

Off the Track(s)

By Holly Werner

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The last weekend of August was the biggest show of the year for me and Zephyr. I felt like we'd done a lot to prepare, and all of the smaller shows had led up to this in an orderly fashion. Little did I know my Thoroughbred had other plans in mind for us, and decided to harken back to his 4-year-old fresh-off-the-track days instead of acting like the 12-year-old reliable man he usually is. On the bright side, he jumped every jump (on the first try, even).

Let's start with dressage. The warm-up went well, but when we got in the actual ring, suddenly he was tense and looking everywhere. Other than two head-tosses in one of the canter circles, there was nothing shockingly disobedient—but we still got the worst score of our careers: a 50.5. Turned out the judge was scoring everyone about 7 points higher than they'd ever gotten before, and there were several other 50s (whereas usually there is NEVER a 50!), so I felt a little better about it.

A couple hours later, I headed up to show jumping. I had walked the course twice, as some of the approaches were tricky (short turns before the jumps). Jump #2 fell for four people in a row during Beginner Novice, a level that almost never has any rails down. I made a mental note to give myself the longest approach possible to #2.

Photo: Elizabeth MoyerI was within the first 10 of my division, slated to start at 4:00, so I got up there about 3:30. To my surprise, they told me they'd already passed my number and I needed to hurry up and get through my warm-up and head to the ring! Apparently they'd made an announcement in the barn about the change in time, but I never heard it. Oh well! At that point you've just got to carry on.

I was a bit frazzled, and I think Zephyr knew it. He was trying to buck while warming up—a habit he left behind years ago. I was a bit nervous to warm up over a fence, but I had to. He jumped it like a deer with his head in the air, followed by running off and not listening at all. (Please see photo because ... well, it's hilarious.) At that point I was scared I would fall off when I had to do a whole course!

They called my number again, and I was shaking with fear as I headed over. That's very unusual for me. I had planned to take a looong gallop up to the first fence, a wide oxer. Instead I cut the turn because I just wanted to get it over with. Turned out to be our only rail down! We left up the problematic #2. The rest of the course he was very forward, but listening much better than the warm-up. Only one turn was difficult, with me turning his head one way with his body running the other way. We broke to a trot but galloped the last line in the right number of strides.

On to cross-country the next day ... a cool, crisp morning had me worried about my 9:00 a.m. ride time. He was going to be wild! I had a 30 minute warm-up just letting him gallop around and around over the solid warm-up fences until I thought the edge was off. So off to the start box I went.

The first two jumps were uphill, and I had nice control. The wheels kind of came off after the third jump, a little house in the shade followed by a sharp right turn that required full control. He pretty much blew that turn by bolting and fighting me and running sideways. I got him back to a collected canter to the base of #4, a brush fence. He landed and saw the downhill grade and just took off. By the time I had control again, I tried to make my next turn, only to realize I couldn't find my jump. Oops! I had blown right past the opening in the white galloping lanes to get there. (The lanes are already staked for the 2010 World Equestrian Games cross-country course so they can put extra grass seed and fertilizer down; at various points the ropes were removed so we could go across the lanes to our next jumps.)

Photo: TeamCEOI did an embarrassing circle to look for the opening in the lane, and came into #5A with a nice, controlled pace. This was the most difficult combination on the course—as you can see from the photo, there's a VERY sharp turn to 5B! And it's all facing downhill. Unfortunately Zephyr landed and bolted again. I was determined to make 5B happen regardless, per my trainer's directions, so I cranked almost a 270-degree turn and jumped 5B on a nearly impossible angle ... yay, Zephyr!

The rest of the course he was still pretty strong, so I trotted a few downhill sections to be sure I could make the turns.

Finally, three jumps from home, he fell into a lazy, relaxed canter. Better late than never? By then I was so tired I just wanted to finish. My horse was probably TOO fit, and was ready to do the course "for real" at that point! I slid off to get some water and remove my pinny, and the next rider came in right behind me. We'd gotten a ton of time faults for all the trotting we did.

So it was another semi-heartbreaker of a show, but I'm trying to look on the bright side: this is the largest Novice course we could possibly find all year, and he didn't hesitate for a moment at any of the jumps! One more show left this year—we'll see if he can pull it all together with the addition of a running martingale next time. How have your shows gone this year? I love hearing other peoples' stories about naughty horses ... or big successes!

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