

Interview with Roger Haller

FEI Technical Delegate

2003 Badminton Horse Trials

Interviewer: Melvin H. Cox – SportsQuest International

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00:28:59:16

Melvin Cox:

Thank you for taking some time to speak with (us). We had a couple of questions regarding the technical side of this Championship.

00:29:06:27

Roger Haller:

Fair Enough!

00:29:07:13

Melvin Cox:

We know that there were changes made to the cross-country course, that there was sand constantly being added to the dressage ring. Can you sort of review the process that (you) went through in your position as Technical Delegate.

00:29:19:12

Roger Haller:

Sure, I think you have to appreciate that with a four star competition, we're always starting out with an ideal goal of what

we're trying to achieve – of having the best horses and riders come out on top and, and penalizing the horses and riders that perhaps have not yet had the training or experience that the others have already gained. But what we also want to do is to make a course and a competition that is fair to everybody. And that has a little bit of a different bearing on the overall outlook of the competition. It's fair to say that coming in, Badminton is treated as the strongest Three-Day Event in the world. It has traditionally from year to year has (sic) the strongest field of riders and horses, the most experienced field. Um, so I think that you're looking at conditions, um as far as the basic tests that are designed, um conditions that are quite high, the standard is very high, because this is Badminton.

Then, along the way, we ran into a couple of speed bumps. Certainly, it started to rain last week, a week ago Friday, as I understand. I did not arrive in England until Monday. But, it started to rain, after seven weeks of very dry weather. The course had been worked on prior to that point, with a lot of aeration, a lot of watering, a lot of work to try to make dry footing good. And then, all of a sudden, the rain started, and we were trying to make wet footing be - hold up to support the horses. I think that that's been the major focus all of this week.

Certainly, we started out with the arena on Thursday, and we were very lucky that most of the storms blew on through. And, I would say that the footing in the Dressage arena at the end of the day looked like it had some wear and tear, but it was not much different from the footing at the beginning of the day. And we started out Friday morning, basically in that, in that mode. Doing the Dressage on Friday all day and in the rain, conditions did prove

to be something that was a challenge. I think the lads did a great job, quite honestly, bringing in the grit and the other materials, and they were constantly on top of trying to keep all the places where horses were doing major movements, like going to a halt from a canter, and kicking off from (sic) a canter from a walk and things like that that – all the places where they had to do transitions. The extended canters back down to the collected canters at the end of the long sides. We were looking all, at all of those places first, because those are the ones that were under the greatest pressure. And I think they did keep basically on top of it. I think the proof of that perhaps is that you had some of the strongest tests towards the end of the day on Friday. It's always easier for a horse that's in good balance and has good impulsion to carry himself over poorer ground, and for a horse that doesn't have that balance it's more difficult. But, I think that the proof in the pudding was that the leaders were all on Friday afternoon, apart from Piia Pantsu.

Saturday morning, I think that we, we faced a different situation. We looked at the course on Friday afternoon, we spent about four hours, the Director and the Chief Course Builder, and my assistant and I, focused on the Cross Country Course, and the Steeplechase Course, because that was the place where footing was going to be the most critical. We were quite comfortable with the warm-up Phase A, and the recovery Phase C, that we were on good ground, because it had been holding up all week. But, we were most focusing on phases B and D.

Certainly, the preparations for Phase B, the Steeplechase, that was done in last two years, which gave us permanent takeoffs and landings on every fence and which gave us... [Coughs]

Excuse me, I am sorry, I'm going to have to get a swallow (of water)

00:33:00:22

Melvin Cox:

Sure, sure!

00:33:04:22

Roger Haller:

Certainly, the work that has been done on the Steeplechase Course in the last two years provided some, some strong base of support, so that we were pretty comfortable with the 'Chase course as it turned out. All the takeoffs and landing were permanent. They had a grass cover on top of (a) thin layer of soil, with stone bases below, and those held up very well throughout Saturday. They did trot up divots throughout the day, but basically I think that that worked out very well for the horses.

The turns, we did have a little bit of wear and tear, but we were already ready as far as this was concerned. We put what are called "dogs" on the racecourse. But, these were some sheep hurdles along the lower turn, which got dug up a little bit, put them on the lower turn and asked the riders to move little bit farther out. And we had already measured that, and we knew that we needed to add four seconds to the Steeplechase times of those horses. And they were galloping on top of the ground at the end of the day, so I'm quite comfortable that the Steeplechase, which has caused some problems in the past, really worked out quite well.

Cross-Country then becomes the focus, and I guess in any Three-Day Event it is the focus. We had a plan of attack from Friday

afternoon, as far as the critical points, which would I say, it's pretty safe to say it's the places where all of the horses have to go. We can either be talking about narrow faced fences, where a lot of horses will be jumping in within a narrow stretch, or you can talk about distance or agility problems, such as bounces – where the horses land and takeoff from one point. And, we put a great deal of focus into working on those particular areas. I think that those actually held up fairly well, except for one case – and I'll talk about that in a minute.

But where we're looking at the turning things that went through Huntsman's Close, which has traditionally been a slippery area, when we're looking at going up and down hill in The Quarry, where we're looking at going down into The Coffin and coming back out, uh, I think that the land held up well on, on Saturday. The, the one thing that we made adjustments for, because we, we analyzed the situations and we thought that by Friday afternoon we were in an impossible situation, we looked at The Coffin, and we just thought that we could not work on that footing enough, and we could not have faith in the weatherman to get that footing right, and I think that taking out the "A" element of the coffin was a successful effort. I don't think it made that fence, the last two elements, any easier for the riders, but I think it worked out quite well.

I think the one area where the footing certainly did not hold up well was the Carisma Puzzle. I think there's no question that that obstacle, which had to be taken out, changed character during the course of the day. It was causing slight problems, but was very forgiving, for the first half of the competition and then was increasingly starting to cause problems as we were going along,

until we reached the point where we realized that the horses were not realizing what the question was that was being asked. We had done so much repair to the ground that they could not tell the side of the, far side of the ditch, from the top, and they didn't know where to put their feet down. And I think that that became obvious when we had two riders in a row have problems there leading to falls. And we just said, 'this is it', we, we, we can not repair this any more, took the fence out, and then had a subsequent list of things to have to do to the competition in accordance with the rules. But it was, I think, the right decision. I think you can not second-guess a consideration of safety.

00:36:28:20

Melvin Cox:

Certainly, certainly!

Um, The sport is sort of in a transition period. We talked earlier about, um, the changes that have been made to the Olympic Games format. Which a number of people find pretty upsetting. Um, in your opinion, from where you sit, (in) what direction are we going?

00:36:48:01

Roger Haller:

Well, I think it's certainly the U.S. point of view that, I think, that participation in the Olympic Games was a very vital goal, and was an obvious goal, and the efforts made by the FEI in order to stay in the Olympic Games were well worthwhile, and well considered.

We actually think that it's a strength of our sport to say that we have a traditional part of our sport, that is Horse Trials - which have been going on for more than 50 years. Horse Trials, that

could be used, a format that could be used in the Olympic format. We have to recognize when competition sites are chosen for reasons other than their success as a Three-Day Event site. And Olympic Games are chosen for a lot of other reasons than equestrian sports, and times of year are chosen for a lot of other reasons than equestrian sports, or even endurance athletes in general. We realize that we have to make some compromises, in order to have our sport continue to be participant in the games. And so we think that that's worthwhile. And, I think that you can apply it, not only at the Olympic level, but you can apply it at the Continental level, for example at the Pan American Games or at the Asian Games; you can apply it on a regional basis at the Caribbean Games, the Central American Games or anything similar to that. When we come to Championships, where the FEI chooses competitions, they're chosen from events that have a heritage of offering Three-Day Events, they're chosen from among organizers that have a history of organizing Three-Day Events, they're chosen from among sites that have a history of offering good Three-Day Events. Then...

00:38:21:08

Melvin Cox:

Just a second. [Battery change]

OK, let's start again... Thanks!

00:38:24:03

Roger Haller:

When we're talking about Championships, or FEI Championships in particular, we're talking about a different baby, really. This is a competition, or these Championships are competitions, that are

chosen by the FEI, from among countries that have organized Three-Day Events, from among organizers that organize Three-Day Events, from among sites that have offered Three-Day Events, and we think there is no reason to change then from Three-Day Event format to a Horse Trials format. And we think that we would be even stronger, as a discipline, if we had parallel goals at the one star level, two star level, three star level and four star level of competitions of significance, some of which were Three-Day Events and others were CIC's, or International Horse Trials. We don't think that this is a weakness, we don't think this is a step back, we think this is a step forward.

When you go beyond that, you can say, "What about qualifying procedures"? Because, this is an integral part of our entire discipline. And, we don't see any difference between the need to have riders qualified in terms of experience and exposure to different obstacles and exposure to different conditions, we don't see any need to have any differentiation, whether you're qualifying for the Olympic Games, in a CIC format, or a World Championship, in a Three-Day Event format. So we think that the qualifying standards, we're now talking technical terms – Article 506, we think that those could be the same, as you work up the four levels through eventing. Because either way that you go, we are really concerned about safety, and we want to make sure that our horses and riders have the sufficient experience to understand how to deal with different conditions.

And there's no question in my mind, (that) Athens next summer, in Mediterranean heat and humidity, with a 5,000 and change meter cross country course, with 45 efforts, and with all the pressure that's on the riders, that's going to be a significant endurance

experience. The fact that they don't have (Phases) A, B and C to warm them up, I think is, is something that all of the coaches and riders in the world are really going to have to examine over the next twelve months, to find out exactly what they need to do in order to be right, so that they start out of the starting box ready to gallop over the course. I don't think I would like to tackle a four star course without having done A, B and C before, and we're going to have to learn how to do it.

So I think that there are a lot of things within the changes that are occurring right now that we're going to have to reflect on, and give our best guesses as to how it's going to come out, and then analyze after we have done this to see where we've been right, and where we could have done better, and on we go. I think our sport can learn from this, and our sport can get stronger from it.

00:41:00:27

Melvin Cox:

A follow-up question. You were the Course Designer for two events in The States that had particularly hot conditions...

00:41:08:03

Roger Haller:

Yes...[Smiles]

00:41:08:13

Melvin Cox:

...The World Championship in Lexington in (19) 78.

00:41:11:18

Roger Haller:

That's right...

00:41:11:22

Melvin Cox:

...and the Olympic Games in Atlanta. What have we learned, since 1978 about competing in hot weather?

00:41:18:07

Roger Haller:

If you've ever compared 1978 to 1996, you would realize that what we learned made Atlanta a successful event and made 1978, and the World Championships, an unsuccessful event. I was asked the question by a journalist in New Jersey, who I had know for an awful long time, and she said, "OK, Roger, the Olympic Games are now over. Tell me what you think is really different"? And I said, "I think the best way to describe the difference, if you remember the Serpent from 1978, which was one of the most significant obstacles on that course, that obstacle would have been 400 meters past the finish of the Olympic Course, and you still would have had 1,200 meters to run.

So we've learned that when we have conditions are stressful, we take those extra elements, whether its heat and humidity, or rain, or whatever it is, we take those extra elements into account when we also add up the distance, and the speed, and the terrain and the footing and the – all the other factors that are involved. And I think that that is the right way for our sport to move forward. Just that concept, and the acceptance of that as a principle, I think is

very sound logically, and it actually worked in Atlanta. So I think our sport has moved forward a great deal.

The funny side benefit from that is it helps our sport to be a discipline that can be enjoyed and adapted to countries around the world which don't have the ideal conditions of, say, a Lexington, Kentucky in April, or a Badminton, in England, in May, or a Burghley in England, in September. But may be a Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in any time of the year, or in Bangkok, Thailand, or wherever. We can have our sport adapt, because we understand the principles of how we have to account for all that factors that place stress on our horses and riders.

00:43:10:26

Melvin Cox:

Fantastic!

One last question. In the press conference earlier today, you mentioned the fact that the eventual winner, Supreme Rock, was a former hunter. And you mentioned, sort of the, the old, the older horses, in the old days, twenty years ago, were all former hunters. And now, we have horses that do not know anything about natural lines. Can you elaborate on that for us?

00:43:32:28

Roger Haller:

I think one of the things that we've realized, as we've been looking at, you're always looking at education, and what you can do to help horses and riders to enter our sport, and to work their way up the ladders in the sport, and everything else - through the different levels. I think one of the things that we've realized is we've had

significant changes over the last twenty years; and interestingly enough, it's not just in the United States that this has occurred, its in many countries around the world. The basic part that has changed is there are a lot of people coming into eventing that have not grown up on farms, have not grown up and gone out foxhunting, have not gone out and been hacking horses across country all of their lives. And they're coming into our discipline from a background that is in riding rings, and very controlled circumstances, where the footing is all perfect and the, everything is level, and you don't have to do anything more than stay inside the boards. That's quite different from what we meet, even on the typical cross-country course today. And I think what we need to do as a sport is to look at what we can do to help those riders and horses come into our sport, because we want to grow, there's no question that we want to attract more people to it. But we want to help them, first of all be ready to go to their first competitions, but also to make sure that we don't lose the, the attachment to the natural cross country obstacles as they work their way along. We can get so fixated on, within the guise of safety, we can get so fixated on trying to make everything perfect, that in fact we lose the fact that they still have to ride down to a straight fence, or they still have to ride down to a ditch, or they still have to ride down to an undulation in the ground that's going to throw their balance off. If we can help them to gain that experience, whether it's in clinics, or it's in schooling competitions, or it's in our regular ladder of competitions that they go through, as they work their way up the ladder, I think that in fact we're going to be helping them. I think we're doing them a disservice if we make every condition perfect along the way.

I think it's unfortunate that we had conditions yesterday that were not ideal, I think it's – you know you always, this course yesterday, under conditions like we had last week in Kentucky, would have been spectacular. We still had spectacular rides. We still had good riders going out and showing everybody how it should be done, and that was a joy to watch. But, it was really a shame that the ones who were a little bit lesser experienced, really were put under great, great pressure – and a lot of them just hadn't dealt with those kind of conditions before.

00:46:07:19

Melvin Cox:

Thank you very much, Roger, for taking some time to share with us. This is something – information that we will definitely take back to America, and share with as many people as we can.

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Roger Haller:

Well, I appreciate that!

00:46:19:06

Melvin Cox:

Thank you very much!

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