

THE FORUM:

A New Game

The first winner of the Rolex Kentucky five-star discusses and outlines the sport he's invented and developed: Cross Country Equestrian.

By **NICK LARKIN**

It took just over 10 years of work, sacrifice and perseverance to win the biggest three-day event in North America in 1998, the Rolex Kentucky CCI5*-L, which at the time was one of only three five-stars in the world. It was a gamble funded by a bank loan totaling more than I earned in a year and involved a journey to a country I had never visited, with a phenomenal horse and a few pieces of luggage that held perhaps the only pair of plastic tall boots to ever win at that level.

We knew we could do it, but I hadn't properly contemplated what we might do after. Unlike some of my friends, I have never been a hard-core fan of eventing or any equestrian sport. I was close to fandom with a stint in steeplechasing, and I've always loved cross-country, especially the old speed and endurance version. That was probably because the horses seemed to feel the same way. However, being less-than-fully immersed in a sport provides a different view from that of the passionate devotees: It's easier to see the broader context and contemplate what's happening beneath the surface and behind the curtain.

I grew up in the city and got involved with horses accidentally, which most likely established a level of detachment, but once in the saddle, riding horses presented an interesting new challenge. Before I knew much about any of the disciplines, I was hooked by the galloping, jumping and adrenaline. Dressage seemed dull and tedious, so I initially veered into show jumping before realizing that horse-power was everything in that game. Fairly soon, I landed in

eventing, where training and conditioning, building a solid partnership with my horse, and effective riding had a greater impact on results. It didn't hurt that eventing also had plenty of galloping, jumping and adrenaline.

The challenge of reaching the top kept me going. The most fervent eventing fans of a certain age will remember Red, a medium-sized rangy chestnut Thoroughbred with a shockingly scopey jump, who won the first five-star held outside of England. A few months earlier, he had won in Adelaide and, later that year, finished clear with a perfect time around the FEI World Equestrian Games course in Rome, but he pulled shoes and injured a check ligament in the muddy going.

After returning to the U.S., we tried to continue, but I had already lost interest in eventing and was looking for something else to fill the void. I loved the sport but not enough. I couldn't see my future in the coming version of eventing that de-emphasized cross-country and athletic conditioning—the parts I loved the most. As a result, I decided to walk away from competition.

But I remained in touch with eventing through teaching while exploring other possibilities. Jeannie and I got married, moved to Kentucky, bred some horses, and dabbled in racing, steeplechasing, and even a touch of endurance riding. Looking back, those years of searching and observation were how I ruminated on a nebulous idea that had first formed when eventing was beginning its transformation



“A few other very popular features of CCE are that coaching is allowed on the course at all competitions, and riding in groups is permitted at some,” writes Nick Larkin. “There are conditions and rules, but these allowances make CCE very inviting and friendly to horses and riders. Who benefits from unhelpful pressure? Has a horse ever gained from their rider feeling coerced or intimidated?” *PHOTO COURTESY OF NICK LARKIN*

into the sport it is today. My unconventional ideas on how eventing should be improved in the late 1990s were the seeds for a new sport, one that I wanted to do and knew others would too.

Those ideas eventually grew into Cross Country Equestrian, a sport vastly more intricate and expansive than the handful of adjustments I thought would benefit eventing.

THE BASICS OF CCE

The foundation of CCE is a cross-country-based jumping competition—galloping, jumping and adrenaline once again. The competitive objective is to finish with the highest score, by earning points for jumping obstacles and avoiding penalties for errors and time faults. The entire competition is objectively scored, so there are no opinions or biases affecting the results.



Wine Country and Trisha Marullo, DVM, clear an obstacle at a Cross Country Equestrian competition at Pine Hill in Bellville, Texas, last June. *ALLISON LEGNON PHOTO*

The most unique and innovative feature of CCE is that every obstacle on a course is optional and can be passed without incurring a penalty. Passing is one of several ingenious elements in CCE that have a dual purpose. Passing an obstacle at lower levels is about making CCE friendly and encouraging good choices. Passing at higher levels relates to tactical decisions on course and competition strategy.

Obstacles are marked with a symbol that indicates the correct side to pass, which is generally the longer route to the next obstacle. A Pass Gate can be used for a safer path or longer detour. But CCE is not like a gambler's choice show jumping round. You have your course of jumps, marked with color-coded numbers, which must be followed in sequence—but you can choose which of them to attempt. You can pass every single jump if you desire. Your score would be zero, but clearly, you had other priorities for that round.

Optionality was a revelation in the creation of CCE because it offers so many advantages and possibilities. Everyone can make choices based on their situation at any given moment: You or your horse don't like a fence? Skip it, and you're not eliminated and sent home. Having a rough day? Pass all but the simplest jumps and finish on a positive. New to the level? Perhaps don't attempt the toughest jumps.

Determined to win? You're probably going to jump them all.

Most significantly, optionality removes adverse pressure to go beyond what is appropriate or safe. Undoubtedly, many cross-country riders have ignored a gut feeling beyond the usual nervous jitters, and then incurred a heavy or even catastrophic toll. A culture of pressure to meet the expectations of others can be dangerous anywhere—on Facebook, or on a horse. Choice shifts the competitor mindset from “jump it or go home” obedience toward being more aware of the horse and considering what is best for the partnership.

I had suspected that changing this habitual thinking might be a process, so at the early CCEs, we instituted a rule of needing to pass one jump to be eligible for prizes, just to get people thinking about it. Everyone knows what it's like to not jump a fence, but with the nudge, they thought about which jump they would skip and why: the smallest, the biggest, the scariest, the one with a slippery downhill approach? Interestingly, it appears the mindset about passing may have a communal element; when one or two riders pass fences, it seems to give permission for others to do the same.

At higher levels of competition, passing obstacles can be a tactical decision, where competitors trade points they

might have scored for fewer time faults or to avoid a high risk of penalties. The huge benefits of choice led to optionality percolating throughout CCE, providing flexibility and possibilities in other areas such as course parameters, competition formats, and other beneficial choices for competitors.

A few other very popular features of CCE are that coaching is allowed on the course at all competitions, and riding in groups is permitted at some. There are conditions and rules, but these allowances make CCE very inviting and friendly to horses and riders. Who benefits from unhelpful pressure? Has a horse ever gained from their rider feeling coerced or intimidated?

For some, the absence of dressage will be very appealing. Others will make a specious argument about cross-country being dangerous without dressage. What they should be saying is that cross-country can be dangerous without training—and they would be correct.

Impressive movement, flawless submission, and a stunning appearance are not needed in CCE, nor will those qualities improve safety. Dressage, or training, when translated from French, is required in CCE. Control, adjustability and responsiveness all come from dressage training. Training improves jumping and makes it safer, and any serious show jumper will attest to that. CCE is no different.

THE OBSTACLES

Every obstacle on a CCE course is classified by *type* and by at least one *category*.

Type refers to the obstacle being a show jumping, cross-country or ancillary obstacle. Type is always visibly obvious and has minor rule and scoring implications. The category is more important in determining scoring values and specific rules, such as the number of attempts permitted.

Regular obstacles are the most common on a CCE course and cannot exceed the dimensions and technicality for the level. Level 5 in CCE is

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EVENTING



Unlike on a traditional eventing cross-country course, obstacles at a Cross Country Equestrian competition are optional. The symbols on the fences show a passing arrow as well as the level of the fence, and if it's a Knock Down or Challenge obstacle. *PHOTOS COURTESY OF NICK LARKIN*



roughly equivalent to training in eventing, so Regular obstacles would have training dimensions. In most cases, Regular obstacles can be attempted twice before a mandatory pass is required.

Approximately 20% of jumps on the course are Challenge obstacles, which typically have dimensions and technicality of the next higher level. Challenge obstacles at Level 5 would have dimensions similar to modified in eventing. Challenge obstacles are worth more points but can be attempted only once, so there is no opportunity to recoup points after incurring penalties.

A similar portion of jumps on the course are Knock Down obstacles. These have a top element that, when dislodged, incurs a penalty deducted from the points scored for jumping the obstacle.

This category can be either show jumping or cross-country type, with the latter commonly using a mechanism that prevents entrapment or interference from the top element. It is easily reset for the next pair.

There are several other categories of obstacles, each with associated rules and scoring values. Some involve an innovative concept, and others relate to a particular situation, such as obstacles in very close proximity where it would be unsafe to jump one and pass the other.

Regular obstacles are unmarked. Every other obstacle is marked with a symbol indicating its category.

THE COMPETITION FORMATS

CCE is based on three different parts, called stages. A CCE competition can include one, two or all three stages, all of which involve riding across country in some form. Single-stage CCEs will likely remain the most common format, being easier and more efficient for organizers, and providing convenience and economy for competitors. The parameters for each stage can vary widely, allowing each CCE to be optimized to suit circumstances.

The most complex format of CCE, and the season's focal point, is an enhanced three-stage competition that is held over three days. Sound familiar? Like the virtually obsolete three-day event, this format of CCE is a significant bump up at the end of the season that will require extra preparation and will revive the skills of tapering, peaking and energy management.

There is a conventional order for the stages in a three-stage CCE, but this is not always required. A multi-stage CCE would typically begin with the Endurance-X Ride or EXR stage. A demanding EXR would include speed and stamina sections, each with different paces, and a modest amount of jumping along the route. A standalone EXR can resemble a trail ride focused on relaxation, enjoyment, and perhaps a little fitness. Other versions are similar to a hunter-pace competition. When part of a multi-stage CCE, the EXR creates a small spread of

scores that competitors take into the next stage.

The Cross-Country Ride, or CCR stage, resembles an eventing cross-country course where all fences are of the cross-country type with a solid build. Course design in CCE differs slightly from eventing. Passing and creating alternate routes affects the positioning of obstacles. Technicality emphasizes adjustability and adaptability more than obedience. There are limits on the number and size of narrow fences, so that a particular skill is not overly tested. Fences that can have serious implications when something goes wrong—such as an open oxer—are restricted, and any back element must project above the front element, so horses are not deceived or confused. CCR is the most demanding stage and is the heart of CCE. An expanded version incorporates several other phases, some of which echo the three-day events of yesteryear.

The remaining stage is the Jump-Off Ride, or JOR, which resembles a hybrid of cross-country and show jumping, with added speed. The JOR involves two areas called settings. The arena setting is a defined area where show jumping obstacles can be used, and the route can loop and cross itself as is typical of show jumping. The open setting is everywhere outside of the arena setting.

Usually, the course starts in the arena setting and then moves to the open setting. An obstacle-free gallop section may be included before the route continues with an abridged cross-country section similar to CCR. In major high-level competitions, the course may return to the arena setting for an exciting finish in front of spectators.

Speed and efficiency are as important as technical jumping in JOR, while the stamina requirement is less than the other stages. Several unreleased features of JOR will add extra excitement and encourage competitors to make different choices regarding obstacles or routes. At major CCEs, the winner should not be apparent until the final horse is nearing the finish, and ideally, only when the time clock is stopped.

THINKING ABOUT SAFETY

CCE allows or requires protective equipment and devices that reduce the damage when things go wrong. However, the greatest impact on safety is achieved by reducing the probability that things will go wrong by improving the skills and knowledge of competitors. Emphasizing training and horsemanship and reducing the advantage of raw horsepower makes any competition safer.

A key safety feature of CCE is the ability to choose whether or not to attempt a fence, thereby removing the pressure to do too much. Course design that emphasizes adjustability and control encourages competitors to invest in training. Additionally, the bonus point system rewards training over severe bits or equipment: Riding in a simple snaffle and without a whip or a martingale gives a competitor extra points. Innovative CCE features such as chicanes, pass gates

and special obstacles add to the training burden and, therefore, result in safer riding.

CCE has sensible qualification requirements and additional innovative mechanisms, such as probationary periods and relegation triggers, which encourage better choices and enforce consequences for poor decisions.

The eligibility to move up a level is achieved by attaining sufficient Q-Scores: scores that reach or exceed a threshold calculated from the points available on each course. More Q-Scores are needed at higher levels of competition.

Ranking is a secondary qualification that provides a quantitative measure of Q-Scores attained by horses and riders. Ranking has implications for eligibility, such as probationary periods to prevent competitor overreach and exemptions for those with proven records.

SPORT IS ENTERTAINMENT

Aside from more participant enjoyment, one of the reasons for variability and an exciting finish is to boost spectator appeal. Sport is an entertainment business built upon its audience. An entertaining sport attracts more fans and garners support. It took minimal research to see that the most popular sports share common characteristics and CCE incorporates these as much as possible.

For example, soccer, the world's most popular sport is a simple contest: Score more goals. CCE has a similar competitive objective: Finish with the highest score. Sports fans tolerate umpires, but judges who determine results are less popular. Furthermore, opinion in horse sports can revolve around fashion or trends, which places a premium on an irrelevant attribute. In CCE, athletic performance is important; your appearance is not.

Relatability is important. Everyman appeal is critical and involves both the image and the realities of a sport. Tradition can be celebrated, but outfits that resemble Downton Abbey dinner parties send an awkward message to the casual observer. Horse sports may never be as affordable as tennis or basketball, but highlighting exclusivity or privilege is detrimental to support. The most popular sports are attainable and welcoming; that will be the tradition of CCE.

ACCESS, HORSEMANSHIP AND FUN

Accessibility was a key factor from the beginning. I knew that increasing exclusivity in equestrian sport was a path toward contraction and eventually those on the margins would seek other options. I knew because I was one of them.

Accessibility is incredibly important to any sport because it is self-reinforcing. It is multifaceted and by far the greatest common concern expressed in my conversations with countless people over the decades as CCE was taking shape. Affordability and availability were the most important factors cited, and there was frustration about the intractability of the entire situation.

Consequently, there is nothing in CCE that adds expense without being essential to the competition. Also, built-in flexibility to adjust or adapt is everywhere, so a rule or requirement doesn't preclude a venue or competitor from participating. An organizer being able to run a single-stage CCE is one example. A competitor being able to gain eligibility via various pathways is another.

Declining horsemanship was the second major concern I heard when listening to people talk about the status of equestrian sport, and the link with accessibility is easy to understand. Exclusivity makes resources and opportunity more important than talent, skill and knowledge. The negative implications on the safety and long-term viability of a sport that is being drained of these critical factors have become apparent.

The third topic of concern was often acknowledged wistfully: People are not having as much fun anymore. There was usually a cumulative effect arising from excessive stress and anxiety about competing, a broader community being replaced by cliques and factions, and a devaluing of the horse-rider relationship in favor of a competitive result. Enjoyment is in decline. CCE removes unnecessary or adverse pressure, focuses on partnership and improvement, and allows each participant to choose whatever is best for them.

A SPORT FOR THOROUGHBREDS

Creating an accessible equestrian sport was one catalyst for CCE. The other was the plight of Thoroughbreds pushed out from racing. To substantially change the Thoroughbred aftercare crisis, it's critical to create a corresponding demand. To be effective, that demand should favor the Thoroughbred over another breed, but it also must match the volume and diversity of unwanted horses. Anything less would have minimal impact.

It is true that Thoroughbreds are represented in many sports, but each discipline favors other breeds: Quarter Horses in western arenas, Arabians for endurance, warmbloods in the English disciplines. Preference for other breeds, inaccessibility and scale make the small subset of Thoroughbreds befitting those sports a tiny fraction of the thousands every year that need an option.

Few would disagree that when it comes to pure cross-country, there is no better horse than a Thoroughbred. They have the complete package of speed, stamina, agility and a sharp, competitive mind. The breed may not be known for extravagant movement or a calm, predictable demeanor, but they are, in my opinion, the most impressive equine athletes.

By requiring all-round athleticism, CCE doesn't heavily favor a specific attribute like racing or dressage does. By

requiring extensive training, a superior athlete does not gain an outsized advantage. CCE is great for the handsome bay gelding with chrome accents but also just as great for the small, wispy chestnut mare with a nervous eye.

The inviting and flexible nature of CCE gives all the organizations and businesses involved in adoption and retraining the perfect opportunity to get economical experience and a legitimate competition record for their horses. It's much easier to re-home a Thoroughbred when they have competition experience in a sport that is ideal for them, and getting that record is easy and inexpensive. After reading this far, you can see how CCE is a natural nexus for all these pieces.

YOU CAN'T SOAR WITH RUFFLED FEATHERS

Like any new start-up that disrupts tradition or the status quo, CCE has encountered a bit of resistance. Historically, people don't like change. However, eventing spin-offs such as arena eventing, "Demo & Dabble" in New Zealand and the just-launched XC+ in England suggest that many around the world are looking for alternatives. Other disciplines are no different, experiencing similar problems and looking for solutions.

CCE has likenesses with eventing, show jumping, endurance and even driving, as they do with each other. But in many other ways, CCE is a very different sport. More important than distinguishing differences is that CCE fills a gap in the equestrian landscape. As I have already outlined, it is for the people and the horses that don't fit or cannot access the traditional disciplines. I accept that a small number may come to CCE from other sports, but they were already on the very edge of that gap, and now they have a lifeline. Consistent with my rationale against exclusivity, a larger and more diverse equestrian world is better for everyone and every discipline. It is more resilient and robust.

The inaccessibility of traditional disciplines will not suddenly reverse course, and the efforts on the margins are unlikely to have any transformative effect. Undoubtedly, CCE will be an entrance point for people who move on to other sports. So, instead of viewing CCE as competing for scarce resources, detractors should open their minds to seeing CCE as a small platoon bringing new resources to restock the cavalry's depleted supplies. CCE is a gateway to equestrian sport that prioritizes horses and horsemanship over everything else. We can play different positions on the field, but aren't we all supposed to be on the same team?

I've asked a few riders from "back in the day" about how much they worked at their riding and what compensation they received compared to professionals putting the same effort into other sports. You can imagine their replies, and

nobody said things have improved. Additionally, many boarding businesses, instructors and trainers are all getting squeezed by the contraction and costs of equestrian sport. A long-term goal of CCE is to provide an opportunity to have a truly viable and ethical business with horses, at all levels and in all areas—competing, producing, teaching. What's not to like?

Since the first trial competition in the fall of 2023, we've run more than two dozen CCEs across eight states. We had a shotgun approach and were willing to set up anywhere that expressed an interest. This year, we'll expand a little more but will prioritize several destination competitions at popular venues. These CCEs will advance the roll-out and introduce more components. Ideally, people will get to a smaller competition beforehand so they're familiar with how everything works, but it will be easy enough to be ready without a rehearsal.

CCE is a start-up sport, and its future currently depends on people trying it and having fun. We believe that once you do, you will. Our main goal is for everyone to have fun and enjoy their horse. It's even in our tagline: Your Course. Your Choice. Enjoy Your Horse. 🐾

Want to learn more about CCE? Visit [RideCCE.com](https://ridecce.com).



Nick Larkin

Nick Larkin, who won the first five-star held at the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event with Red in 1998, now lives with his wife, Jeannie Larkin, at Wainui Farm in Lexington, Kentucky. Nick is training a few Thoroughbreds for CCE, and he has a super-sized Uncle Mo gelding for dressage. He continues to teach and train horses for other people while maintaining and improving the farm.

IN THE FORUM, people are invited to express their views and offer constructive criticism on any topic relevant to working with and enjoying horses. The opinions expressed by the writers are entirely their own and not necessarily those of The Chronicle of the Horse.



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