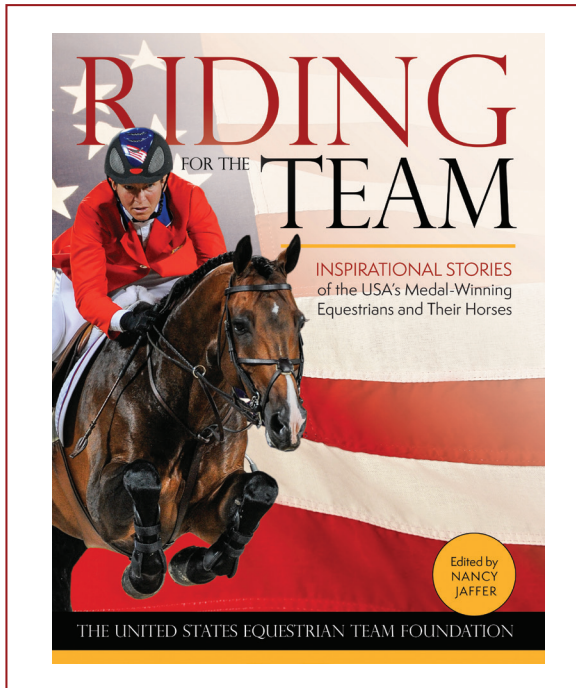


Derek di Grazia PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

an excerpt from



Edited by Nancy Jaffer, *Riding for the Team* chronicles the lives of those who dreamed about competing for their country and “made it,” sharing inspirational stories from the international governing organization’s eight equestrian disciplines: show jumping, dressage, eventing, driving, vaulting, reining, endurance, and para-dressage. The featured eventers include: Derek di Grazia, Phillip Dutton, Boyd Martin, Gina Miles, Kerry Millikin, David O’Connor, Karen O’Connor, Kim Severson, and Amy Tryon. Athletes tell their stories and those of their horses during the years they honed their talent and dedicated their lives to representing their country.

The third American ever to design a cross-country course for the Olympics, Derek was announced in 2016 as the man who would design the cross-country courses for both the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games and the 2018 FEI World Equestrian Games (WEG) in Bromont, Quebec. Bromont eventually bowed out of the WEG, but it attests to Derek’s stature in his profession that he was asked to design two championship courses in a row for the discipline’s most important tests.

On an annual basis, Derek is best known as the designer for the Kentucky Three-Day Event CCI five-star, a competition held at the Kentucky Horse Park, which he won in 1985 on the Appaloosa/Thoroughbred cross Sasquatch, the horse who was his mount when he competed for the U.S. Equestrian Team the following year at the World Championships in Gawler, Australia. Derek also was the designer for the three- and four-star CCIs at the Fair Hill International in Maryland, where he was a winner in 1991 on Our Busby. He has continued training riders and riding himself at the three- and four-star level while designing courses, giving his work an extra dimension of insight. Derek serves on the U.S. Equestrian Federation’s Eventing Sport Committee and prior to that was chairman of the USEF’s High Performance Eventing Committee. In 2015, the Wofford Cup for service to the sport was presented to Derek and his wife, Bea. The two met when they worked for Olympic medalist Jimmy Wofford. The couple lives at their Stillwater Farm in Carmel Valley, California, and they have two children, Perkin and Ben.

My work in course designing has evolved over time and is still evolving. I originally started by helping build cross-country jumps for the horse trials at Huntington Farm in Vermont, the childhood home of my wife and her parents, Essie and Read Perkins. In 1984, we embarked on a new venture when an exciting opportunity became available in California.

Bea and I accepted the position as directors of the Pebble Beach Equestrian Center in Pebble Beach, California. This facility was a multi-faceted equestrian operation, which, among other things, hosted A-rated horse shows and dressage shows. Previously, many well-known combined training events had been held there. I did all the design for the show jumping classes at the horse shows, while Bea managed the dressage shows.

Over the years, we trained many event riders at this facility, as well as developing many horses for the sport of eventing. To help facilitate the training of horses and riders, I designed a cross-country schooling area that was built by Mick Costello, who eventually would become the head builder for the Kentucky Three-Day Event. Through my experience riding, as well as through my working with great trainers, I was starting to develop an understanding of what horses needed in their training to bring them through the levels. Many years of schooling horses and riders over many different types of jumps has enabled me to see how horses would deal with different situations, types of terrain, and combinations of jumps.



Sasquatch, a Thoroughbred/Appaloosa cross who got his name because of his big feet, was Derek di Grazia's most famous eventing mount. *Fred Newman Photography.*

Being able to ride and train horses, or watch other riders over different lines of jumps, always proves to be educational, and certainly has helped me in my designing courses. Having the ability to continue competing in eventing has been an enormous benefit for me.

The first horse trials course I designed was a Preliminary track at Wild Horse Valley Ranch in the wine country of Napa, California. Mark Phillips, who went on to design the course for the 2018 FEI World Equestrian Games in Tryon, North Carolina, and the Burghley five-star CCI in England, was the designer for all the upper-level courses there. Mark was very helpful to me and served as an advisor for some of the courses I did. To this day, Mark has been available to advise when needed.

I went on to design a CCI one-star at what used to be the Ram Tap Horse Trials in California. My biggest break came in 1993 after word spread about

what I was doing and I was asked to design the one- and two-star CCIs at the Essex Horse Trials, based at the U.S. Equestrian Team headquarters, Hamilton Farm, in Gladstone, New Jersey. That job led to my getting other courses to design, which quickly started to occupy more and more of my time. Eventually, I was spending more time course designing and less riding, though my riding was still important to me.

I assisted Mike Etherington-Smith with the course for the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games at the Kentucky Horse Park. That was very helpful for me in the transition to taking over designing the annual event's course at the Park.

I like to believe my courses are fair and educational for horse and rider. Obviously, the safety side is a huge part on which I really concentrate. The advent of the frangible pin and MIM Clip to help stop rotational falls is very important. I use quite a lot of

them, and think it's great that we have these tools. The more we use them, the more we learn how to use them, and the locations where they work best. Everybody in our industry, as well as people outside it, is trying to come up with other devices to help make the sport safer.

Course designing is about trying to go out and do the best job you can every time you produce a course. You're always trying to educate and keep horses confident. Once you have horses that are backed off, it's often very hard to get that confidence back and to have the horses going the way you want them to go. You always must be very positive in what you try to do with horses and how you bring them along. You like to make sure that the horses see what they're doing. A lot of that goes back to the rider and the training. Horses should be trained to focus on the jumps they're jumping, pay attention to the situation that is upon them, and be able to assess the different questions in front of them.

When you come up to a jump and look at it, do you really see the front edge of that fence? If you don't see it, I'm not sure the horse is going to really see it, either. If you take a bare jump and start decorating it, you can change how the jump is perceived by the horse, as well as the difficulty of the jump. You want the horse to be able to see where the front and the back of the jump are, whether it's through how the jump is painted, the placement of flowers or bushes, or by using some form of ground line. You'll see spread fences that have flags on both the front and the back of the fence. Again, this should help the horses recognize the front and the back of the jump.

When you have jumps under trees and in areas where light and shadows might affect it, you try to minimize that issue as much as possible. If you have jumps where the light will change, you use brighter flowers or brighter ground lines, or make sure the shades of color on the fence are such that you'll be able to see them in a dark area.

When I first rode at Pebble Beach, I was able to attend the 1969 U.S. Open Three-Day Event, with riders from across the country, such as Jimmy Wofford and J. Michael Plumb. It's been interesting to follow the history of eventing over the years since then. ➔



Derek di Grazia designing at the Kentucky Horse Park. Nancy Jaffer Photo.

You're almost talking about a different sport than what you had 35, 40, or 50 years ago, the cross-country has evolved so much. Taking away the endurance aspect (roads and tracks and steeplechase were dropped in the early twenty-first century) really changed the game and changed the type of horses competitors ride. The riders also thought they needed a different type of horse because the level of the dressage and show jumping became more difficult. You still need a horse that's fast for the cross-country; however, the courses have become a lot more technical. The exercises are more difficult and ask more of the horses than even 10 or 15 years ago.

A big part of course design has to do with jump placement and the shape of the jumps. I like using terrain to develop different types of exercises on the cross-country. I also enjoy working with different pieces of ground to figure out how the jumps best fit into that space. The relationship of the jumps, one to another, has become more difficult over the years. That's not to say the questions are unfair, but what the riders can do has gotten so much

better. The riders are quick to figure out what you're asking and usually have access to cross-country schooling areas or even their own show jumping arenas where they can set up the various exercises to practice. Developing courses that ask new types of questions can be a big challenge.

Things changed in our sport when we went from the long format to the short format. At the time, you might have thought, "That's the end of eventing," and wondered what the reason was for the change. From what I understand, they were trying to keep eventing in the Olympics. It was quite logical, because putting on a full-phase competition with roads and tracks and steeplechase at the Olympic Games was difficult, particularly in today's world with limited space available. There wasn't any going back and obviously, we've stayed in the Games since then.

The long format made riders into better horsemen as they learned how to get horses fit to compete in this type of competition. There was a lot to be gained from knowing you had to have fit horses for these competitions. I think some of that initially was lost

when we stopped doing the long format, because riders stopped conditioning their horses the way they used to. That caught up with them in the early stages of the evolution to short format.

Today, you'll find riders taking the conditioning a little more seriously than they used to. At the same time, I think we have ended up with a whole generation of riders who never learned how to get a horse fit, and that probably is more worrisome to me. They should understand conditioning and learn to do it correctly. It's getting better, but I can't say it's as good as it could be. I think one of the reasons many horses are sustaining injuries is because they're not properly conditioned.

In the bigger picture, Tokyo is the first time we're going to have teams of three at the Olympic Games, instead of four riders with the luxury of one drop score. To me, that's quite significant and something more to think about. It changes the dynamics quite a lot. Everybody on that team of three counts, and that's probably going to influence the strategy and certainly affect the selection of horses for the Olympic Games.

When you design for the Olympics, you try to build a course that's going to be fair, will create a good picture for the sport, and produce a good competition on the day. The pool of competitors will come from many countries, and while all must qualify to compete, some may not have the technical skills required to jump the course using all the faster options. So you're going to need alternatives at certain jumps in order to get as many finishers as possible. Everybody can have something come up that's a reversal of fortune – a horse takes a wrong step; a rider falls off.

As I focus on designing for the Olympics, I think about going out and producing the best course I can. After that, it's up to the riders and all involved to make sure they go out and do their job. The extra added factor about Tokyo is the potential for heat and humidity, which is another element that's going to come into play.

It's certainly a challenge, but it's also a great honor to design the Olympic cross-country course. Needless to say, I was really happy to get such a special assignment. 🐾