



Interview with Peter Holmes

Holly Grayton

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Peter Holmes is a British Columbia-based course designer, but he is no stranger to Alberta's show jumping riders. Peter has designed at Thunderbird Show Park for many years in Langley, BC, as well as at Spruce Meadows in Calgary and at top venues all around the world. Alberta Show Jumpers caught up with Peter during the most recent competition at Thunderbird to ask him about his job as a course designer.

Most course designers have some long-standing connection to the sport of show jumping itself, and for Peter Holmes, it was no different. His mother ran horse shows when he was young, so he got an early start and grew up with the shows.

Peter explained his philosophy for designing courses to be several unique sections of course that are connected or woven together. This is the starting point for his design. Many considerations will affect the final outcome of the course, such as the type or format of competition, calibre and quality of entries, and the scheduling of the competition.

Designing for a welcome competition early in the week is different than for the Grand Prix on the weekend. The idea is to get the horses jumping well, even if that means there may be a few extra clear rounds as a result.

The trend of encouraging good jumping is present throughout Peter's designs, as he explained that having short sharp turns or a zig-zag type of track will lead to rough riding and tense horses. While the best riders will make everything look easy, amateurs and developing riders will struggle. So the track must encourage the free-flowing forward movement of the horse to allow for good riding and horses going well.

The time allowed is always a point of contention amongst riders, course designers and judges. Peter sees the time allowed as just another interesting element that can be used to add some flavour to a class, but if the time allowed becomes too much of an issue, it can break a class apart. At the highest level, many of the top riders need the extra challenge of a tight time allowed to differentiate the top tier of the class.

Designing for amateurs is definitely the largest part of the job as course designer, Peter described. The concept for amateurs needs to have more room for mistakes and more options. In golf, for example, the fairway on an amateur-friendly course will be wider, allowing for slightly errant shots. An amateur show jumping course needs to have this same wiggle room to allow for one more or one less stride here or there on course, while the top riders may need the challenge of having only one choice and needing to make it work.

Jump material is a key to a good class that Peter has always used wisely. The water jump is an important part of the sport still, as it is a legitimate test of courage, but the entire premise of water jumping is the opposite of most other jumps on course (i.e. jump low and wide rather than high) so it is important not to overuse the water. Color combinations and contrasts are good ways to test horses and riders, without needing to make the jumps too big or wide. A tough visual can test the horse's carefulness but only slightly challenges the horse's courage.



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Throughout the conversation, Peter re-iterated the importance of looking out for the horses. It is vital to encourage the horses to do their jobs, to ensure they don't struggle during the course, and to challenge the riders instead to ride well and create the connections between the segments of the course.