

► BETWEEN ROUNDS WITH:

ARMAND LEONE

Should We Be Concerned About The Growing Number Of Foreign Riders Sponsored By U.S. Owners?

Our new columnist questions why this globalization appears to be one way.

The globalization of sport has created an increasing diversity of nationalities playing on national teams across many professional sports. The English football Premier League is one example where English players account for less than one-third of the playing time, and restrictions on the number of foreign players have been imposed. Professional ice hockey teams contain a high percentage of players who are of differing nationality than the country where they play. Players go where the money is.

U.S. show jumping is also showing an increase in the number of foreign riders who are sponsored by U.S. owners and ride top quality horses with a non-U.S. passport. When the

Olympic Games and World Equestrian Games arrive, these horses compete against U.S. riders. Is this a natural progression of the globalization of sport coming to equestrianism, or are other factors within our sport involved?

It's understandable that a world-class horse owner would match the best human athlete with the best horses regardless of national boundaries. However, this "globalization" appears to be one way: Few U.S. riders are sponsored by foreign owners, and few U.S. riders train European clientele in Europe as their main business. This indicates that there are other factors causing the United States to lose control over world-class horses that are owned by U.S. owners.

An Evolving System

Looking at the history of U.S. support for international show jumping teams, one sees a clear progression from the late 1950s to today. Originally, U.S. owners acted as patrons of the sport and bought horses that were donated to the U.S. Equestrian Team. Bertalan de Némethy then allocated these horses to the riders he thought most appropriate to achieve success with them.

Starting in the 1970s, the American Grand Prix Association circuit created opportunities for top-level competition at home. Grand prix purses increased considerably, and U.S. owners began to select specific professional riders to ride their horses on the AGA circuit. These riders would then compete for



a place on the U.S. team. Owners no longer bought horses for the USET to be matched with riders under the coach's discretion.

In the 1990s, U.S. grand prix show jumping became more accessible to top-level amateur riders with safer fences and multiple entry levels for grand prix competition. Owners were now able to buy the horses for their family members to compete in the grand prix events. The percentage of professional riders in grand prix events declined, and many professional riders found that there was a substantial business in training the family members of the owners rather than riding the horses themselves. Major family-owned grand prix show barns developed and replaced many



professional show barns.

European shows increased in number, and there was more access for Americans to ride on international circuits. The United States has focused on and emphasized European competition as the premier competitive venue for show jumping. It was logical for modern U.S. owners to look for international talent and to import it home.

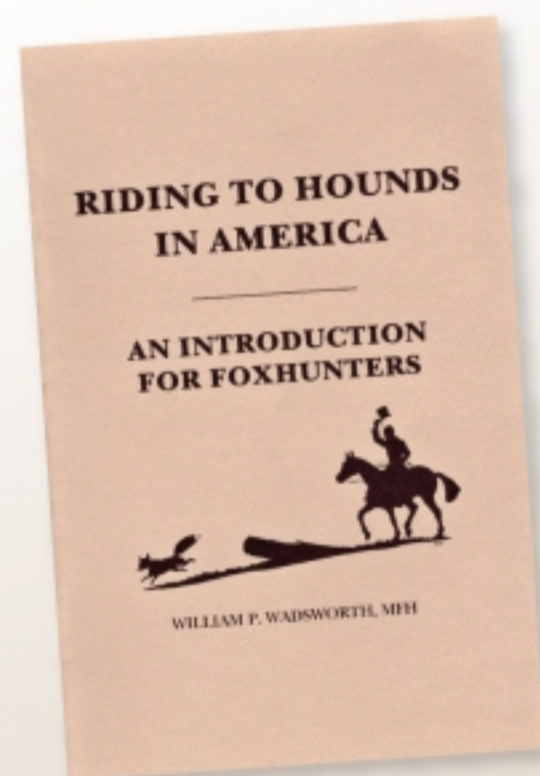
Why Does It Go One Way?

Within the last 15 years, foreign riders supported by U.S. owners began appearing with increasing frequency. Canadian, German, English and Irish riders are now mounted on international-level horses bought for them by U.S. owners. Typically, these foreign riders work closely with family-owned and -controlled operations. The Canadian, English and German riders generally continue their main operations in their own country. The Irish riders tend to move to the United States and integrate themselves into the national scene. Hard work and talent has resulted in merited success. Some of this may be explained as part of the continuing globalization of equestrian sport, but the one-way nature of this globalization needs more explanation.

It may be the allure that has been created about Europe as the epicenter for equestrian sports. There currently is no American grand prix series or league of any prominence that offers that experience, although there are several standalone marquee events that come close. There is no American Grand Prix circuit anymore that creates an overarching competitive league and prize money structured across a multitude of venues. While the free market approach to show development has benefits, it has limitations. The AGA circuit, like Europe today, had unique locations for its events. The Aachen (Germany) showgrounds do not run week after week with a multiplicity of lower level events

Are questions about the integrity of the hunter/jumper world causing more and more U.S. owners to turn to foreign riders for their best horses? KAT NETZLER PHOTO

THE AUTHORITY ON FOXHUNTING ETIQUETTE!



Riding To Hounds In America has long been considered the gold standard regarding hunting etiquette. Its lessons are time-tested and trusted.

**A MUST HAVE FOR
EVERY FOXHUNTER
AND USPC MEMBER**

800.877.5467

chronofhorse.com

The
CHRONICLE
of the **HORSE**

“It is time for the Federation to implement rules that increase the transparency of horse sales and restore a reputation for fair dealing in the horse business.”

for “customers.” An AGA-type model is currently being used by the Global Champions Tour, as it brings top-level events to multiple venues in multiple countries around the world.

American high performance show jumping has focused on Europe for so many years that it has failed to keep up our show jumping game at home. Competing in Europe is a necessary factor for success but not sufficient alone. We need to re-create an AGA-type league of events that address our high performance needs and create the international jumping level experiences here for riders and owners. This is where U.S. Equestrian Federation should step in with financial support to help organizers create show experiences similar to Europe and the GCT. The class specifications can be driven by international training needs rather than maximizing the number of entrants or jump-off qualifiers, and owners can be treated like valued guests rather than captive customers.

We did this in the 1970s, and we can do it again. We can create exciting, top-level competitions that afford international training experiences for 40 of our best riders and reward 40 owners at a time instead of sending five athletes on a European tour. This is not just an issue of prize money. It involves things such as restricting the class offerings, limiting the number of horses entered, requiring qualifying events for weekend events, and

encouraging the ability to be successful with sustained performance over several days rather than on Sunday only.

The Fraud Factor

Another issue is that the increased demand and prices for competitive horses over the last 20 years created the opportunity for abuse and fraud in horse sales. It only took a few instances of U.S. owners being ripped off by a U.S. rider or trainer on a purchase or for undisclosed commissions on high-priced European horses to create perceptions of general dishonesty in the hunter/jumper industry.

The failure of the USEF and the U.S. Hunter Jumper Association to address the dual agency problem and lack of transparency in horse sale transactions only compounds this misperception and fails to remove this taint. Some U.S. owners may feel they have more control over a foreign national who is working for them to manage their barns and horse purchases. Some owners may feel they are buying “from the source” when they employ a foreign rider or trainer and thereby avoid the cost of a middleman.

The problem of dual agency has been discussed within the hunter/jumper industry for several years. However, there have been no USEF regulations or rules to prevent this practice. Although there are several

states with statutes specifically prohibiting dual agency in horse transactions, the Federation has remained silent. It is time for the Federation to implement rules that increase the transparency of horse sales and restore a reputation for fair dealing in the horse business.

The number of foreign riders supported by U.S. owners has risen over the last decade. However, reciprocal cross ownerships with U.S. riders sponsored by foreign owners are lacking. The globalization of equestrian sport is one factor that has brought this about. However, the lack of a cohesive international level grand prix circuit in the United States that addresses high performance training needs is also a factor. Lastly, the lack of transparency in horse sales and the lack of rules against dual agency continue to allow questions about the integrity of the hunter/jumper industry to linger. The USEF can reverse this trend if it is willing to take actions. 🐾

ARMAND LEONE



Armand Leone of Leone Equestrian Law LLC is a business professional with expertise in health care, equestrian sports and law with strengths in strategic analysis, business development and operations. An equestrian athlete

dedicated to fair play, safe sport and clean competition, Leone served as a director on the board of the U.S. Equestrian Federation and was USEF vice president of international high performance programs for many years. He served on USEF and U.S. Hunter Jumper Association special task forces on governance, safety, drugs and medications, trainer certification, and coach selection.

Leone is co-owner at his family's Ri-Arm Farm in Oakland, N.J., where he still rides and trains. He competed in FEI World Cup Finals and Nations Cups. He is a graduate of the Columbia Business School in New York and the Columbia University School of Law. He received his M.D. from New York Medical College and his BA from the University of Virginia.

Leone Equestrian Law LLC provides legal services and consultation for equestrian professionals ranging from riders and trainers to owners and show managers in the FEI disciplines on a wide variety of issues. For more information, visit equestriancounsel.com or follow them on Facebook at facebook.com/leoneequestrianlaw.