

Rethinking the Young Event Horse Class

By Craig Thompson

The Young Event Horse Series hosted its third Championship last October in conjunction with the Morven Park CCI* and Advanced Horse Trials. Business specialists have noted that most ventures fail within the first year, and those that last three years generally succeed. This is good news for everyone who has supported the YEH, a program that appears to have a very bright future. With that said, the beginning of the program's fourth year offers an ideal opportunity to examine both what has worked as well as areas that need further improvement.

The USEA deserves a pat on the back for making the YEH program happen in the first place. It would have been far easier to form a committee to spend the last three years looking into the feasibility of a young horse showcase rather than actually making it a reality. The sponsors of the YEH also deserve a large thank you from everyone in the eventing community. It's nice to see businesses that profit from eventing investing in it as well. Equally encouraging is the fact that running a YEH qualifier is a relatively easy process for organizers. The last thing organizers need is another headache, especially one that doesn't yield a significant profit. But the current approach is to allow the qualifiers to be very low key, almost informal, which also serves to attract riders. The involvement of top riders is another positive sign. Without the likes of Buck Davidson, Leslie Law, and Mara Dean, the validity of the entire undertaking is questionable. It seems too often that riders are quicker to clamor for something than they are to embrace it, but the involvement of our best riders should result in the involvement of our best horses.

Yet despite this promising start, the Young Event Horse program is not without its problems. The most pressing four concerns that I have

identified are inconsistent judging, inconsistent jumping courses, a playing field tilted in favor of warmbloods, and the lack of a truly significant championship. Each of these issues can be addressed individually, but they must ultimately be combined and dealt with in order for the Young Event Horse Series to become truly meaningful.

Inconsistent judging is the by-product of the effort to make hosting a YEH qualifier easier for horse trials organizers. This goal is admirable. The end result is not. It is not uncommon for qualifiers to employ dressage judges or hunter judges to adjudicate the placings. What these individuals have in common is that they are readily available to judge a young horse class. They often donate their time and live locally, saving money for organizers. What they don't necessarily have is any background in choosing top event horses. Hunter judges, by the very nature of their background, are inclined to choose a careful, attractive jumper that lacks scope over a scopier jumper that doesn't demonstrate classic form over a fence. I can count on one hand the dressage judges that I know who have ever chosen a top event horse. They appear to have a better eye for a obedience and accuracy in a horse than they do for heart and desire. This winter the USEA hosted a training program for judges designed specifically with the Young Event Horse classes in mind. It is too early to tell if this will yield the desired results, but it is a step in the right direction. Additionally, it seems to me that the most qualified judges are the riders who have shown a track record of picking top horses. Last fall at the YEH Championship, Bobby Costello and Bonnie Mosser spectated the competition from the hillside above Morven Park's jumping field. They certainly would have made good judges.

As with the judging, the jumping courses employed at qualifiers vary widely, which is again a by-product of trying to make life easier for organizers. By rule, the jumps can be a mix of natural obstacles and show jumps, which is great. In reality, however, it's possible to attend one qualifier where the horses are asked to jump unpainted show jumps, and another where the horses are asked to jump a cross-country course.

The problem lies in the fact that jumping unpainted poles is a great way to introduce a three-year-old to fences; jumping a jump from and into water is a preliminary question. The two questions are useful, but combined do not result in a consistent test. This lack of consistency has a negative effect on participation, making some qualifiers too easy and others too hard, and making the rider's job next to impossible when it comes to preparing horses for the qualifiers.

The third problem with the current system is that it places Thoroughbreds at a disadvantage to warmbloods. As a disclaimer, I am a Thoroughbred man. I don't think there is a better group of horses in the world for eventing than the Thoroughbred, though in this country the very best Thoroughbred athletes end up at the track and never make it to eventing. None-the-less, I also believe that Thoroughbreds can be improved for eventing by being crossed with quality warmbloods, just as today's modern warmblood athletes have been improved by the influence of Thoroughbred blood. Within the context of the YEH, however, Thoroughbreds don't stand a chance for two reasons. The first is the fact that the YEH is limited to 4 and 5 year olds, which generally means horses in their first or second year of competing. But the best Thoroughbreds that do make it to eventing generally start out at the track, racing until they are 4 or 5 before making the switch to eventing. This limits the pool of Thoroughbreds that can participate in the YEH. A simple solution is available. Instead of 4 and 5 year old classes, we need to offer 1st and 2nd year classes and raise the age limit. A 4 or 5 year old horse in its first year of competition would be eligible for the First Year Young Event Horse Class. A 5 or 6 year old horse in its second year of competition would be eligible for the Second Year Young Event Horse Class. This would open the competition to more horses across the board while also leveling the playing field between warmbloods that have only ever had one job and former race horses that are making a career change.

In addition to changing the age restrictions to make a more inclusive, fair competition, we need to reconfigure the scoring. The current

scoring system weights the dressage phase far too much, again benefiting warmbloods and placing Thoroughbreds at a disadvantage. Specific to the dressage scoring, a young horse's trot tells you very little about its ability or potential. Its canter speaks volumes, however, not just about how the horse will canter in a dressage test, but also about its jump and gallop. Most horsemen will tell you to buy a horse that has a great canter and average trot over a horse with a fancy trot and average canter. So the YEH dressage section should reflect that. We need to assign a multiplier to the canter of 2 and reduce the significance of not only the "Trot" mark but also the mark for "Submissiveness." Reducing the "Trot" and "Submissiveness" marks by a multiplier of .5 will more accurately reward the type of horse that we need for successful upper level eventing, while also leveling the playing field between warmbloods and thoroughbreds.

The fourth item that needs to be addressed is the end of year Young Event Horse Championship itself. Our YEH program is based on that of the English, who have been doing it for years. Theirs is known as the Burghley Young Event Horse Championship, and the championship is held during the Burghley Horse Trials 4-Star, the biggest event in Europe on the fall competition calendar. The current schedule places this year's YEH Championship at the American Eventing Championships, which is a step in the right direction. However, my concern is that the YEH will be lost amongst everything else going on at the AEC. Further, if a rider has a 4 or 5 year old qualified for the YEH Championships as well as the AEC, which should he choose? Shouldn't our best horses be able to compete both at the AEC in the horse trials and in a YEH Championship? My belief is that the YEH Championship should be run in conjunction with the Fair Hill 3-Star, our premier fall championship. While the qualifiers hosted by horse trials must remain low key affairs, at the very least our championship has to be a big deal, and Fair Hill is the big deal on the fall schedule. When the owners, breeders and potential buyers of young horses come to watch the best young horses in the country, they need to be impressed not only by the horses, but also by the venue. The dressage ring should be the "main

arena,” complete with decoration, flowers, and gate keepers to open and close the ring. The jumping course should look the part of a championship jumping course, with the height of the jumps at the high end. If show jumps are used, they should look like they just came from the Washington International Horse Show – brightly painted wings and poles, flower boxes and gates. If cross-country jumps are used, they need to be equally impressive. Not only should they be beautiful in appearance, they need to challenge our best young horses to show why they deserve to win. And the questions asked need to be probing. By year’s end on a championship course, it’s ok to ask harder questions than would be normally found at a novice or training level event. We can have a truly meaningful Young Event Horse Championship, but not without a truly meaningful setting.

I firmly believe that we have some of the best young horses in the world right here in America. Some are homebreds, some are imported, some start out as racehorses. I also believe that with a bit of fine tuning we can have just the right Young Event Horse program to identify and reward that talent.