

An Introspective Journey to the American Eventing Championships

Looking back on my decision to try to qualify for the AECs, I would do it again. Although during the competition, if you had asked me just before each individual phase; my stomach in knots, and I would have said “no way”. There’s too much stress. It didn’t matter from where it came, although all of it was from myself. The real decision to try and qualify for Tryon came early in the year. My horse, Dr. Yelon, and I were seriously working on our dressage, and starting to show Third Level. Unfortunately, the harder we worked the more stressed Yelon was getting in the arena. So I decided he needed a change, and that included some running and jumping. I have always needed a goal to work toward and with the AECs still in Tryon, I made that our goal. The fact that I hadn’t competed in a horse trial in about 15 years didn’t seem relevant. I had a horse that was competing at Third level, so dressage would be a snap. Yelon never had a refusal on Cross Country while my daughter Alana competed with him three years before, so I wasn’t concerned. Show Jumping was the weak link but we still had time to improve. Now that I had retired, I was riding at least one horse a day, often two or even three, so I was much tighter in the track.



It rained all spring, and getting out into my fields was impossible. All my jumping was done in Dutch Manor's indoor and earlier dressage work had been mostly in collected canter. So what did 350 meters per minute feel like? I didn't remember! Larkin Hill in June was our first outing. I finally had one canter outside, so I felt that we were golden. Silly me. I thought we had done a great dressage test, until I saw the score, 34.0. I was dumbfounded. How could my Third level dressage horse get such a poor score? I had to read the comment, "not going forward", a couple of times until it sank in. I had sat the trot and we got too collected. Oops number 1. Then came show jumping. I didn't translate working in an indoor to riding outside with a slight hill. Rails fell. Oops #2. Then came cross country and we nailed it, almost. Yelon jumped every fence perfectly, but we were slow. We still had two fences to go when my watch went off and neither of us could go any faster. The ironic part was that was my first qualifying score. Our XC jumping was clean and because I fitted into the Master Amateur Division, I ended up placing 2nd. I didn't feel as if I had earned it, but you know what they say about looking a gift horse in the mouth.



That was our wake up call. 15 years did make a big difference and if I was going to seriously compete at the AECs, I had to get my act in gear. From then on I rode rising trot in the test and we won all of our dressage tests. Show jumping got better and by the end of our qualifying competitions, Yelon was jumping clean. We were trotting more hills at home. I was now running to the mail box, both ways and not dying. Yelon and I were actually getting fit! Unfortunately, the ground was still too wet to do an actual gallop but we were making the

time and we received the rest of our qualifying scores. Panic raised its ugly head about two weeks before we were to leave for Tryon, North Carolina. I went to a XC clinic for a final tune-up. The clinic did not go well. Yelon kept stopping at a small fence and I fell off. The clinician was supportive but reminded me to actually ride XC. That certainly snapped me out of my complacency.



Our 16 hour drive to the Tryon International Equestrian Center (TIEC) was uneventful. We didn't know who or what we were going to find when we got there around 9:00 PM. That was a needless worry, as the TIEC doesn't sleep. We pulled right up to our barn and unloaded. The barns are beautiful. The aisles are fully mated as are the large stalls. Each stall has its own permanent fan, power sockets, with a water faucet every other stall. TIEC isn't as large as the Kentucky Horse Park, however it is very well laid out. All the barns surround the competition rings so you're never more than 3 minute walk from any ring. The maintenance of all the rings was excellent. It had rained heavily for three days due to remains of hurricane Harvey, but the footing was always good.

Thursday was a relaxation and acclamation day. We hacked all over the grounds and did a dressage school. There were a lot of new things for Yelon to see but he took most in stride. When we finally got a look at the cross country course, it struck me as Derby Eventing and not real cross country. Except for one surrounding strip of real turf, never did my course ever touch natural ground. It never went out into the fields, it fit right within two large competition arenas and the Derby Field. We couldn't complain about the manufactured footing, especially with all the rain we had had, but there was an interesting phenomenon to deal with. It was running over several different types of footing. There was the manufactured sand, the real turf and then the turf in the Derby Field. It didn't strike me at the time as

being a big problem, can you say fore shadowing. Friday was dressage day and as the day dawned, so did the knot in my stomach. I couldn't believe I was so nervous before dressage. Thank goodness I rode early. If it had been later in the day I probably would have imploded. I got on about an hour before my ride and went for a hack. Thankfully, as soon as I got on all the demons disappeared and we were down to business. My division was the largest of the entire competition with 40 rides. Warmup went well, especially after doing some counter canter, and then in we went. Our test included everything: suppleness, flexibility, perfect geometry, if I do say so myself, including the usual anticipation Yelon has when I pick up the reins after the free walk. He didn't jig but that tension was enough to eventually leave us in 4th at the end of dressage. I was disappointed that we didn't hold on to our first place but the horse that won dressage was everything we were but without that moment of tension, and deserved to win. I did keep telling myself though, we were still within 1 rail of first. When I was untacking Yelon after dressage, I hung up the saddle pad that was given to us by the Area I Adult Rider Program. It was then that I really noticed the initials, AARP. How appropriate for someone in the Master's division.



Cross Country Day, or Cross Country Derby day in our case, dawned sunny and dry. I was only my normal nervous and was looking forward to the ride. The first two fences on course were fine but then we had to leave the sand arena and headed onto different footing. Yelon wasn't crazy about the change but we cantered through, into the next sand arena. Once he realized we were back in the sand he forgot about the footing and got back to the business of jumping fences. The next 5 which included a combination on a bending line flew by with no problems. But then we were back into the turf and muck. The mud wasn't deep but the changing back and forth was pulling his focus. We now we're on a decent stretch of real grass and we

galloped right up to and over the brush and onto to #7 we went. This was the last fence on real grass before we headed up the Derby bank and the footing was very chewed up. There was the natural green grass, the churned up mud, some of the white sand and then some dark green artificial material that was being used to stabilize the footing. At this point, Yelon got too focused on the footing. It was too late when he finally realized there was a fence and we so had a stop. I'm not sure if it was in my head or out loud but I remember yelling "Nooo!" I don't think I was saying it to the horse. I think it was more of the realization that I had blown it and the chance of placing in the championships was now gone. I gathered the horse back up and we took the fence as if there had been no problem at all. Now that we were back on the Derby Field the footing was consistent for the rest of the course and he jumped everything beautifully. He felt so good when we finished he was barely breathing hard. For the rest of the day I was beside myself. I was angry that I didn't ride better. I was disappointed that Yelon wouldn't get his second national championship, and I was the most disappointed that I had let my team down by not performing better.

Sunday morning also dawned bright and dry. The Advanced were off to do their XC as they had been rained out two days before, but for us it was Show Jumping day. The competition was held in a large stadium with seating all around, as well as a Jumbo Tron. You had to enter the stadium through a tunnel and I had previously brought Yelon down there a couple of times to get him acclimated to the energy of the arena. Both the initial warmup, as well as the on deck warmup went well and then we entered the tunnel. They would let the on deck horse enter the arena as the competing horse was still on course. I used this as an opportunity to canter around as many fences as I could while staying out of the way of the horse and rider finishing their round. Then the buzzer sounded and we headed to the first fence. Yelon really didn't want to make the turn to the first fence but once he did he locked onto the fence and though I wasn't positive that it was clean, I was hopeful. He didn't want to go forward or be straight to the second fence but I was not going to allow a run out. It was not a pretty fence but we got over it. From that point on he settled into a rhythm. Yelon is not a horse who will allow you to adjust his stride if you are within 4-5 strides of the fence. If you try or if you sit to drive, he will get flat and quick. So I have learned if I can't see a distance far enough back, I make sure that my upper body is back, he's balanced, going forward and in a good rhythm. We did meet a couple of the fences off a long stride but he cleared them well. It turns out, two of the fences that I thought we had met at a good distance were the ones that did us in. Yelon has a complacency in show jumping. I sometimes think that he feels the jumps are so small that it's not worth his effort. That or he's too smart and knows they'll fall down. Disappointment at this point was almost moot, but it was still there nonetheless. We did finish though and earned a beautiful medal, although I am ashamed to say I didn't truly appreciate it at the time. There were quite a few who weren't lucky enough to receive the medal.

The trip home was uneventful and two hours shorter than on the way down. No Rt 81 construction delays. We pulled in around 9 PM and Gunner and Toady were at the paddock gate waiting for Yelon. We took off his wraps, let him get a drink and then put him out with his buddies. In the dark you could hear Yelon rolling and then the semi thundering sound of 12 hooves as they all ran off to the far reaches of the paddock. A little over a week has passed since we got home and our great adventure to the AEC is finally settling into its proper perspective. So what did I learn about my horse? Quite a bit actually. After all those years of just doing dressage it seems Yelon is a little DQish when it comes to changes in footing. My



other horse Toady is not as brave as Yelon. That's why Toady went from Eventing to Western Dressage. He was always so careful about touching a fence. There was always a good foot of distance between the top rail and the bottom of his legs. While maintaining his boldness, I wish Yelon had a bit more of Toady's carefulness when it comes to show jumping fences. So, unless I can learn to ride like Beezie Madden or Greg Best, that's something I'm going to have to learn to accept.

What did I learn about myself? That I'm competitive and don't like to lose. I already knew that, but why was I so obsessive. I think I needed to prove that I was still as good as I once was. Surprise, I'm not! I am a better dressage rider now and my form over fences was coming back but my reaction time is a lot slower and I actually had to make a point of getting fit. I also felt the crunch of time regarding Yelon. He's 18 and although he's feeling good now, he's taken very well care of to the point of neuroses. There's no way I would put him through the stress of shipping to Colorado, so this year at Tryon was our last chance because who knows where the Championships will be next.

I went to the American Eventing Championships and didn't win. I didn't even place, but I did finish. My horse is home sound and happy. If I knew then what I know now, would I do it again? Absolutely, I'm an Eventer after all!

Thank you to my husband Brian and our daughter Alana who came with me, and supported me throughout all of the drama. Thank you to all of our veterinarians and doctors who kept both Yelly and me sound. A final thank you to Area I and the Adult Rider Program organizer, Suzanne Adams for putting together all the teams and the medal that came with it. Being on the team did make it very special

