An Overview of the History of Show Jumping

By William Steinkraus

Show Jumping Hall of Fame class of 1987

Halls of fame, whether physical or virtual, exist to celebrate the accomplishments of certain individuals associated with some particular activity. In this case, the activity is show jumping, and those recognized by the Show Jumping Hall of Fame have played a variety of different roles in it, and in different eras. Younger people entering the sport and those who have never been exposed to it usually have no idea of where show jumping came from, how it evolved, or who contributed importantly to its historical development. The Show Jumping Hall of Fame at Lexington, KY was created to address this need, and these words attempt to provide context for the individual elected members' plaques by furnishing some essential background facts.

Origins and Early History (before 1900)

Horses and their riders have been jumping over natural obstacles together for a very long time (in fact, millennia), at first in the ordinary course of going places, and then, many centuries ago, for sport (hunting) and war. However it was not until the 19th century that jumping became a particularly admired, special equestrian skill. This was a natural result of following hounds over country that had been fenced in compliance with England's 18th century Enclosure Acts, and the subsequent advent of horse racing over obstacles—steeplechasing. By the middle of the 19th century, private matches to settle wagers had evolved into public competitions, incorporated in the programs of agricultural fairs and a growing number of horse shows. Before the automobile came along, much interest centered on draft, harness and saddle horses, but from the very beginning the biggest draws for the general public were the high jump and the broad jump.

In the absence of reliable documentation, a lot of show jumping's early history is conjectural. However, what we do know is that Dublin staged jumping competitions in 1865, Paris in 1866, London (at Agricultural Hall, Islington) in 1876, and New York (also indoors, in the original Madison Square Garden) in 1883. The first recorded jumping competitions simply attempted to determine who could jump higher (high leap) over rails or a wall, and sometimes, wider (wide leap) over a water jump with a hedge, in separate competitions. A qualified hunter jumped 6'6" at the National in 1884, but quite quickly, high jumping became not just a test for hunters, but a specialty all its own. (Even so, jumpers continued to be lumped together with hunters and called hunters for many decades in many prize lists.) By the turn of the century, high jumpers were jumping more than seven feet regularly at horse shows under controlled competitive conditions and more or less topped out at just over 8 feet. Hunters, in the meantime, were jumping longer, lower courses, and judged partly on style. In the interest of variety, jumpers often added a short course, sometimes as few as four five-foot fences each, jumped twice. (Lower versions for hunters became considerably more varied and sophisticated over time.) Of course, not every hunter/jumper can jump six or seven feet, and thus interest in high jumping gradually waned in the 1920s and 1930s and then virtually disappeared, later replaced, if at all, by the Puissance over a big wall.

Developing the International Sport (1900-1950)

Show jumping made its first Olympic appearance in Paris at the Second Olympic Games of 1900 as an addendum to a big national show. There were three events—a high jump, a broad jump and a "prize jumping" over a smallish course, and military officers competed against civilians and professionals. (Because of the professional taint, it was decades before the medals won there were officially recognized.) In the meantime, civilian national show jumping in the U.S. continued to prosper with its own professional and amateur riders. (Amateurs more than held their own as hunter riders while professionals tended to dominate the jumpers.)

International show jumping became part of London's Olympia Horse Show in 1907 and New York's National Horse Show two years later, and the international military Nations Cup, contested by teams of officers, slowly began to rival the high jump as a major public attraction. Equestrian events were dropped from the 1904 and 1908 Olympics, but Stockholm in 1912 more or less defined the form international jumping would take from then on by staging the whole modern Olympic equestrian program with a show jumping Nations Cup in a beautiful dedicated stadium, with scoring and courses not so different from today's, though touches were scored. There were separate competitions for the team and individual medals (as again in 1920, 1960 and at every Olympics since 1968).

For the next half-century two different forms of show jumping, the military and the civilian, co-existed and evolved in separate but parallel streams. International and Olympic show-jumping activity, following the Stockholm exemplar, typically took place outdoors in a stadium or dedicated show ground. Courses were generally long, with up to 15 or 16 obstacles, many of them natural (such as banks, ditches and water jumps). Only knockdowns were scored, along with refusals and falls, and there was a "time allowed" with time faults imposed for exceeding it. From 1920 on, touches were no longer penalized, and in the event of equality of faults, elapsed time over the course often determined the winner in the jump-off or even the first round.

The second stream for show jumping was the national, civilian “Open” stream, patterned after conditions at the National Horse Show. Even if the competition was outdoors, courses were short, being contested in a small ring. The obstacles were simple and portable, since the ring had to be cleared after every competition to permit other classes to be held. There were not many different fences, often only 4 or 5, jumped in a figure-eight pattern or twice around. Touches were scored, and successive jump-offs were held to separate horses tied in faults. Time was not taken and was never a factor. The disparity between these two different forms of show jumping somewhat complicate its history, but they also help to explain it.

Show jumping and its growth were severely impeded by the catastrophe of World War I, in which both civilians and the various horse cavalries sustained huge losses. The 1914 National Horse Show was not held, the 1916 Olympics were cancelled, and many other horse shows on both sides of the Atlantic were necessarily suspended. However, horse show activity resumed surprisingly quickly after the war. The 1920 Olympic Games in Antwerp were organized on schedule and considered a success, though only six nations competed in show jumping.

By 1920, it had been evident for a long time that a serious impediment to the growth of show jumping, both domestic and internationally, was the fact that each national and international competition determined its own program, rules and conditions. The sport had no governing bodies to regulate the sport, at home or abroad. This problem was finally addressed by the creation of the American Horse Shows Association (now the U.S. Equestrian Federation) in 1917, and the establishment in 1921 of an international federation, the then Brussels-based Federation Equestre Internationale (now based in Lausanne).

Not surprisingly, the standardized jumping rules the AHSA settled on were basically predicated on the National Horse Show “Open” conditions with small rings, touches to count and no time. FEI International Rules, in contrast, stipulated variants of the scoring and competitive conditions that had evolved after the 1912 Stockholm Olympics. After World War I, officers rarely competed in regular national competitions, while civilian competitors, amateur and professional, who were effectively excluded from most international forms of the sport, happily went their own way under their own rules. The same situation prevailed in most of the English-speaking world. In England, Ireland, Canada and Australia, show jumping survived and prospered steadily using national rules and scoring touches for all ordinary competitions, while in Continental Europe, most nations used only FEI Rules for both national and international competitions. Our premier show, the New York-based National, solved the conflict in scoring by establishing entirely separate divisions for the international (FEI-rule) and the national (AHSA-rule) competitors from the 1920s on, and these continued to run their parallel courses almost until the millennium, by which time the amateur distinction had more or less disappeared from the Olympics and show jumping finally became virtually reunified.

The 1924 Olympic Games at Paris were conducted using the then-new FEI rules, and were considered more than satisfactory, as were the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam. (Our own results in these two Games were regrettably lackluster.) Los Angeles was awarded the 1932 Olympics, and while world economic conditions and the difficulty of ocean travel held down overall international participation—there were only three jumping teams—our leading Army horseman won the individual silver as well as a team gold in Three-Day. The international sport's post-World War recovery was climaxed by the brilliant Berlin Olympics in 1936. There, no fewer than 18 nations competed over a long, challenging course of 13 obstacles, including a double and three triple combinations requiring 20 efforts in all. The 1,050-meter course may have been a bit of an over-kill for many, but it produced the expected result: German riders won both the team and individual gold medals.

Entering the Modern Era and the New Millennium (Post World War II)

Needless to say, the ensuing cataclysm of a second World War within three decades totally disrupted everything. The 1940 Olympics were cancelled and virtually all horse show and show-jumping activity ground to a halt almost everywhere while the war was being fought. Just as had been the case after World War I, however, the sport's rebound was again immediate and surprisingly rapid. It was also fueled by rapidly accelerating technological change, particularly with respect to improvements in the transport of horses, even by air, and the growth of television, which found show jumping a safe and attractive spectacle and attracted a large public. (This was especially true in England, where it was aggressively promoted by the BBC.)

By the end of World War II it was clear to everyone that the centuries-old role of horse cavalry in warfare was no longer viable. Only three civilian show jumpers competed in London's 1948 Olympics, where our cavalry team enjoyed significant success in the three equestrian events, but after the games our Cavalry's mechanization was finalized, and all its horse activities terminated. Unthinkably, there was no military team to represent the US in the international events of the 1948 and 1949 National Horse Show, and neither would the Cavalry provide a team for the forthcoming Olympics. It was necessary to create from scratch a totally new organization, the US Equestrian Team (now the USET Foundation), to select, train and finance civilian teams for the 1950 and subsequent National Horse Shows and the 1952 Helsinki Olympics.

Our first civilian team, which included two women and had to scrounge for horses and training facilities, produced surprisingly good results at the National in 1950 and 1951, but when the International Olympic Committee ruled against permitting women to compete in Olympic show jumping we were required to select an all-male team for the Helsinki Games. Thus in 1952 we fielded our first more or less “civilian” team, consisting of two civilians on borrowed horses and one carryover cavalry officer riding a veteran Olympic horse inherited from the Army. Fortunately, our hastily improvised three-man team was able to acquit itself admirably, winning the bronze. Moreover, the pendulum was swinging for everyone, and in having to start over, we were not alone. In Berlin there had been no civilian show jumpers, in London only three; but before long, civilian men and women were competing and excelling in all the equestrian disciplines, and by the 1970s and ’80s, the officers had virtually disappeared.

In its earliest years the USET had to live more or less from hand to mouth. A fifth-place finish at the 1956 Olympics suggested that we still had a lot of ground to make up, as the European teams were all successfully rebuilding. Critical developments for the USET in the 1950s were the engagement of a European-trained cavalry officer as its coach and then in 1961, the fortuitous establishment of a first-class, permanent training facility at Hamilton Farm in Gladstone, NJ. Though air transport of horses made it easier for the USET to compete in Europe more readily, domestic shows also gradually acquired more of a European flavor, a development that was helped along by the AHSA’s requirement of 30% spread fences at major shows, and later by the activities of the American Grandprix Association, dedicated to promoting European-style Grands Prix in the US. Another very helpful development was the creation of the FEI World Cup in 1979.

Thanks to the generosity of its many supporters, and with help from the AHSA and later, the USOC, the infant USET was able to confront its daunting challenges with growing success. Bit by bit, corporate sponsorship also began to play an important role in the Team’s, and the sport’s, economics. After an Olympic team silver medal in 1960, the US earned its first show jumping gold medal, an individual, at Mexico in 1968. Then, after another team silver at Munich in 1972, it finally annexed both the team gold and the individual gold and silver at Los Angeles in 1984 and most recently, garnered back-to-back team golds at Athens in 2004 and Hong Kong in 2008.

Show Jumping in the New Millennium

Show jumping had become an important national and international sport in the first half of the 20th century, but after World War II, modern technological developments, especially in transportation and communication, and a growing role for corporate sponsorship have enabled it to become a truly global sport. Today the sport is participated in by many tens of thousands and witnessed, in person or via electronic media, by millions. Not only do our own riders now compete successfully around the world, individual foreign riders, as well as teams, from around the world, frequently come to the US to compete. In addition to representing our country quadrennially in the Olympic and Pan American Games, US riders, now amateur and professional without distinction, also participate regularly in the FEI Show Jumping World Championship, the FEI Show Jumping World Cup Finals, the FEI Nations Cup Series and other major individual national and international show-jumping competitions both at home and abroad. Along with our many Games medals, our riders have accumulated no fewer than nine World Cup Finals titles, most recently back-to-back titles in 2012 and 2013, and truly countless major Grands Prix and Nations Cups. It is only stating a fact to say that since the 1950s we have gradually become and remain a serious force to be reckoned with in the International sport.

Show jumping has come a long way since it was primarily a matter of a single high jump and a broad jump; it is now a fully fleshed-out, varied, exciting, beautiful display of riding skill and subtlety and equine talent, athleticism and courage. To see it at its best is to enjoy one of the oldest forms of sporting collaboration between man and horse translated into modern terms. It is always hard to predict what the future may hold, but you can rest assured that The Hall of Fame eagerly awaits the induction of new generations of brilliant horsemen, horses and relevant others. Your continued interest, support and participation (especially if you can *really* ride) are invited.