

Eight Americans Competing in Land Rover Burghley Horse Trials

U.S. eventers take on prestigious and challenging CCI**** in England.

Posted: September 1, 2007, 5 a.m. EST

The eight American combinations competing in the 2007 Land Rover Burghley Horse Trials include a grandfather, an Idahoan, an 18-year-old horse, a combination contesting their first CCI**** and a combination looking to settle a score with one of the most challenging CCI**** tracks in the world. Ranging in age from 21 to 56 these riders bring all levels of experience and expectation to England to take on the world's best at the prestigious event, which runs Aug. 30 – Sept. 2.

The Grandfather

An accurate count of how many three-day events Bruce Davidson has contested would be nearly impossible to track down. But he won his first of two consecutive World Championships at Burghley in 1974 and the quality of his performance has not waned. He has added four Olympic Team medals (two gold and two silver), won the Rolex Kentucky CCI**** six times, won the prestigious Badminton CCI**** and team and individual medals at the Pan American Games and World Championships over the last three decades. When it comes to experience, no one can trump Davidson.

"It's like life going in full circle," said Davidson about returning to Burghley. "Years ago I took Irish Cap to Burghley, I did it on my own and I did the best I could and I enjoyed it thoroughly and I'm looking forward to doing it again. I'm looking forward to the chance."

At 56 years old Davidson is contesting Burghley for the thirteenth time. He considers himself lucky to be sitting on his beloved 11-year-old homebred mare, Jam. Very competitive at the three-star level, a rare mistake at Rolex Kentucky this spring is one of the only cross country penalties on her record. Jumping comes easily to the Thoroughbred mare, and Davidson has been working very hard to bring her flat work up to a comparable level.

"I want to be at least 10 points better than Kentucky in the dressage," said Davidson. "She's gotten much better. I'm really happy with her. Her progress is great. This is what I love. I bred her and made her and I enjoy watching her develop and improve."

Jam is out of a mare called Honey who is something of a Unionville, Pennsylvania legend. She spent a significant amount of time jumping from field to field at Davidson's Chesterland Farm. Both of Bruce's kids (Buck and Nancy) rode her in everything from point-to-points to hunter trials and she never met a jump she couldn't jump or a contest she couldn't win.

"It is one of the special things in life to have the chance, the horse and the means to do this. The horse is capable and I enjoy proving how good she is."

Fittingly enough Jam's final week of work before getting on a plane for the first time was a Davidson family affair including a lesson from Buck (who is now an extremely accomplished rider in his own right) and a ride by Nancy's toddler Oram.

"He didn't want to get off," said Bruce of Oram.

You really couldn't blame him.

The Idahoan

Sara Mittleider was on her way to Blenheim CCI*** in England last year, when El Primero came up lame in a hind leg. The 21-year-old returned to her base in Idaho, sorted the 12-year-old Thoroughbred out and headed back to Rolex Kentucky CCI**** for the third consecutive year and picked up another award for being the leading young rider.

She then set her sights on returning to England.

"Going to Burghley has been the plan since the beginning of July," said Mittleider. "We wanted to see how he came back after Kentucky and he came back really, really well."

Jumping has always been the ex-racehorse's forte and Mittleider has been working very hard with fellow Idaho rider (and

Olympic medalist) Debbie McDonald to improve his dressage.

“He’s been really good, I’ve been working with Debbie quite a bit this summer, that’s showing in the flat work,” she said. “He’s getting way more rideable in his show jumping. We’ve been setting up accuracy questions working on pace and lines and calming myself down.”

Sara and her parents, Gary and Brenda, drove El Primero from Idaho to New Jersey to meet up with the other members of the U.S. contingent. A trip to Burghley is something that she has had her eye on for 15 years.

“I’m pretty darn excited,” she said before she left. “This has been something I’ve been wanting to do since I was four. I saw my first Badminton and Burghley tapes and I said I want to do that.”

She has had El Primero since he came off the racetrack at the end of a career where he beat one horse in four starts. All of El Primero’s training has come from Mittleider. A scrappy 15.2 hand Thoroughbred might not get a second look in the barn but just keep putting up the jumps.

“Much to everybody else’s dismay, I always knew he was a horse I could do this on,” she said.

The First-Timer

Dornin North and her own Lion Display look to contest their first CCI**** at Burghley. Veterans of four CCI****’s, the student of Phillip Dutton’s puts most of the idea of making this trip on her coach.

“It wasn’t my idea, Phillip suggested it,” said North, 26, of Bluemont, Virginia.

Lion Display, an 11-year-old Irish Sport Horse is North’s first advanced horse and the partnership they have developed over the years is incredibly strong. North’s biggest challenge has been getting the laid-back gelding (whom she calls Jem after the main character in *To Kill a Mockingbird*) fit enough to tackle Burghley’s rolling terrain. She credits Virginia steeplechase trainer Richard Valentine for his help.

“I do feel ready,” said North. “Jem has been on the Richard Valentine Fitness Program and he looks really good. I feel really good, Richard helped me with his fitness a lot.”

The pair had their final preparation at the Millbrook Horse Trials in Millbrook, NY and North is excited to get on the plane.

“He jumped around Millbrook great,” she said. “He feels really ready.”

The ‘Older Gentleman’ Equine Version

Will Faudree has made a name for himself on the back of a wonderful campaigner, Antigua. The Australian Thoroughbred celebrates his 18th birthday on December 31 and despite a smattering of grey hairs in his dark bay coat, hasn’t lost a step or his love of the game.

Faudree, 25, contested his first CCI*** on Antigua in 2003 and has subsequently represented the U.S at the 2006 World Equestrian Games and was a member of the gold medal winning team at the 2003 Pan American Games. Four clean cross country rounds at Rolex Kentucky CCI**** and one at Badminton as well as two top finishes at the Fair Hill International CCI*** make Antigua one of the most experienced horses in the world.

“He has been trucking along in very hot weather all summer,” said Faudree, who is based in Southern Pines, NC. “He’s been really good. He was good at Millbrook, my saddle pads slipped badly on the cross country and the pads flew out after the water. His back was a little sore afterwards but he jogged up great. I thought about not running him because we had torrential rain. But he had to run to be qualified and he was the third horse out and the ground seemed good. In hindsight, I’m very glad I ran him because he left the start box pulling my arms out.”

Faudree knows that Antigua is much closer to the end of his storied career than the beginning (he had already completed Adelaide CCI**** when he was imported in 2002) but without a cross country penalty on their record Faudree knows that the veteran isn’t ready to be done quite yet.

“After the show jumping at Millbrook (where he had two rails down) people asked me if he felt older on the third day, but everyone seems to forget that show jumping has been hard on him in the past,” said Faudree. “Over time, as I got more

accurate he got better. The two rails were totally rider error. He feels great, his body and his mind feel better than they've ever felt. I spare nothing with that horse so he gets everything imaginable that he can get and he needs. He feels good and ready."

Faudree and Antigua was the traveling reserve for the 2004 Olympic Team and went all the way to Athens but didn't compete. He then rerouted to Burghley later that fall where a high nail ended the competition at the first horse inspection. As far as another shot at the Olympics in 2008, Faudree is realistic.

"I'm not sure if the Olympics are right for him next year," said Faudree. "That would be a tough trip on an older horse and that may be putting my ambitions before what is best for him. We'll see how he is after Burghley. Everyone keeps asking me if it's his last trip and if it is, it's been a fairytale for me with him."

Everyone likes a happy ending.

The Kristi(e)ns

Both Kristen Bond and Kristin Schmolze have jumped around the Rolex Kentucky CCI**** twice on the horses they head to their first Burghleys with.

Bond and Fleeceworks Blackout have had an odd thing occur on both trips to the spring four-star but neither took anything away from very professional performances. In 2006 she had a silly run-out on the cross country but still made the time and show jumped clear. In 2007 Blackout slipped over on the flat before the last water while up on the clock. Unscathed Bond remounted and galloped home.

"I'm so excited I think I'm going to have a heart attack just driving to the barn," said Bond on Thursday morning shortly after Blackout had left the country.

The 13-year-old New Zealand Thoroughbred finds jumping very easy and is Bond's first CCI**** horse. She says the excitement is mutual for both horse and rider.

"He's really happy too," she said. "Blackout was at Gladstone last night and he's always really grumpy- he always has his ears back. But last night he had his ears forward, he was really happy."

Blackout ran at the Maui Jim Wayne Horse Trials in July which was his first run after Rolex and his last cross country run before Burghley.

"He was really naughty in the dressage because he just is some times," said Bond. "I just went quiet on the cross country and he was great in show jumping. Then I went to Millbrook to do just do the dressage and show jumping and he was much better in the dressage and of course good in the show jumping."

Blackout's opinions about dressage are no secret but Bond thinks she has made a deal with him which she hopes will last through the Thursday of Burghley.

"He's been doing so much dressage," said Bond. "He's so tired of dressage. I keep telling him that he only has to do it one more time for awhile. I don't know if he believes me, I hope so."

Bond is very busy stateside riding multiple horses most weekends at horse trials.

"I've been to watch a couple of times," said Bond of Burghley. "I was so amazed that the trade fair has street signs. I'm so excited go, it's a great group of people going. It will be nice to just have the one horse and actually just enjoy some of it. I'm just excited to go."

Bond's excitement resonates throughout the whole family. Her parents, Liz and Ray, will be traveling from Washington State to watch her.

"I think they have had their trip booked since we got Blackout," said Bond.

The enthusiasm must be contagious.

Kristin Schmolze and 11-year-old Irish Sport Horse Cavaldi has the jumping blood of the Irish Holsteiner stallion Cavalier

Royale running through his veins. He lives up to his pedigree and jumps for fun.

"He's pretty fabulous," said Schmolze from Andrew Nicholson's yard in England on Monday morning. "He feels great. I figured while I have him and I have the opportunity I've always wanted to do it I thought it was a good time. I'm pretty excited to be over here and be doing it."

Cavaldi and Schmolze were second at the CCI*** at Fair Hill International in 2004, putting their names on the High Performance map. Innate athleticism makes running and jumping easy for 'Joey' and Schmolze has learned how to harness his enthusiasm over the last two years. Lightly competed since Kentucky, Schmolze feels like she has been able to do lots of preparation at home.

"He hasn't run very much this summer," said Schmolze. "But he's been good both in the flatwork and in the jumping. The issue with him has always been rideability. He's been getting more and more rideable."

Schmolze feels like she is up to taking the toughest test of her competitive career.

"I think he's the best he's ever been," she said. "I think partly it's because he's 12 now and I've had him for five years and the partnership is really there. I've been riding with Phillip (Dutton) which has been really helpful, I've been figuring him out more, he's not a horse you're ever going to change so I'm pretty just working on improving him."

The Sleeper

Jane Sleeper first represented the U.S. in 1988 when she rode on the Olympic Team in Seoul, Korea. She followed that up with a medal winning effort at the 1991 Pan American Games and has returned to big time more than a decade later with a lively Irish-bred mare named UN.

Named for not being named (she arrived from Ireland without a name and had UN for UNKNOWN on her papers and Sleeper never managed to come up with anything appropriate) rather than the United Nations, UN has bounded around some big courses including her first four-star at the Rolex Kentucky this spring.

UN, like Cavaldi, is by Cavalier Royale and jumps with the same enthusiasm as her relations. Out of Never Ever, the 12-year-old mare has been working on her dressage as there is little room for improvement over fences.

Sleeper has made her life with horses at her small Pennsylvania farm outside of the horse-oriented community of Unionville. She consistently buys and sells horses consistently from Ireland and has a very popular working student program.

At 56, Sleeper is thrilled to have the chance to show the mare she produced to the rest of the world.

The Redeemer

Jan Bynny and Task Force first contested Burghley in 2004 after spending the summer training in England as an alternate for the Athens Olympics. The Australian Thoroughbred jumped bravely around a very difficult track to fall at the penultimate fence.

Bynny has been wracking up excellent results since that mistake with Task Force and she is looking forward to giving the now very experienced horse another chance at the prestigious event.

"I'd like to try to make it through the finish flags on cross-country and complete the competition this year," said Bynny. "He has been great, I've only had two intermediate runs on him because I went on a family vacation which my father insisted that I didn't miss. It was probably the best thing for me. I did the OI at Stuart and the Intermediate at Waredaca and he won both."

So Task Force, owned by JC Chester, has returned to form after an uncharacteristic performance in his first trip to the UK this year at Badminton. Over the past four years the 16-year-old gelding has won the Jersey Fresh CCI***, been in the top ten at Rolex Kentucky CCI**** twice, was sixth at the World Cup Final in Malmo, Sweden and was 11th at the Blenheim CCI*** in 2003.

"Anything can and will happen but I'm very excited about how he's going," said Bynny.