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How long have you been a course designer and what got you interested initially?

About 18 years. Around that time I was asked to help build a course for a local riding club show. I would have had an interest in how a course would ride but had never built one before. The show went well and I got a lot of enjoyment out of it and decided I would like to know a bit more about the whole process. Shortly afterwards I went to a show where Steve Hickey was the course designer and started to go to some shows with him. Around that time the horse I was riding, suffered a fractured splint bone and was off for over a year. I had a bit more time to do course designing and it just went from there.

Did you compete as a rider before you started designing courses and how important or necessary do you think that this is for course designers?

I did ride but I wasn't very good. I jumped up to 1.20m level and I competed at Horse Trials (Eventing) to 1 star level. I still love Eventing as a sport.

I believe that understanding what a rider and horse finds difficult or easy, especially young horses, is very important and having ridden, a course designer should have a better understanding of what is fair or unfair. That said, if a person is willing to learn, the lack of riding experience can be overcome in my opinion.

Very few among us are entirely self taught and most have been lucky enough to have had a few guiding lights throughout our formative years as a course designer. Who have been the most important influences in your career?

Initially Steve Hickey was a great help and influence on me. He always emphasised the importance of building flowing courses. In Ireland Gerry Byrne and Paul Duffy were always very helpful. In recent times I have been able to work with Alan Wade who is a top level course designer now.

I have also been very lucky to be able to work with top course designers like Frank Rothenberger, Bob Ellis, and Peter Gillespie. I would like to think that I learned something from each of them. They were all very helpful and keen to pass on their knowledge

I have also found that listening to top riders can be very helpful especially those who produce young horses and those who coach.

There comes a time in every course designer's career when they eventually get the chance to build their first really important class. Can you remember your first ever Grand Prix/major competition and how was it?

My first "big" class was the National Grand Prix at Louth County Horse Show. It is my local show, the first outdoor show on grass of that year, and all our top riders were there. In the end it went well but not without lots of anxious moments.

What has been your career highlight to date?

The first time I was asked to design the National classes in the Simmonscourt arena at Dublin Horse Show was definitely a highlight.

I was very lucky to do a World Cup Qualifier in Estonia a few years ago. That was good and this year I was invited to do the 4 day "Zagreb International Summer Show", in Croatia, which I really enjoyed. This show has run for 52 years and it was a privilege to be involved in it. My good friend Edi Petrovic was instrumental in getting me invited to that show.

Although we are all honoured and proud to build at championship and Grand Prix level, these are often times of great stress and pressure. On the other hand, we all have other shows that we really enjoy doing, and look forward to, whether because of the atmosphere, the entertainment or just the weather. What has been your favourite show over the years and why?

CSIO Dublin is my favourite show no question. It is a long week but a brilliant show to be involved in. Mullingar International in June, Tattersals in July are also favourites. To be honest most shows I do are very enjoyable

Dublin Horse Show in the grounds of the RDS, Ballsbridge, is a very special show. The crowds, the atmosphere, and the variety of classes all make for a really good show. Besides showjumping there is pony club, working hunter, showing, demonstrations, etc. Every year you meet some-one that you haven't seen for a while.

Over the years we have all seen some fantastic horses and riders compete. Which combination has been your favourite to watch and what made them so special?

One of the best aspects of being part of the team at CSIO Dublin is getting to see some of the world's best riders including John Whitaker, Kevin Staut, Bezie Madden, Eddie Macken, Paul Darragh, etc compete. I have also seen Meredith Michaels Beerbaum, Ludger Beerbaum, Marcus Ehning. The best riders always make it look so easy. Marcus Ehning would be a favourite of mine as a rider and a combination I loved watching would be Eric Lamaze and Hickstead.

What would be your ultimate future career highlight as a Course Designer? Is there a show that you would dearly love to officiate at but haven't yet had the opportunity?

Even when I was young I always enjoyed going to the RDS for Dublin show so it is a favourite of mine. I have been lucky to have worked at CSIO Dublin for a number of years and have designed the courses for the national young horse finals.

This year I also designed the courses for the International 7 and 8 year old classes. Like most Course designers I would like to get the chance to design at as high a level as possible. That having been said I normally enjoy whatever job I am invited to do

When you are helping or advising younger Course Designers, what are the qualities that you like to see that make a good Course Designer?

To be a good course designer I think is necessary to be willing to learn from every course that you design. Walk lots of courses by different course designers and watch how they ride. You need to be willing to put in the long hours, be able to admit to mistakes and learn from them, to be able to work as part of a team especially with regard to other officials, and to have an empathy with the riders. Theirs is not always an easy job

It is also important to make the time to work with more experienced course designers. This demands a lot of commitment but to do a good job it is necessary to learn from the best available course designers

We will never know it all so it is important to keep an open mind and keep learning. I have found over the years that the more you learn the more you realise there is much more to learn.

On a similar note, what do you really dislike to see in courses? What have you seen in show jumping classes that you feel is either harmful to horses, riders or the sport in general?

I don't like courses that don't ride fluently. At the highest level everything is tested but when horses are learning it is very important to encourage free, forward movement in order to allow horses to stay in balance and to jump out of their rhythm.

Young horse classes should be free flowing and rhythmical and horses will then learn to enjoy their job. If this happens when they are young they have a very good chance of reaching their full potential.

We must never try to trap the horse or rider. That said I think that the standard of course design is very high at most shows nowadays.

On a final note, looking back over all the competitions you have built in the past, can you pick a favourite? Please attach a copy of the course plan and explain in some detail what made it your favourite and why?

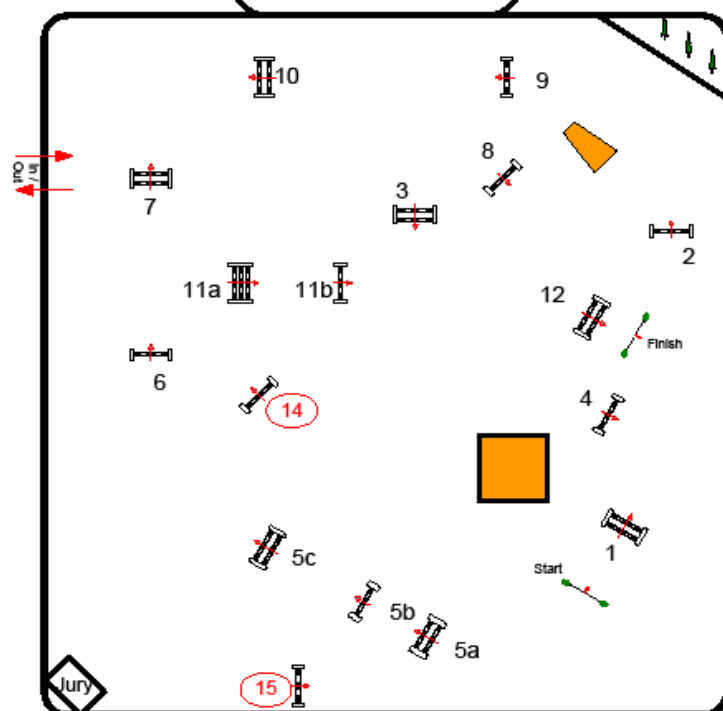
It's difficult to pick just one but I liked this one from this year.



Horseware Louth County Show 2011



HORSEWARE IRELAND GRAND PRIX



Class No.: 8
 Grand Prix
 Competition with one jump-off
 24 April 2011
 Start: 15:00

Table: A
 National RG:
 FEI RG / Art. 238.2 A2
 Height: 1.50 m

Speed: 350 m/min
 Length: 510 m
 Time allowed: 88 sec
 Time limit: 178 sec

Obstacles: 12
 Efforts: 15
 Penalty sec
 Closed combination:

1st Jump-off:
14-7-3-4-5b-5c-15-1
 Length: 320 m
 Time allowed: 56 sec
 Time limit: 110 sec

2nd Jump-off:
 Length: 0 m
 Time allowed: 0 sec
 Time limit: 0 sec

*Course Design
 Tom Holden*

This class was the first round of our Premier series which is supported by our association, sponsored by Horseware Ireland and has a minimum prize fund of €12,000. Louth County is the first outdoor show on grass and is always supported by our top riders. Cian O Connor has won this Grand Prix on at least 5 occasions, usually on one of his top international horses. Paul O Shea and Harry Marshal have also won the class

33 combinations started the class and 9 made it through to the jump-off. There were no eliminations or falls and only 1 horse retired. The time allowed was a factor but there were places where riders could make up some time if needed.

The approach to fence 1 at 1.37/1,40m was easy and well away from the in-gate and 2 (1.45m) was 8 strides away. Fence 3 (1.43/1.60m) led to fence 4 (1.50m) on 9 or 10 strides. The combination went towards the pocket and was early in the course at fence 5. As it was early in the season this made for horses not being tired and also confident going towards the in-gate

6 forward strides later fence 6 to 7 was on a slightly short 4 stride distance, Fence 6 was 1.52m and 7 was 1.42 by 1.65m

Fence 8 was on a free run and stood at 1.52m. Fence 9 at 1.52m and 22.50m to a big oxer at 10 (1.45 by 1.60m) proved to be a difficult enough line. Then the double combination at 11 was a triple bar (1.50 /1.85m) to a vertical (1.52m) on a distance of 10.90m. Fence 12 was 1.46m by 1.60m oxer.

The jump-off worked well also. A new line 14 to fence 7 and back to 3 then 4 where riders left out a stride, back to 5b and 5c followed by a turn to another new fence 15 and a gallop to the last which was fence 1 from the first round. This stood at 1.47 by 1.65m in the jump-off. I liked it because it was not over difficult, horses jumped really well, and the class was very competitive.