



Opinion: Why Jumping Should Return to Its Literal Grass Roots

By Armand Leone

Competitive jumping grew out of foxhunting, which involved riding across open countryside and jumping ditches, banks, walls and fences — whatever stood in the way. Well into the 1960s and 1970s, that heritage remained plainly evident in the competition arena.

For generations, most jumper and hunter horse shows in the United States were held on wide-open grass fields with undulating terrain. Ocala, Palm Beach, Ox Ridge, Lake Placid, Saratoga, Chagrin Valley, Monmouth, Southampton, and more were all held on grass before those grounds became the year-round industrial circuit.



Jumping on grass is an art form, requiring riders to consider the weather and ground conditions and navigate a course accordingly, argues Armand Leone. *Photo by Jump Media*

Outdoor courses in wide-open fields with natural obstacles were once routine in hunter competition. The only real exceptions were the indoor fall shows — Harrisburg, Washington, New York and Toronto — where grass was never an option. Even Devon, now noted for its synthetic all-weather ring, held competition on turf for more than a century before making the switch.

That world of wide-open grass competitions is gone, replaced by a sanitized, ring-bound aesthetic. Very few of today's hunter or jumper riders are ever required to navigate a course without a fenced-in arena to define it, where there are no lines to ride and no stride numbers to count, just galloping and jumping across open ground with varied terrain.

And it is not only about the absence of lines. Anyone who has foxhunted knows that riding on grass requires an understanding of footing that today's synthetic, all-weather surfaces do not. There is a speed limit on grass. Turns must be ridden in balance, with the horse's weight off the forehand.

When competing on grass was still routine, some days the ground was wet, some days hard, and you changed your shoeing and adjusted how you tackled the jumps accordingly. Today's all-weather footing is engineered for consistency, which is exactly why it won the commercial argument. Riders can ride more aggressively, more often, with less weather fluctuation. That is the honest reason synthetics took over, and it is a real one.

Only a minority of the industrial calendar still runs on grass, but those fixtures remain the sport's showcases. Aachen and Hamburg in Germany, Spruce Meadows in Canada, Britain's Hickstead, La Baule and Dinard in France, Falsterbo in Sweden, Dublin in Ireland, and Rome's Piazza di Siena, which returned to turf a decade ago, are prime examples.

These long-standing, somewhat anachronistic events showcase the sport in a way no synthetic ring can. It is the same reason people stop to watch golf on television for the green vista or find something inherently beautiful in a polo match on real turf. Grass is not incidental to those sports' appeal. It is integral to that appeal.

These venues are not holding onto grass out of nostalgia alone. In 2010, Hickstead spent roughly \$675,000 to rebuild its main International Arena specifically to keep it on turf, even as it converted a secondary ring to synthetic footing for scheduling flexibility. It does not have to be either/or.

A Hybrid Approach

An example of that is the Del Mar Horsepark in California, where its centerpiece Grand Prix field has been intentionally preserved as a premium, world-class grass ring. The facility uses synthetic footing in its other rings and warm-up areas, illustrating a hybrid approach. But keeping grass requires better riding and a return to the sport's origins — literally to its grass roots.

In Wellington, Florida, a grass derby field has been completed at the newly expanded Winter Equestrian Festival site. Richard Hayden of Hayden Turfcare, the same specialist behind Hickstead and Dublin's turf arenas, built it as the first self-attenuating grass arena in Wellington, designed to hold water in an underground layer and release it slowly, which matters in a place where it rains and floods.

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Considering a Lease? Read These Articles First

With many riders considering leasing a horse ahead of equitation finals or the upcoming competition season, now is the perfect time to learn the benefits and pitfalls of the arrangement — from both sides.

Protecting Your Horse Out on a Lease

Leasing out your horse can be a beneficial situation to both of you. Perhaps you've become busy with your career or your family and don't have much time to ride, but don't want to sell your beloved partner. Or maybe your horse has an old injury that would make him unsellable, but he's still fit and sound enough to be ridden.



A detailed lease contract provides clarity for all parties and minimizes unwelcome surprises. *Photo by Jump Media*

In the right circumstances, a lease situation can give you the chance to make sure your horse stays healthy and happy, while also providing an excellent opportunity for a deserving rider.

Before beginning a lease, take some measures to ensure that the agreement reflects your expectations and protects the safety of your horse. It's always best to plan ahead to minimize the potential of the lease becoming a source of angst for the owner if things go wrong.

A horse could come back from a lease unsound because he was pushed beyond his capabilities, strapping the owner with a huge vet bill from an injury sustained during the lease. Think about potential scenarios now, rather than waiting for problems to arise. Create a detailed lease contract prior to the start of a lease to protect both you and your horse.

[Read the Full Article](#)

Leases and Trainers: More Than Meets the Eye

Leasing a horse is to accept the responsibilities of temporary ownership. You are effectively buying the horse for a specific period with all the good and bad, hoped for, and unexpected along the way.

Like a purchase, the rider lessee's trainer plays an important role in the lease venture, perhaps even a more important role than in a purchase. The experience the rider has during the lease depends on the trainer's skill in finding the right horse to fit the rider's needs. There are immediate needs and reasonable financial constraints. The horse returned to the owner lessor at the end of the lease depends on the trainer keeping the horse in the proper program and with proper care.



Trainers should consider long-term welfare when managing leased horses for their students. *Photo by Jump Media*

In return for using their expertise to find the right horse, the trainer should receive compensation from the rider lessee and only from the rider lessee unless the rider lessee is advised otherwise. The trainer is paid to find a horse that suits.

Just as when acting as a trainer agent in a purchase, the trainer is not a guarantor of horse's performance during the lease. The trainer has a responsibility to work with the rider lessee to achieve a suitable performance with the horse and rider. From that perspective, the trainer's obligations are no more or less than during a sale.

However, the owner lessor has a vested interest in how the horse is managed during the lease. From tack to turn out to after show care, the trainer is the most important factor in the horse's well-being. The physical care depends on the right balance between training, showing, and rest.

Because an owner can expect a rider lessee to be only concerned about the short term, she must look to the trainer to watch out for the horse's interests. The horse's interests should never be sacrificed for the rider.

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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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175 Rock Road, Glen Rock, NJ 07452 - 201.444.1644