

On Course with Michel Vaillancourt

From Vermont to Pan American Games

By Lindsay Brock



Michel sets a fence in the Grand Prix ring at the Vermont Summer Festival, one of his favorite events.

Photo by David Mullinix

Michel Vaillancourt, course designer and international equestrian in his own right, has been looking forward to 2015 for more than two years. On July 12, he will set foot in Toronto with creativity and patriotism in tow. Chosen as the course designer for the 2015 Pan American Games in his home country of Canada, Michel — born in St-Félix-de-Valois, Quebec — has been refining his courses and jump designs for more than two years, and is ready to finally unveil them.

A Horseman In and Out of the Tack

Like many top course designers, Michel can place himself in the boots of discerning riders as he was once one of them. He made history at the 1976 Montreal Olympics by becoming the first Canadian equestrian to win an individual silver medal, riding Branch Country. At the Pan American Games, he was part of the bronze medal team in 1975 aboard U.F.O. and was a member of the silver medal team in 1979 with Concord. Due to the boycott of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, an alternate Olympics for show jumping was held in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, where Canada claimed the team gold, aided by Michel's performance on Chivas.

Michel has since acted as chef d'équipe of the Canadian show jumping team, most notably in the 1990s, and was inducted into the Jump Canada Hall of Fame in 2009.

With the medals to prove it, Michel has spent his fair share of time in the limelight at major games, but 2015 will mark the first time he approaches them as a course designer. For Michel, the transition from rider to course designer was a means to remain in the sport he loves, and while a résumé in the irons is not mandatory for a successful



Michel (right), joined by Jim Elder (left) and Pierre Jolicoeur (center) during his 2009 induction into the Jump Canada Hall of Fame.

Photo by Michelle C. Dunn

course designing career, he admits it has done nothing but propel him to the pinnacle of show jumping sport.

“It takes one to know one,” said Michel. “You need to have a feel. When you set a problem, you need to understand exactly what it feels like for a rider to negotiate. To be a good course designer, you have to be a good horseman. It’s not just about being able to build a Grand Prix course, but building every day and, by Sunday, having the horses jumping better. You want them to leave better horses than they were when they arrived.”

According to Michel, responsibility for every aspect of show jumping falls on the shoulders of the course designer.

“We have to consider heights and distances, but also the outcome, spectacle, giving the public a good show, producing good sport, asking modern questions and keeping it fair while still challenging. It’s a hard job, but it’s our job and our intentions are always good.”

Vermont Bound

While 2015 is a historic year for Michel, setting tracks at his first international games, he is also proud to kick off his

summer with a personal favorite: the Vermont Summer Festival.

Returning to the mountains of Manchester each summer, Michel admits that Harold Beebe Farm in East Dorset, Vermont, holds a special place for him.

“Having a favorite horse show depends on a lot of things like caliber, environment, management and even weather. But, I do have my favorites and Vermont is one of them,” he said.

The Vermont Summer Festival is New England’s largest hunter/jumper competition, offering more than \$750,000 in prize money, making it the richest sporting event based on purse in the state of Vermont.

In Vermont, Michel joins course designing talent from all corners of the world, including Alan Wade (IRE), Steve Stephens (U.S.A.), Chris Brandt (CAN) and Ken Krome (U.S.A.). He takes the helm during the second week of the Vermont Summer Festival (July 8–12) to set the high-performance jumper tracks, which include the \$10,000 Open Welcome and \$30,000 Grand Prix.

While Vermont is familiar territory for Michel, 2015 will christen a new era for the show. Throughout the past several

months, a complete overhaul of the Vermont Summer Festival’s competition surfaces took place. This year, designers will work with the all-new, top-of-the-line Kruse Cushion Ride (KCR) footing. Every competition and training surface at the show grounds has been completely renovated with KCR footing, totaling 334,000 square feet of rejuvenated ring space.

“Footing is such an important aspect of our sport and a major topic of conversation no matter where we go these days,” explained Michel. “Good horses are difficult to come by, and riders don’t want to ruin them by jumping on footing that is too deep or too firm. KCR creates a fantastic cushion. It was a major investment and by management taking the initiative to accomplish it, they have significantly improved the experience for riders and horses.”

O Canada

With courses swirling in his mind for nearly 30 months now, Michel will not only showcase his talents as course designer,

but also as jump builder in Toronto. Self-proclaimed as “old-fashioned,” he plans to give a nod to a long-established tradition in jump design at the Pan American Games. From Eastern Canada to the western coast of British Columbia, Michel has made it his mission to ensure that the fence designs for the 2015 Pan American Games have a unique Canadian flavor.

“I still believe the venue should represent the host country,” he said. “Every fence will have Canadian flare.”

Acting as an Olympic qualifier for North, Central and South America, Michel has noticed a trend of elevated importance at the Pan American Games.

“As far as continental championships go, people are taking the Pan Ams a lot more seriously than in the past,” he claimed. “This is an important event; the Americans are sending a team that is as good as they can put together. Venezuela is a force to be reckoned with, and Colombia has a strong team.”

Michel is anticipating top sport come July, and is also looking forward to a rewarding sporting event for Canada.

“When you do well, you convince your country that your sport deserves the support, and Canada has no choice but to do well,” he said. “Our qualification for Rio and future five-star invitations depends on it.”



Michel made history on home turf by winning the individual silver medal at the 1976 Olympics riding Branch Country.

Photo by Canadian Press

Patriotic to the core, Michel is ecstatic to set the courses for the 2015 Pan American Games and is even more pleased to be doing so on Canadian soil.

“It means a lot to me, but it also means a lot to my country,” he said. “Canada

deserves this. I am confident that these games will be successful from the sport’s point of view, but will also leave a new legacy for Toronto. These opportunities don’t come by very often and I feel honored to be a part of it.” **S**