

► HORSE SHOWS

BETWEEN ROUNDS WITH:

ARMAND
LEONE

What Happens Next?

In the last of this three-part series about “the mollification of American show jumping,” our columnist looks at how we can begin to turn riders back into horsemen.

PHOTO BY DOUGLAS LEES

How jumping today is becoming less accessible to more Americans as the costs of participating increase. This is a dangerous trend, because the wealthy rider has become the new normal. Fifty years ago, riders made their way up the ranks riding both good and bad horses owned by others; now, most grand prix riders or their families own their own horses.

The youth of today need to avoid riding on easy street. Riding only nice horses and nice courses is fun and nice to watch, but it doesn't develop the underlying foundation a horseman needs to be a great rider. So, how can we stop the mollification of the sport?

Let kids be kids and ponies be ponies. At a young age, the least important part of riding should be showing. 4-H, U.S. Pony Clubs, riding bareback, tent pegging, jumping on and off, taking care of the ponies—these will all do more for creating a stronger generation of riders. Learning how to fall, and not fall, is so much easier when the distance to the ground is small. Learning how to get that pony over the wall or around the ring is more important than a leadline blue ribbon. Kids and ponies need to mix it up to shake out the best.

Let's restore the essence of foxhunting



“A foxhunting revival would help restore a realistic base to the sport,” says Armand Leone.

“Over hill, over dale, tally ho is wholly different than Perfect Prep and whoa, whoa, whoa.”

to our sport. Today's hunters cater to the meek—any resemblance to riding a foxhunter has long since vanished. A foxhunting revival would help restore a realistic base to the sport. Over hill, over dale, tally ho is wholly different than Perfect Prep and whoa, whoa, whoa.

Remember that horses were originally ridden across the fields and terrain for transportation. They were the first four-wheel drive vehicles. Jumping ditches, brushes and waters should be looked at as part of the horse's and rider's education, not an artificial contrivance. U.S. Equestrian needs to enlist our older trainers to help teach this new generation how to teach horses and riders to jump natural obstacles. Removing these obstacles from competition only ensures the further softening of the sport.

Competition managers need to put natural obstacles of varying difficulty back in the show arena, and bonus points should be awarded for jumping them instead of the post and rail. The snowboard terrain park is a perfect example of how differing difficulty obstacles are available to use depending on one's skills and abilities. As soon as you cannot win a class unless you jump the ditch, water or bank, trainers, riders and horses will figure out how to do it. Lesser trainers and riders can still have fun competing, but like a Gambler's Choice class, you can't win unless you try and successfully jump the Joker.

Lastly, children must learn how to groom and take care of their horses from the ground up. You can never be a great horseman and rider if you arrive

at the barn in your boots and breeches, get on the horse or horses and ride, then give it back to the groom and leave. If you want to understand the sport, wear jeans and get dirty taking care of your horse. When it's time, put on your chaps and ride, and then take them off and take care of your horse again.

Look at a problem that arises in a pony or horse as an opportunity to learn how to correct and manage it, to grow as a rider and then put that lesson in your "tool kit." If you avoid working through problems on the way up, you will never be able to manage them when they arise later on.

The future of American show jumping is in jeopardy, unless we recognize that well-meaning efforts to make everything fun don't make good riders. Like a marriage, good times only exist because of working through bad times. Good performances, especially under adverse conditions, are only possible if both horses and riders are comfortable facing adversity and have the necessary confidence and respect in each other to succeed. The ability to be a great rider requires self-learning from working through mistakes and prob-

lems as well as good instruction.

By promoting the grassroot skills of horsemanship, we can rebuild the core strength of the sport. Our young riders need their Thelwell ponies to love, care for, fall off, and get back on. We need our trainers to learn how to ride natural obstacles and then how to teach them. Trainers need to require riding without stirrups for their adult riders,

even for a few minutes, to build a more solid seat. They need to recognize that by limiting the questions asked of their riders and horses, they never get them out of their comfort zone and build their abilities. By refocusing our attention on our children's fundamental horsemanship skills and not on lead-line blues, we can rebuild the grit we need to be successful in the future. 🐾



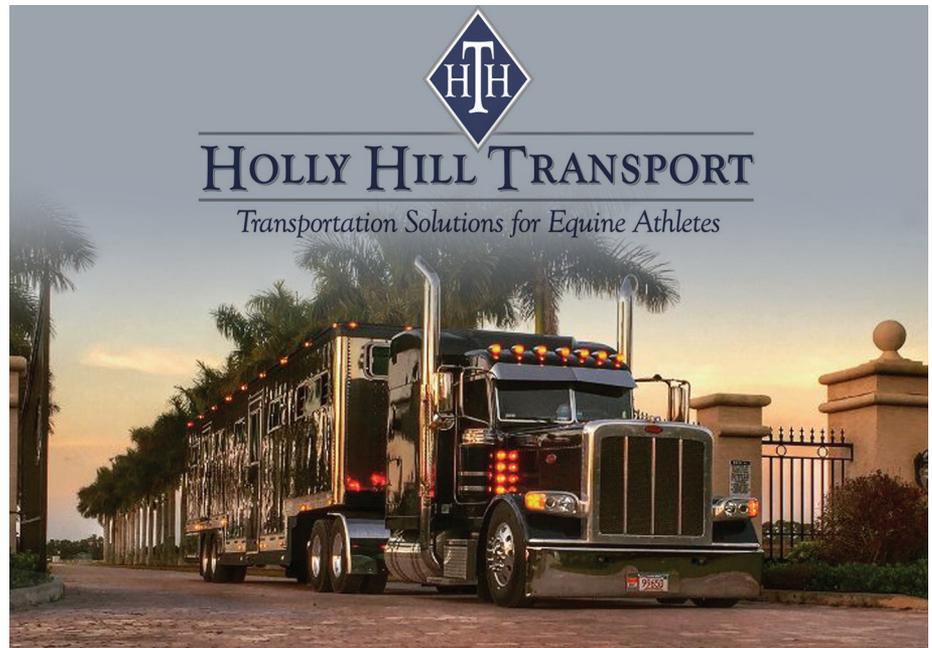
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Armand Leone of Leone Equestrian Law LLC is a business professional with expertise in health care, equestrian sports and law. An equestrian athlete dedicated to fair play, safe sport and clean competition, Leone served

as a director on the board of the U.S. Equestrian Federation and was USEF vice president of international high performance programs for many years. He served on USEF and U.S. Hunter Jumper Association special task forces on governance, safety, drugs and medications, trainer certification and coach selection.

Leone is co-owner at his family's Ri-Arm Farm in Oakland N.J., where he still rides and trains. He competed in FEI World Cup Finals and Nations Cups. He is a graduate of the Columbia Business School in New York and the Columbia University School of Law. He received his M.D. from New York Medical College and his B.A. from the University of Virginia.

Leone Equestrian Law LLC provides legal services and consultation for equestrian professionals. For more information, visit equestriancounsel.com or follow them on Facebook at facebook.com/leoneequestrianlaw.



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