

DERBYCROSS

THE NEXT GREAT HORSE SPORT?

by
Phil Audibert

CONTESTANTS

Capt. Jan Byyny Pam Am medalist; World Games competitor, United States

Phillip Dutton Australian turned US Citizen. 2x Olympic gold medalist, Australia and Atlanta

Boyd Martin Olympic team, Australia and winner at the Adelaide 4 star in 2003

Capt. Leslie Law 2004 Olympic Gold medalist, UK

Lesley Grant 4 star rider, Canada

Bonnie Mosser 4 star 2007 Pam Am team rider, United States

Capt. Sharon White 4 star rider, United States

Kristen Bachman 4 star rider, United States

Allison Springer 4 star rider, United States

Capt. Clark Montgomery 4 star rider, United States

Lynn Symansky 4 star rider, United States

Donna Smith member of 2006 World Games team, New Zealand

Will Coleman 4 star rider; top ranked Young Rider 2001 - 2004, United States

Kim Severson Olympian and 3 time winner of Rolex Kentucky 4 Star, United States

Shannon Lilly 3 star rider and singer of the national anthem at the event





Lynn Symansky aboard No It Tissant. (Photo by Susie Audibert)



Will Coleman, captain of Team Stubben successfully, clears the 4'9" joker fence, subtracting ten seconds from his time. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

John Gobin aboard Tenacity - Orange Crush polo player (Photo by Phil Audibert)



TV Producer, Dana Voorhees was sharing a glass of wine with close friends and professional event riders Rebecca Howard and Sinead Halpin in Ocala one evening, and they got to thinking, *How could we make this sport (eventing) a bit more spectator friendly, a bit more interesting competitively, and easier to understand?*

Pretty soon they were scribbling ideas down on cocktail napkins, which by the way, is how many a successful venture has been hatched. In this particular burst of creativity, they came up with Derbycross.

Dana sums it up like this, "We decided to extract the two great, neat phases of the sport, cross country and show jumping, and combine them into one. Make it fun, make it exciting, make it straightforward, and set it up in a way the spectators can see the entire course from where they are sitting."

She had just produced a logistically challenging five-part TV series about three-day eventing. She found the essence of the sport difficult to convey on the TV screen (too much time over too much distance). It's impossible to be everywhere at once with a camera. "I wanted to show eventing in a little bit of a different light, get people to know the horses, the riders, and the challenges, and the passion it takes to be really good at the sport."

Fast forward to Great Meadow, near the Plains in the heart of Virginia horse country this past summer and the third ever Derbycross in its young history. Tattooed and dreadlocked DJ's are blaring rock music over the PA system. Coronas and Dos Equis bristle from ice tubs. A decidedly young and hip crowd is getting in the mood as tailgate parties sprout along the rail of the event facility. Guapo's Mexican Restaurant, an event sponsor, is serving up tasty southwestern fare to the VIP crowd. People laugh, wine glasses clink. "Horse sports are normally a bit more staid," comments Dana above the din of the blaring speakers. "We decided to spice it up a little



Gonzalo Fuchi aboard Twinkle Toes - Team Dutta Corp. (Photo by Susie Audibert)

bit, add a bit more progressive spin to the sport.”

Here’s how it works. Five teams of four riders each negotiate a technical show jumping course with three-foot, nine-inch *questions*. This happens not in an arena but on the grass. Then they gallop off on a cross country course several hundred yards long that includes a variety of broad and *skinny* obstacles plus a water feature. Finally, riders return to negotiate another show jumping course, different from the first. The whole thing takes about three and a half heart-stopping minutes, and as a spectator, you see the whole thing.

Scoring is marvelously simple. “Four seconds, four faults,” explains Dana. “If you knock a rail it’s four, if you miss a fence it’s four, if you have a stop it’s four, and the fastest time wins.” At the end, riders opt whether or not to try a four-foot, nine-inch “hu-normous blue and white vertical,” known as the *joker*. If they clear it, they subtract ten seconds from their time. If they

knock it, it doesn’t count against them; so everyone tries it.

Riders are numbered one through four. First, all the number one riders go through one at a time, then the number two’s and so forth. The number three riders are always the team captains. And the number four riders?

Aha! Herein lies the rub, for this is the unexpected, the unknown, the unpredictable factor. The number four riders are polo players—really good polo players, mind you, some five and six goal guys, but generally clueless about jumping. They’ve had a little time to practice, and the jumps are lowered to two-foot, nine-inches, but still some can’t refrain from riding one handed and twisting in their saddle to make the horse turn! The crowd loves it, and in fact on this particular afternoon, it was the polo player who gave the winning team, Dutta Corporation, the edge.

Looking at the team rosters is like reading a *Who’s Who* of event riding in this

country, heavy hitters like Phillip Dutton, arguably the leading event rider in the country and Kim Severson, the leading lady nationally. She’s won at Rolex three times! Olympians, Pan Am Games team members, World Equestrian Games medalists and four-star riders abound.

The course designer was none other than Sydney Olympic Gold Medalist, David O’Connor, who among many other things is currently President of the United States Equestrian Federation. “It’s obviously helpful to have people like him behind us and supporting us - hugely helpful,” says Dana gratefully.

And the riders love it! Will Coleman, a talented young eventer, steered Toga to a fault free ride as captain of team Stubben. He even cleared the joker. “It’s a fun competition,” he says enthusiastically. “It’s exciting. It’s easy to understand. It’s a great idea! It raises awareness, a buzz, and it is fun to do.”

Also, it doesn’t hurt that the prize



Event sponsors, Dr. and Mrs. David Vos of Athena Technologies, share the victory with Derbycross winners, Dutta Corporation. From left to right: Phillip Dutton with children, Gonzalo Fuchi (polo player), Dr. and Mrs. David Vos, Team Captain, Jan Bynny and Boyd Martin behind her. (Photo by Phil Audibert)

money is nothing to sneeze at. The Dutta Corporation team brought home \$10,000. Second place Orange Crush collected \$2,000. Will Coleman says, "I think you can win more money here than you can at our fall three-star national championship. It's a sad reality, but that's probably the truth."

The reason the purse is so generous is due to the sponsors, particularly Athena Technologies. Based in Warrenton, Virginia, this high tech company is the leading manufacturer of control and navigation systems for unmanned aerial and ground vehicles, such as the drones used in Iraq and Afghanistan. It also doesn't hurt that the company's founder and CEO, Dr. David Vos, is an avid amateur equestrian.

"So I think it's great," sums up competitor, Will Coleman. "These people who started it, they did a great job. It's grown a little bit every year. Every time they do it, it seems to be a little bigger and better. I wouldn't be surprised if it eventually becomes a real draw. It should be."

That should be music to Dana

Voorhees' ears; she is already planning for next year's event. "The concept is fun," she concludes. "The people love it. The riders love it, and it's not a lot of wear and tear on the horses."

Sounds like a winning combination all the way around.

Phil Audibert has been writing and doing photography since age 16 and won three first place awards from the Virginia Press Association recently. Phil and his wife Susie, a photographer in her own right, spend their time between dogs, horses, vintage cars, land preservation, gourmet cooking and following, and photographing the Keswick foxhunt on foot.

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