

Top Officials Strive to Make Eventing Safer

USEF and USEA officials urge attendance at upcoming USEF/USEA Safety Summit.

April 30, 2008

Three-day eventing is experiencing tremendous strain. Tragic accidents are calling into question the safety of the sport's cross-country phase and the recent Rolex accidents have heightened the anxieties.

In response, on April 29 David O'Connor, United States Equestrian Federation President, and Kevin Baumgardner, United States Eventing Association President, released an open joint letter expressing their concerns about three-day eventing's safety record and calling on the equestrian community to rally together at an upcoming Safety Summit. Here is the full text of that letter:

"This past weekend at the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day, Laine Ashker suffered a serious fall during the cross-country stage of the competition. She is currently in critical condition at the University of Kentucky hospital in Lexington. Laine's horse and another involved in a separate accident had to be euthanized.

These accidents come just a month after Darren Chiacchia, an Olympic rider, had a serious fall at an event in Tallahassee, Florida. They also come in the wake of a recent article in the New York Times about 15 rider fatalities in cross country that have occurred worldwide over the last two years.

These accidents have hit us hard in the sport of eventing - we are all riders who care deeply about the horses, their welfare and the image of the sport. For us, the issue is also a personal one.

This spate of accidents has raised important and potentially troubling questions for those of us who govern the sport: Why are so many riders and horses having accidents? Is there more that can be done to make cross country safer? Is the sport just too dangerous?

There is no question that eventing is a demanding and yes, risky sport. Riders cross undulating terrain at high speed and jump a series of challenging fences - all while atop a 1,000 pound horse. So there is a constant need for us to ensure that every precaution is being taken to reduce the risk of injury to riders and horses.

Although we have implemented several measures to improve safety over the last year, clearly more needs to be done. In the coming days and weeks, we will be redoubling our efforts to identify additional steps we can take to make sure that riders and horses can compete as safely as possible. We would like to ask your help in this effort - whether you're a rider, trainer, coach, veterinarian, or simply a horse enthusiast.

We invite each and every one of you to the USEF/USEA Safety Summit to be held in Lexington, KY June 7-8. We will break the issue of safety down and examine the causes and potential solutions with some of the best minds in the game. In the meantime, if you have immediate thoughts about how we can improve the safety of cross country, please email them to us at: safetythoughts@usef.org and/or safety@useventing.com.

Over the last few days, we have received emails from people who were at the Rolex event over the weekend and were disturbed by what they saw. They are asking hard questions of us and questioning whether they should continue to support the sport of eventing. To them and to you, we want to say that we too are disturbed by what we see. No matter how much we tell ourselves that injury is a part of our sport, it is always traumatizing to see a horse fall.

Therefore, we are working closely with FEI to do whatever we can to better protect riders and horses and to repair the public image of our sport. We are proposing today that within the U.S. the following five initiatives be put into effect:

1. If a horse has a rotational fall, horse and rider are suspended from competing for three or six months
2. If a horse has a rotational fall, horse and rider lose their qualification at the level at which they are competing.
3. If a rider falls off on the course they are eliminated.

4. Open oxers on courses at every level are made frangible.

5. If a horse falls related to a jump both horse and rider are suspended from competing for one month.

We don't have all the answers, we are deeply concerned about what is going on in the sport of eventing and we need your help."

Sincerely,

David O'Connor, USEF President
Kevin Baumgardner, USEA President

What do YOU think? Join the discussion: Is it WORTH IT?>>