

Three Phase Event: Gaited Horse Eventing - No Jumping Required

Back in the 1800s, an event termed “Raid Militaire” by the French, developed for strengthening the training regimen of the calvary, would later evolve into what the modern equestrian world celebrates as three day eventing. First observed as an Olympic sport in 1912, three day eventing is popular for its test of versatility and endurance in both horse and rider.

Over the course of three days, (sometimes two, depending on the event’s format), horse and rider are judged on overall performances in three areas: dressage, stadium jumping, and cross country. Each discipline is very different from the others, and the winners score is determined by least overall penalty points.

Historically, horses most commonly ridden in three day eventing have been the same horses seen in the dressage arena or jumping stadium. Among these breeds are Thoroughbreds, Hanoverians, Trakheners, Warmbloods, and more recently even some Quarter Horses and Morgans, used because of their versatility, strength, speed, and jumping prowess. These breeds thrive in the competition world, in the Olympics, and at three day events throughout the nation.

However, as times are changing in the equestrian world, so are some riders and their views on conventional competition. Four years ago, a group of women over fifty decided that while three day eventing was fabulous and fun, they were getting older. Some of them did not want to continue jumping or posting, for that matter, and they began looking at a different horse for a different kind of event. They began looking at gaited horses, the smooth, versatile, sustainable ride, and dreamed up the Three Phase Event.

The non-profit Three Phase Event Organization modeled the Three Phase Event after the Rolex Three Day Event in Lexington, Kentucky. As three day eventing highlights the amazing levels of versatility in the horses that compete at events like the Rolex, the Three Phase Event has the mission to focus on versatility in all gaited breeds. Many gaited horses are usually used either in the show ring or on the trail, but the intention of this new event is to engage the ability of all gaited breeds to successfully compete in dressage, stadium obstacle, and cross-country obstacle. All gaited breeds or mixed gaited breeds, regardless of registration or age, can compete. Any rider can compete over twelve years of age, and there are levels available for all ranges of skills and experience. The only requirement is that the horse is true to its own proclaimed gait, and that all riders have a great time.

Jennie Jackson and Champagne Watchout won the Training Division during the first couple years of the annual event. Jackson and her famous stallion, featured in February’s Going Gaited, have started to break down the walls of gaited dressage. However, other riders, whether accomplished competitors or avid trail riders showing for the first time, are also deciding to step up the challenge and get the most out of the Three Phase Event. Among these newcomers are trail rider Pixie Jarvis and her McCurdy Plantation Horse, Rebel, from Bowling Green, Kentucky, and April Cuthbertson, of Illinois, with her two talented Saddlebreds who show consistently in various circuits throughout the Midwest. Combing dressage training and obstacle trail riding, both in an arena and out on the trail, prepared the two riders for the challenge.

Dressage is the first event included in the Three Phase Event. Even in its most basic form, dressage offers a wealth of benefits to both horse and rider, including developing rhythm, suppleness, impulsion, and nearly invisible cues that elicit light and effective responses in the horse. The Three Phase Event recognizes dressage as an important building block in any horse’s training, especially the cross-training of the gaited horse, and uses USDF guidelines to construct this portion of the event. When deciding which level of the Three Phase Event in which to

compete, riders should go by their skill level in dressage. Beginner/Novice uses Intro A, Novice uses Intro B, and the Training Level competitors use Training Level 1. More information about specific tests can be found at their website, threephaseevent.org.

“Don’t let the dressage intimidate you,” says Jarvis. “I thought ‘Oh, no, I can’t do it - I’ve always been a trail rider.’” However, through working on preparing for the dressage phase of the event, she has really enjoyed the connection and partnership with her horse that she gained. She quickly began to view dressage as a way to make her a much better rider for her horse, allowing her to even more effectively control her horse’s body for the other obstacle phases.

Stadium obstacle is the second portion of the event and replaces stadium jumping. As in dressage, the obstacle courses vary in graduating levels of difficulty, depending on the level of competition a rider enters. For example, higher level competition involves a built-in wooden bridge but for the beginning level, a simple wooden platform is used. One obstacle is a multi-level platform that includes adjustable heights, ranging from a dirt ramp leading to the platform for the beginners to climbing the platform for the higher levels. The water feature is a mud pit.

Also, a serpentine is typically part of the course, its navigational complexity depending on the level of competition, ranging from three easy to loops to a zig-zag pattern. Some horses and riders have to back through this serpentine. Poles are also used that ask the horse to either step over them or side pass along their length. A u-shaped side-pass pattern might even be required.

Basically, requirements for the stadium obstacle course is that a rider should be able to have his or her horse go forward, backward, side-pass left and right, climb up and down, and back up. If these basic maneuvers are mastered, just add obstacles and the rest is relatively a cinch, as long as the horse doesn’t want to munch on the brush box. Stadium obstacle is timed, as each obstacle is allotted a certain amount of minimum and maximum time to be completed.

Cross country obstacle is also timed and the horse and rider can be penalized if over-time or under-time. As in stadium obstacle, the event organizers have computed a minimum and maximum time allowed for each obstacle completion, with a 60 second window for error. In the past three years, cross country obstacles have not been judged -- rather it has been a matter of whether the obstacle was completed or it wasn’t. Outriders merely stood by to judge whether or not a rider simply by-passed obstacles. However, in its fourth year, the Three Phase Event will have each obstacle judged and obstacle negotiation will now be judged more on quality of execution. Obstacles on the cross-country course include log crossings, stream crossings, and natural inclines. Riders may also be asked to pick up a rain coat, put it on, and then ride somewhere else and take it off.

Cuthbertson and her two Saddlebreds, with whom she placed both first and second in the Training Level division of Three Phase Event in 2009, regularly shows her horses in dressage at rated shows and in trail on the Saddlebred circuits. However, she found training for the cross country with her Pinto to be a challenge in preparation. He would not go through water, so she ended up training him to cross streams by backing him in and turning him around halfway through the obstacle to head the right direction. He employed this water-forging technique in eight out of nine water crossings at last year’s event, the photographer managing to capture his one forward creek entrance on film. Jarvis was most at home with the cross country, but both riders enjoyed the thrill of getting through the course as partners with their horses.

Judging for the event is loosely based on the guidelines of the United States Eventing Association. As a result, the judges score each individual horse based on its breed and the gait it performs where specific gait is required, such as certain movements in the dressage tests, or

during indicated parts of the stadium obstacle. Since the scoring is so individualized, the Three Phase Event is even including Western Dressage this year, open to all breeds. Those interested in participating can find more information about regulations at the organization's website.

Placing within each division is determined by the best time with least amount of deductions throughout the three phases. Overall points are awarded to a Junior and Adult division and ribbons are awarded through sixth place.

The main point of the entire event is to give anyone, absolutely anyone, a good ride and a successful run, with the hopes of riders and horses returning year after year, challenging themselves through the levels. Being disqualified is virtually impossible. Even trotting horses are welcome.

Kristie, of the Three Phase Event board, said, "The event puts the horse and rider in three very different states of riding. We want gaited horse owners to have a place to come and compete in a versatility event that is for them. For the trail horse. Something different than a rail class." The organization seeks to promote gaited horse versatility and recognize those trail riders and gaited horses who so skillfully make their way through difficult pathways and terrain. The event emphasizes the importance of using dressage to establish improved connection and maneuverability, along with the strength, endurance, and partnership required of the obstacle phases. This event is meant to show that anyone can reach amazing levels of partnership through cross-training.

The Three Phase Event organization benefits the community in another way. A program called the T.E.D. Program, which stands for Training, Education, and Development is the main reason for their non-profit status. Through this program, the organization is always trying to constantly educate and make safe their riders. Money they raise goes to a grant program and through this grant program, they were finally able to raise enough money to launch their first Equine Education program for 2010. This grant goes to junior and senior college students who plan on education in equine studies.

The greatest reward that Jarvis and Cuthbertson both achieved through the Three Phase Event has to do with the open, supportive atmosphere of the event. Jarvis loved how helpful everyone was the first time she attended and as she prepares for 2010, she says her goal is "to just show one horse so I have time to help out other first-time competitors." Cuthbertson also remarks that the main reason why she keeps coming back to the event is because of the people. "The best reward anyone can get is to go and be with people who love their horses. The best thing is to just know you can do it [complete the even]." Last year, Cuthbertson's gelding, Magic's Royal Gift, had been seriously ill and the main reason why she chose the Three Phase Event as her first competition for him was because she knew she would have veterinarians on-site and amazing, caring people around her to help her horse if he needed it. Both riders stress that this event is the best place for gaited horse owners to come, demonstrate their horse's versatility, and strengthen the bond between horses and riders, and between competitors. No one should expect anything but a relaxed, supportive opportunity.

Better than ribbons, competition, or prestige is the feeling of accomplishment a rider and horse can share of achieving an objective and strengthening their bond. The tests of versatility incorporated into Three Phase Event bring out real horsemanship in the rider and true talent in the horse. Surrounded by support and the radiating love for the gaited horse and gifts that various breeds can bring to one central location, Three Phase Event has opened its doors to a new revolution in gaited horse opportunities.