



Design Gives Shape to Event

By Alice Ritzman

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If I were going to design a golf course, I would start by walking the land, trying to get a feel for how to carve 18 holes out of the landscape. Captain Mark Phillips, designer of the cross country course for the equestrian Event at Rebecca Farm, does exactly the same thing when he designs a cross country course. He is good at it too – he designs around 50 of them each year.

Phillips was in town to meet with course builder Bert Wood and come up with a course for the event that will be held July 24-27 at Becky and Jerome Broussard's beautiful farm northwest of Kalispell. As with any event of this magnitude, attracting more than 15,000 spectators last year, it doesn't come off without continual planning and preparation.

Just as a golf course designer plans for the way the course will play from multiple sets of tee boxes, a cross country designer has to plan for how the course will ride for multiple levels of competition. The Event will attract riders from novice to CIC***W which is World Cup level. He strives to make each level be a preparation for the next level above. Each of the eight separate levels of competition must be woven seamlessly into a pattern where each has the advantage of the land's best features. "If you have to look at a fence (jump) three times, something is not right," is Phillips' philosophy.

When I speak about different levels of competition, it isn't just the riders that I'm speaking of. Horses have to go through the same learning curve and levels. In fact, Phillips tries to think and see as a horse would before he thinks as a rider. "Footing is everything," according to Phillips. He finds the best soil, and tries to put a fence approximately every 100 meters of a course that for the most advanced will be in the 3000+ meter length. This is where a great builder like Wood factors in – his job is to make all the fences look the same to a horse – a jumpable obstacle. It's the spectators who enjoy the carvings of ducks, fish, dinosaurs, and bears.

It's actually a joy for Phillips to design a course where "the tracks are dedicated to cross country," and not to feeding cattle or something else the rest of the year. The farm has excellent viewing, and offers plenty of interesting water challenges in addition to changes of elevation and some wide-open spaces.

A good course has three stages. The Beginning is where the horses get warmed up and up to speed. The Middle is "the meat" of the program, or the most difficult part. The End is where they wind down, and have some fences that make them feel good when they are finished. The job of the rider is to get the horse to a good place to jump the presenting fence. A horse needs to shorten his stride by 4-5 feet in preparation for the jump, and can't do that if the speed is too great, so a rider is constantly monitoring the pace that they're keeping.

Phillips' "day job" is shepherding our best equestrians in national and international competitions as the technical advisor to the US Equestrian Team, so he hopes the course is to the liking of our top riders. Top competitor Hawley Bennett said of last year's course, "It's a tough course, but you get perfect footing." Music to his ears!