



Organizers and exhibitors enter the “new normal” with fluid plans, frustrations and frets.

by Kim F. Miller

With cautious optimism, a scaled-down schedule of equestrian competition is expected to begin this month. At least that was the case as this issue went to press during the third week of May. As in every segment of society, uncertainty has been the only constant when it comes to the pandemic’s impact on equestrian sport.

The United States Equestrian Federation and discipline-specific governing bodies have issued clear requirements and recommendations for safe return to competition. Qualification criteria for medal finals, championships and various industry programs have been or are being modified. So have mileage rules in several cases where organizers want to reschedule shows cancelled between mid-March and the expected easing of Federation restrictions on May 31.

In parts of California and elsewhere, the lifting of USEF restrictions is made moot by city, county and state regulations that supersede those of sport governing bodies.

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Stemming The Trickle Out Effect

Langer Equestrian Group co-chief Marnye Langer wants horse shows to resume for three main reasons. “I want to put people back to work; trainers, groomers, haulers, etc. Second, I want to test and figure out what we need to do to have shows in this new, somewhat temporary environment, which I think will be our environment for the rest of the year. Third, I want to have exhibitors experience a show in this more restrictive environment and see how they feel about it.”

She is hoping for a June 13-14 unrated hunter/jumper event at Hansen Dam Horse Park in the Los Angeles area’s Lakeview Terrace. It would be in place of what would have been the Verdugo Hills June show. The LEG team is ready to implement a simple, low-cost competition that could be contested over one or two days. At press time, however, the City of Los Angeles Recreation and Parks, to which Langer Equestrian is a concessionaire, had said “no.”

Why a carefully staged horse show was declined while horse racing was underway at Santa Anita half an hour away is one of several frustrations for the organizer. It also illustrates the conflicting guidelines issued by various governing bodies that complicate the process of moving forward with competition.



Divergent Opinions

Responses to a May Facebook survey of exhibitors produced divergent responses on whether, when and how people would want to resume competing. “It was very polarized, which didn’t surprise me,” Marnye says. “I appreciate that people were either on one end of the spectrum or the other.”

Those in favor cited the ability to take personal responsibility for their own and other’s safety by following protocols, and the desire to help get the equestrian economy going. Those in the “no” camp attributed that to either not being personally comfortable with returning, or some who asked, “How can you be so irresponsible? I’ll never come to your shows again,” Marnye relays.

Out of 140 respondents, 50% said they’d be comfortable returning to shows this month; 20% said July; and 30% said August.

Relatively even differences of opinion occurred on several points. These included the importance of a show being rated by national, regional or local organizations and preferences for a one-day haul-in show versus a two-dayer. Thirty percent said they’d want to stable their horse overnight even with the various social distancing restrictions, 20% said no thanks. Thirty percent said they’d be willing to show even if the format was “show and go: no hanging out,” with 20% saying no. The rest had more moderate responses to these questions on the survey’s 1-5 scale.

The poll results stand alongside Marnye’s hunch that nobody knows what they want until they experience it. “Once people come to a handful of shows, if they are pretty restrictive, I’m not sure how many will want to keep spending money until it’s a better experience.” All of which intensifies the importance of getting some events underway to see if a formula can be devised that works for all involved.

Cost Containment

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Costs will be a critical component. Marnye anticipates keeping the simplified format to about \$400 for a stall and fees covering five classes. That's compared to approximately \$750 to \$900 for a rated show weekend produced by LEG.

Above all, Marnye is among those deeply worried about what she calls the "trickle out" effect of the economic shut-down. Langer Equestrian Group also manages the Hansen Dam Horse Park, the boarding, training and special event facility that is normally home to about 175 boarded horses. Fifty of those left since mid-March, presumably many for stables with fewer restrictions on how owners can interact with their horses. Whether the destination stables had lighter restrictions, or had looser enforcement of similar rules, is unknown.

The upshot is a disturbing math equation either way: "50 fewer horses is two fewer stable workers, less income for the trainers, less shavings purchased, etc." Marnye notes. "The snowball effect goes on and on."

There might be a silver lining. "Now more than ever, we are really learning how to work together in our industry," Marnye reflects. "It's given a lot of lip service but, by and large, we don't do it and we are not as well off as a result. There is a way of working together without impeding your own company's success: to be competitive and collaborative."



Is It Safe?

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As for how safe it will be to resume showing, Cornerstone Dressage manager Glenda McElroy is confident of the efficacy of guidelines and of exhibitor compliance. Especially at shows staged at city, state or county-owned venues.

“Exhibitors should feel very comfortable competing at those facilities,” she says. “They are going to be watched and checked very carefully,” she says of venues including Los Angeles Equestrian Center and Hansen Dam Horse Park in the Los Angeles area, and Del Mar Fairgrounds and Horsepark in San Diego County.

Events at privately owned places may be equally safe, she stresses, but there is no doubt the level of enforcement and scrutiny at publicly-owned venues will be intense.

Cornerstone’s Festival Of The Horse CDI, March 17-22, had to be scrapped and attempts to reintegrate it into a mid-June show didn’t pan out. Although restrictions were to have been eased by then, the logistics of travel and accommodations for officials was one of many insurmountable obstacles.

Star Spangled Dressage June 27-28 at LAEC is Cornerstone’s next event. Separate entry and exit doors and plexiglass desk shields for the show office are already in place at LAEC. Ample stabling and parking should make physical distancing relatively easy, Glenda notes.

Sizing up her clientele’s mood, Glenda senses exhibitors with “pent up energy” ready to show, and those, sometimes at higher health risks, who may sit things out a while longer. Star Spangled Dressage typically draws 120-130 horses. It was too early to predict entries at press time, but Glenda was prepared to adjust in either direction: either limit entries to facilitate safety procedures if entries are high, or consolidate into a one-day event if they are light.

Hotel stays and dining out seem to be exhibitors’ bigger concerns, she shares. “We may see more one and two days shows at the beginning.”

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“Everybody is having to adjust to this,” says Glenda, whose experience includes many years of hosting CDIs and serving on FEI World Cup Finals organizing committees. “It’s not comfortable for anyone, but with all the steps that are being taken by organizations, local government agencies and facilities, there are good guidelines in place to help everyone feel as comfortable as they can.”

Much Scrambling, No Omelets

A blank calendar belies behind-the-scene scrambling to reschedule important competitions on the eventing circuit. There were no rescheduled recognized competitions on the US Eventing Association Area VI calendar at press time.

Robert Kellerhouse’s newly christened “Kellerhouse Presents” team is poised for action at Galway Downs Equestrian Center in Temecula. Its two early-year anchors, the International Horse Trials at Galway in late March and The Spring Event at The Horse Park at Woodside in late May, were virus victims.

Attempts to work with Shepard Ranch and their June 19-21 date for a recognized show in Temecula were lost to logistical challenges, including finding available hotel rooms for officials. “We’d started planning it about two months ago,” Robert shares. “It was such a big endeavor, and this has all been just crazy.”

Going forward, “If ‘phase 3’ -- sporting events without spectators -- is announced on June 1, we’ll be able to offer an unrecognized competition pretty quickly,” Robert says. Getting a recognized event is more complicated and would take longer, even with Area VI and the relevant governing bodies doing everything possible to reschedule events. Its staging would also need to be weighed with the question of what it would prepare exhibitors for, Robert states.

The Sexton family who owns Shepard Ranch in Santa Ynez announced an unrecognized schooling derby on that same June 20-21 weekend. It will be two, one-day shows with several combined phase options.

Also lost was what would have been the inaugural Twin Rivers CCI4*-L in April, a highly

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anticipated addition to the international calendar. The Baxter family's Paso Robles team tried to reschedule it for early June, but it was not to be.

Still set for the summer are the Twin Rivers Summer Horse Trials, July 2-5; The Summer Event at Woodside, Aug. 7-9; Shepard Ranch Horse Trials Aug. 21-23; Woodland Stallion Station

Horse Trials Aug. 29; and the Copper Meadows One-Day Horse Trials on Sept. 5.

The Event at Rebecca Farm, a highlight of the West region eventing circuit, was still set for July 22-26 in Montana.

(Editor's Note: Show cancellations and postponements change daily. Check event websites for the latest status.)

Help For Lesson Horses

Current and ongoing economic hardship throughout the industry are another of very few sure things. Especially for riding schools, where lesson horses need care, food and exercise even when lessons aren't allowed. The United States Hunter Jumper Association acknowledged this in launching the USHJA Feed Aid program on May 18. It provides \$300,000 in matching funds to assist riding schools and training barns that provide lessons to non-horse owners. For more information, visit www.ushja.org.