



Advancement Without Ability Is the Hidden Risk We're Ignoring in Modern Jumping

In Armand's latest opinion piece for [The Chronicle of the Horse](#), read his comprehensive take on a major issue in modern jumping and the series of steps that could be taken to rectify it.

The 2026 U.S. Equestrian Federation Annual Meeting, held in January in Louisville, Kentucky, included an excellent presentation from the Human and Equine Safety and Welfare Committee, chaired by Dr. Mark Hart. I was very impressed with the work the committee has done and continues to do to improve equipment safety standards.

Let's face it, riding is a contact sport. It's one of the riskiest sports per participant, more dangerous than football, skiing, or even motorcycling in terms of serious injury risk. A rider is 20 times more likely to get hurt on a horse than on a bicycle. Falls from the height of a moving horse can cause severe injuries, so the work that the committee is doing is extremely important.

Unlike bicycles and motorbikes, where the rider and the bike typically fall together, in equestrian sports, the rider falls off the horse far more often than the horse falls with the rider. As such, there are about 300 horse falls in USEF-rated competitions each year, but approximately 4,500 rider falls. Safety improvements can only go so far, and without improved rider competency, reducing equestrian sport injuries is unlikely. In addition to enhancing helmet, vest, and stirrup safety, increasing trainer and rider proficiency is central to lowering the risks inherent in equestrian sports.



Minimum eligibility requirements, trainer certification, and a focus on rider fitness are all crucial pieces of the puzzle, argues Armand. Photo by [COTH/Kimberly Loushin](#)

Understandably, riders want to progress quickly and successfully in height and venue. Interestingly, preliminary data show that most falls occur when jumper riders move from the 1.05- to the 1.15-meter level, which aligns with moving from the back ring to the big ring, and when mistakes start to have greater consequences.

This is when the trainer's role becomes most crucial, by aligning the rider's expectations with their actual ability. Buying a 1.50-meter horse doesn't instantly make someone a 1.50-meter rider; it just means you have farther to fall and a higher risk of injury if you make a mistake jumping that height. There should be a standard measure that ensures riders are ready to progress to the next level when they are truly capable, not just when they want to.

One's ability to stick to the saddle is critical to compete safely when jumping, and more "saddle stickiness" is needed at higher fence heights. This is a physical skill that must be learned through practice. It takes time to be able to flat without stirrups, then progress to jumping without stirrups. Both are necessary skills for safely moving up the equestrian ladder with the well-being of rider and horse in mind.

Although riders will always fall off horses, minimizing the number of falls during competition can be achieved only through proper instruction and training at home. Trainers need to develop and test their students' fundamental skills before letting them advance to higher levels of competition.

Improving riding safety requires a three-pronged approach: meeting minimum eligibility requirements for progression (a proposal currently under discussion within the U.S. Hunter Jumper Association), a formal trainer credentialing program, and better rider preparation and fitness.

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Armand Leone's Extraordinary Career

In this profile piece in [The Plaid Horse](#), discover how Armand's remarkable career and family life have taken him on a path in the equestrian world that is anything but typical — including nearly making the U.S. Olympic team ahead of the 1980 boycott — before his life came full circle.



Armand Leone on Lassandro, with whom he won five AGA Grands Prix, including Upperville, Las Colinas, and the LA Equestrian Center in the 1980s.

Armand, Team Leone's senior brother, is the only one who didn't go into the horse business as a professional. It wasn't so much a choice, he says, but the fact that his parents, both doctors, "didn't really make the horse business an option for me."

With education always their priority, Armand earned a BA from the University of Virginia, then attended New York Medical College, graduating in 1982 and becoming a radiologist in 1986. In 1991, he graduated from Columbia University School of Law and began practicing healthcare-related law. Later, he added an M.B.A from Columbia Business School.

All the while, Armand kept up a continuing involvement with equestrian sport as an athlete, USET Chairman and President, USEF Director and High Performance Vice President, and most recently, a Member of the FEI Tribunal for equestrian sport.

Armand was always motivated to be a good student because if he did well, he "could cut out early and go ride my horses." To go to Florida and show required missing a few weeks of school, so the beginning had to be good, and he had to be able to juggle his sport with his work from the beginning. No grades, no horses. There was never a question of giving one up for the other.

The Leones started showing ponies and junior hunters locally in the northeast with Sullivan Davis, an African American rider who rose to success in the show ring and the horse world in the 60s. Dave rode saddle horses, Arabians, and Morgans as well as hunters and jumpers. The Leones learned to break their own horses, and with Dave's coaching, achieved regional success.

However, the Leones recognized that to compete at the top levels, they needed to train with a top professional and sought out George Morris. Armand remembers that they were intimidated by him and that approaching George felt like "going to Yoda up on the hill."

Armand began riding with George in his last year as a junior, and it didn't take long to see the results. With a Thoroughbred hunter named Clipse, Armand qualified and competed at the National Horse Show at Madison Square Garden in the First Year Green, Green Conformation, Large Junior Hunter, and Maclay Finals.

[Read the Full Article](#)

For advice and counsel related to the equestrian industry, contact Leone Equestrian Law at info@equestriancounsel.com.

Led by Armand Leone, Jr., MD, JD, MBA, 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.

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