

Understanding course design is key to horse and rider progression.

by Ginger Freeman

Along with several other riders from Shady Lane Farm, I took a day off from riding to learn from Canadian FEI course designer, Peter Grant, in early December.

Understanding the dynamic and technical aspects of course design is essential to achieve effortless beauty on course. Peter's in-depth description and hands-on activities about course design gave me a different perspective on show jumping and some helpful hints of what to focus on while practicing at home to achieve success on course.



Peter began the clinic by telling us about the evolution of show jumping and its connection to course design. In the early years, the sport did not prioritize horse and rider safety, Peter explained. It was standard practice then to use hard poles and deep cups, which created jumps that were nearly impossible to break down. Luckily, the sport has evolved from “jump or die Darwinism” to safety over the past few decades.

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Peter's process works to set up the horse and rider for success and good course designing is critical to horse and rider safety. A course can either do damage to a horse or make them better. Despite the importance of quality course design, horse show management is often money incentivized and neglects to invest in hiring a course designer to save money. Peter urged us to encourage show management to invest in course designers, which will, in turn, improve the sport.

Thankfully, stricter safety regulations implemented by USEF over the past 15 years have led to better courses that have contributed greatly to the evolution of the show jumping horse. The horses themselves and what they can handle are constantly changing, so the course designing process has to be dynamic. A good course designer works like a teacher designing curriculum because they assess different skills at each level. The same basic questions of shoulder control, compression, and stride length are asked at each level but complicated by the course designer depending on the experience and ability expected at each level. The lower the level, the less is asked from horse and rider. At 1.40 meter and above, questions beyond the basics are asked. This level is more about showing the horse what they can do rather than the horse showing the rider what they can do.

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