

Endurance - The Lessons of Lexington

Darlene Ricker for Horsesdaily, Inc.



Endurance Test Event held in Normandy in August of this year. Photo Credit: Philippe Millereau

Despite many landowners' enthusiasm about opening their land to the endurance course at the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games, some weren't quite so keen. Concerns were property damage, legal liability and horse health, not to mention the disruption of having outside riders, horses, coaches, grooms, course workers and volunteers on their property. (Spectators did not have access to private farms.)

Emmett Ross alleviated the landowners' fears, gradually enlisting their cooperation. The key, he said, was asking for their assistance and inviting them to be part of the process. After identifying a parcel he wanted to include in the course, Ross would request permission to speak with the landowner or farm manager about the Games. When one agreed to a visit, Ross would say, "Your property is lovely. Would you entertain allowing us to use some of your land for the endurance race?"

Several flat out declined – "and in no uncertain terms," as he recalled. Ross turned the around by asking for their assistance in planning the course. "And I meant that sincerely," he said. A few days after denying his initial request, Robert Brady, managing partner of Kentuckiana Farms, called back and said, "I've been thinking . . . maybe I could help you map out the trail" (which he did). Barton Brothers Farm offered to clean out an old tobacco barn so the course could go through it, making for an interesting element.

When Ross visited Dixiana Domino Farm, manager Terry Arnold told him, "You can use the farm, but next year there's going to be a fence there," pointing to where the course was supposed to go. Ross thought for a moment. "May I show you what could be a better place for the fence line?" The answer was yes, and the course map was unchanged.

With several farms onboard, Ross formed a landowners' advisory group that met regularly to discuss preparations for the Games. Together they came up with ways to minimize negative impact to the farms. "It's not as complicated as it seems,"

said Brady. "These guys have done this all over the world, and Emmett is a true professional. He knew exactly what he was doing and eased our concerns."

The 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games Foundation purchased an insurance policy to cover farm owners for property damage, injuries and other landowner liability issues. Some matters were particular to certain farms, such as those that were actively engaged in baling hay and producing vegetables. Ross said he "had to explain to them that this was a race against the clock; we weren't going to stop and eat their crops."



Unidentified riders with Mont St. Michel in the background. Photo Credit: Philip Millereau

Normandy officials encountered the same fears. Farmers were concerned about their crops being damaged, and residential owners expressed worries about their yards and gardens, said Wahlen. A French legal team drafted an agreement that protects the landowners, and the local government agreed to reimburse proprietors if fields needed to be mowed or paths cut across their land.

In Lexington, Ross had assured farmers that the course wouldn't go through planted fields or any other areas they designated as off-limits. The majority of the Lexington properties were fully fenced, sometimes cutting off access to other land needed for the course. In addition, breeding stock had to be protected from potential health threats from competitors' horses, even though the Kentucky Horse Park and FEI regulations imposed ultra-strict health requirements.

At no cost to farm owners, 85 gates were provided by a sponsor and installed to allow access. Many saw it as a benefit and left them in place after the Games. Others wanted the gates dismantled and their original fences restored, which Ross accomplished (along with taking down the entire course) the day after the race. Elmendorf Farm had a continuous type of fencing rather than individual plank fencing, and the owner did not want to cut his fences for a gate. A neighboring farm offered to install the gate on a portion of his fencing between the properties.

As a health measure, the trail was routed away from pastures where landowners' horses were kept. Breeding farms such as Castleton Lyons and Mt. Brilliant had further concerns about their herds perhaps being upset by hundreds of outside horses racing by, even if at a distance. They brought their stock into the barn the

evening before the race. In most cases, the horses had to be stalled only for a few hours, depending upon how many times and for what distance the course crossed the property.

Although initially skeptical, Castleton Lyons came through. But first a question: "What do you want to do on our property?" Ross decided to work up to that slowly, first commenting on how beautifully the driveway stretched from the road to the mansion. The response: "You want [the horses] to go down my driveway?"

That had never entered Ross's mind, but he figured there was nothing to lose. "We would love that," he said. "It's done. What else do you want?"

More doors opened. "Most of the landowners even had their staff out there helping us on race day," said Ross. Some landowners let their grass grow a few weeks before the race, skipping cuttings so they could mow a 25-foot wide path to make it easy for riders to follow the trail.

Elmendorf Farm took its antique carriages out of storage and adorned the property with them. It and several other farms asked Ross if they could put up a tent near the course and host a brunch. He was delighted when more than 5,000 people watched the raced from tents at Elmendorf, Kentuckiana, the University of Kentucky property and other farms.



UAE team rides against a dramatic backdrop of Mont St. Michel. HH Sh Hamdam Bin Mohammed Al Maktoum (left), HE Sh Rashid Dalmook Al Maktoun (right); Raed Mahmood (rear). Photo Credit: Philip Millereau

While the festivities went on at Elmendorf, Brady was in Canada selling horses. Still, he found it fun. "I watched a video of the Sheik [Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, ruler of Dubai] riding across my land. How often does that happen?"

Spectators at Cobra Farms cheered the Sheik on from the sidelines. "He was very personable, waving back and thanking everyone," said Mike Owens, farm manager, who later hosted the team from Spain for a visit.

For Goodman, the Sheik's presence was a "special thrill" because he had been a longtime customer but had never visited Mt. Brilliant. "I was excited that he may get to see where some of the horses he had bought from us over the years had come from and get a feel for the land they were brought up on," said Goodman.

Brady found the overall experience phenomenal. "It was exciting for us to be part of it, and everything went off without a hitch," he said. "There was very minimal impact to our farm – a few hoofprints, here and there. I was proud to be part of it and felt we were giving back to the community."

Said Nancy Cox, associate dean for research at the University of Kentucky's College of Agriculture, "As a state-funded entity, we're always happy to help out when we can." At least 25 miles (one-quarter of the course) crossed UK land, and the institution put in a water tank for the horses and riders. "At first we had trouble envisioning how the competition horses could cross our property with all the research horses here, but Emmett explained so clearly what the race would be like and told us how respectful the competitors are," said Cox.

Today, landowners who participated are overwhelmingly positive about their experience and say they would do so again. "It's a win-win for everyone," said Cox. That was echoed by others, including Lourie, who offered advice to anyone contemplating allowing his land to be used for a major equestrian event: "Do it! Don't worry. Just sit back and enjoy yourself."

Their reactions have created a legacy in Lexington that has extended to other disciplines that require vast expanses of land, such as three-day eventing. Some landowners who allowed Ross to use their property have since opened their farms to multi-discipline events modeled on the Games. For the past three years, portions of the FEI North American Junior & Young Riders Championships have been held on parcels owned by Spycoast Farms and the University of Kentucky. Normandy officials are hoping for the same.

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