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Why Team Selections Need a National Jumping Championship

By Armand Leone, Jr.
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I was involved in the fielding and funding of international U.S. equestrian teams as well as selecting coaches to lead the teams from 1992 through 2012, first as a member and officer of the United States Equestrian Team (USET) and then as Vice President of International High Performance at our national governing body USA Equestrian, now US Equestrian (USEF). Before this, I had the privilege to ride in international events and on Nations Cup show jumping teams.

Our U.S. jumping team had one final opportunity to qualify for the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, France. In order to qualify, they had to have a strong performance at the 2023 Pan American Games in Santiago, Chile. Ultimately, they earned team gold and punched their ticket to Paris. However, we should not have been in this position in the first place. We shouldn't have to send our best horse-and-rider combinations to the Pan Ams, but we had no choice. The U.S. jumping team's performance throughout the last 12 years has been good but, in the past, I feel we were able to accomplish as much with fewer resources. Our recent lack of sustained competitive excellence is not due to a lack of funding or too few riders. Rather, I have found that we send groups of very talented individual riders from a specific pool of athletes with extensive strings of horses rather than evaluating all capable athletes on an even playing field.



*The team for the 2012 Olympic Games in London, England, was chosen by formal USEF Selection Trials. Through this process, the then-17-year-old Reed Kessler earned a spot on the squad with her mount Cylana.
Photo by Molly Sorge*

We arguably have some of the best riders and horses in the world. The current high performance jumping budget to send riders and teams to international competitions dwarfs the funding we had when I was involved with our national governing body and the USET (when it was responsible for high performance sport before it became the USET Foundation — the current philanthropic partner to USEF). Our individual riders have some of the best horses in the world and are supported by entourages of trainers and staff. The resources of U.S. owners to purchase and provide horses for our athletes appears unlimited. Yet, we lose to other countries that have smaller programs, smaller numbers of horses, and fewer riders to choose from. The whole of our greatly talented jumping riders who are selected for our teams is currently not greater than the sum of its individual parts. Some very talented athletes with fewer resources are precluded from being selected for a major championship team, and at the same time, we do not seem to develop the same synergy and camaraderie as some other countries with less resources. All of these factors have been detrimental to increasing our successes.

It is time to have an annual U.S. National Jumping Championship that is again an integral part of our team selection process where all jumping riders vying for a spot on international U.S. teams for major events such as the Olympic Games and World Championships compete at one venue, at the same time, under the same conditions, and at a difficulty level that enables us to confidently rank the horse-and-rider combinations. The U.S. National Championship should mirror the World Cup Final format, or other similar multi-round championship formats, and must be essential to our selection process for major championship teams. It is time to return to a team selection process that has both objective and subjective elements.

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