COURSE DESIGN

A Pony Club Chief Coaches Directive

The results of the recent Trials prompted Ann Graves to ask the question "Are we doing the right thing by our PC members with the courses that we are producing these days?" She presented a paper to the recent CCP meeting, titled **SOME THOUGHTS ON CROSS COUNTRY COURSE DESIGN** which was endorsed by all present, and so from this, these hints have been revised from an earlier directive.

Aims of a Cross Country Course

1 to test the horses speed and. jumping ability.
2 to test the rider's skill in guiding the horse and riding it within its means to complete the course safely and quickly.
3 to provide safe, challenging courses that teach and encourage horses and riders as they move up through the grades. They may scare some riders, preferably not those in the lower grades, but not the horses.

The FEI course designing directives – and they are for the higher grades! – are :

- All courses should offer a **positive experience**.
- Horses and riders should be encouraged and have their **confidence built**, not destroyed.
- We should look after the more experienced riders whilst giving **the less experienced the opportunity to benefit;**
- We should aim to get a good percentage (30%) of clear jumping rounds, not necessarily within the time, and only a **very few eliminations**, i.e. those who are not up to standard.

These are so much more important at the lower grades.

Pony Club is, among other things, a **training ground** for young riders and this should be our object when we build XC courses for them. CD's must understand that courses must prepare horses and riders for the next level of competition so need to be of the correct degree of difficulty. Competitors will have prepared for that level; it is not fair if they arrive at the competition and find that the test is too difficult thus producing an unacceptable risk. Conversely going clear over a below standard course, leaves the competitor under the illusion that they are perhaps ready for the next level thereby encouraging a risk at the next level that may be unacceptable.

We should remember that there are still another **four grades** for Eventers above our Gr1 before they are at the top level of competition. Gr1 is **only Pre-Novice standard** – it is not even Novice – and therefore even our Gr1 course should not be asking difficult questions. Grade 3 is Introductory! Therefore one of the objects we should have in the back of our mind is "**what are we teaching them**?" when we present them with a certain fence or combination.

At the **lower levels** we should build inviting fences that the riders will ride at with pleasure, and not ones that will eliminate them. They need a **wide face** to encourage riders to ride forward to them. In most cases Gr3 fences should **not be a miniature version** of Gr1. The 'fly' fences could be but not the majority. Even at our championships, which is likely to be the **most difficult** they encounter in a season, all riders should be looking forward to their XC, not worrying about it.

Naturally we need to ask **more questions** as they go up the grades so Gr2 can have one or two fences to think about and Gr1 can have a few technical ones that do ask the riders to think how to approach it and which line they will take.

Courses for all grades should **start** with **t**he first four or five being **very inviting fences –** wide-faced (4 m) galloping type fences – to get both the riders' and the horses' confidence going. Then one can start to put in a few more testing fences. The most **difficult fences should be after half way**, but not right near the end when the horses may be tired.

We **do** need to introduce a few **technical fences in the lower grades** so they are not presented with them for the first time when they are up in height, therefore Gr3 should have one or two. However, in most cases an **option** should be offered. Remember we do not want to eliminate them.

Hints on Design

1 Ensure most jumps have a **good wide frontage**, especially for the lower grades – at least 12 feet, preferably 14 or more. This encourages bolder riding and gives a wider range of take off, useful when it is wet. One can always put 2 portables side-by-side to give the extra width, or put brush wings either side of them.

2 The **first four or five fences** should be substantial, flowing and encourage the horse to gallop on in a good rhythm to give confidence. The **bigger the building material** the better.

3 **More testing and technical jumps**, such as water, 'skinnies' apexes or difficult combinations – e.g. bounces or lines that are not straight – which cannot be attacked should be from one to three quarters of the way around. It is an optical illusion that the narrower the fence the higher it looks.

4 **Some narrower jumps** (min. width 1.5m), to test obedience should be included for the higher grades. A few may be introduced at the lower ones, but slower options should be offered for the more technical jumps in **all our** grades. **All bounces** shall have options.
One should expect certain more testing fences, where particular skills are asked for, to have more penalties at them, but others should be 'let up' fences so make them as inviting as possible.

5 The **last two or three jumps** should be substantial but not athletically demanding or difficult for a tired horse. But the last fence should not be too easy as mistakes are often made by riders relaxing and speeding over it.

6 Take advantage of elements that offer opportunities in the natural terrain, but ensure that they are placed at a suitable time in the course. Therefore the line the course takes and the **timing and placement** of certain fences must be carefully considered.

7 Consider the **expected conditions** for the time of the year the event is to be held – if wet or bright sunshine likely. Many areas will not be suitable in wet conditions. Steep hills then can present an extra problem. Obstacles looking straight into the sun can be most difficult. Check its position is not unsighting the fence at the time of day it is likely to be jumped. A fence may become unjumpable as the sun moves. Also take care when jumping into dark areas that the fence is not camouflaged by shadow. Use lighter coloured building material for these. If very hilly consider a shorter course.

8 Develop a **well balanced course**. Where possible a course should include:- Verticals / spreads, Ditches, Banks, Water, Drops, Brush and/or bullfinch, and utilise some combinations and options. Other technical ones could be skinny, apexes or a bounce combination. **Offer alternative options** at the more technical ones for low grades.

9 **Avoid false ground lines**, e.g. hay racks. Provide bales or other filling that gives a good ground line in front of high point.

The following recommendations have recently been added to the FEI's Cross Country Design Guidelines (version 1.2):

At one star (Novice) level

- *Narrow fences to be a minimum of 1.5 metres jumpable width. (Jumpable width to be between the flags).*
- *Maximum of 4 narrow fences*
- *Bounce can be used - but not compulsory*
- *Up to 5 combinations and related distances, including water, all of which should be on the last ¾ of the course.*

These are for Novice level. Our courses are all below that level, so one should consider decreasing the numbers by one for each grade, i.e. narrow fences <u>maximum</u> – 3 for gr 1, 2 for gr 2 and 1 for gr 3, and combinations / related distance similarly reduced.

REQUIREMENTS OF SPECIFIC OBSTACLES

See Annex 5 for dimensions for all grades.

Note: All portable fences must be fixed solidly to the ground. Spiral fixing is to be recommended.

Apexes: The angle should not be more than 60° (less for the lower grades) with the top filled in to prevent the horse getting his legs caught in it.

Brush Jumps: Should be solidly packed. The back rail should not be higher than the front rail.

Bullfinches: Ensure filling remains the same throughout competition. Have more on hand if possible. Remove old spiky twigs in old brush or bullfinches.

Banks: Must be built months before competition to be allowed to consolidate. This applies to anything involving earth moving.

Ditches: The bottom must be solid as for water jumps. Take off rails are advisable with bevelled edge on landing side to avoid injury.

Drops: If using a maximum drop ideally build up to it with a smaller drop preceding it in the course.
For large drops have the landing running away to lessen jar on the horse's legs. Never build a fence so they drop into a rising bank. Don't use a maximum drop into the water.

Log Piles: Logs should be solidly packed so they cannot be dislodged preferably fastened. The take - off edge should be chamfered or protected with a round or half round rail.

Triple bars: Do not build these to maximum base spread as profile of the fence becomes too flat.

Water Jumps: Bottom must be solid through-out. Dennis Piggott recipe for a solid base is if boggy establish a bed of rock (jack - hammered flat). Then add a 10-1 mixture of cement and scree or gravel, with a layer of blue metal on top.
When designing it make sure that you have plenty of options for the entry and the exit. An exit for a lower grade could be the entry for a higher one. It is recommended that the entry into water should not be more than a beach entry for the lower grades, a drop with no fence for grade 3, but a fence may be used for Grades 2 and 1.
The jump in to the water should be rounded on top, e.g. a large telegraph pole to encourage bascule which avoids injury from the dragging of legs.
A fence before the water shall not be placed closer than two strides for Grade 2 and lower, and one stride for Grade 1. Do not make it maximum. This shouldn't change whether a beach entry or a fence into the water.
Minimum length if it has a bank or fence out is now 9 m for EA so new ones should comply with this.

Narrow Fences: Keep at a minimum and provide option. In wet weather the take off and landing can deteriorate.

Obstacles in Fence Lines: Provide solid spar wings higher than the obstacle.

Painted Fences: Utilise where they look appropriate e.g. white gate; entrance; garden fence. They are not really appropriate on cross country.

Practice Fence: Allow room and provide an upright and spread or at least a good log. Must have red and white flags.

Tables: Provide a ground line - seat or hay. Preferably have a slight elevation towards the back.

COMMENTS

Shane Rose – Cross country fences need to be made from large solid materials with a wide approach, not built like show jumping courses.

Ann Graves – They need a wide face to encourage riders to ride forward to them. Time is part of XC riding, therefore we need to give the riders the opportunity to make time, not ask them to slow down to show jumping speed for every fence in order to stop their horse from running off.

Andrew Hartnett and Allan Howard – As a pony club builder I would prefer to have every rider complete the cross country course without elimination or a fall.