



Top Horses and Riders Meet at Rolex 2008



PHOTOGRAPH | CATHERINE BISHOP
left

PHOTOGRAPH | CHARLES BISHOP
above

KER-sponsored riders
Karen O'Connor (left) and
Phillip Dutton (above) compete
at the 2008 Rolex Kentucky
Three-Day Event.

Was it a love of top-level horse sport, a response to the hype surrounding the upcoming Alltech World Equestrian Games, or simply the lure of a day in the sunshine? Whatever the reason, a record-setting crowd of more than 103,000 spectators flocked to the Kentucky Horse Park in late April to watch the 2008 Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event. Equine enthusiasts were rewarded with outstanding performances in all phases—dressage, cross-country, and show jumping—before the weekend was capped by a long-overdue victory for a veteran competitor who has had to settle for reserve honors in several previous attempts.

Throughout the weekend, the eyes of Kentucky Equine Research and its Team Member feed manufacturer, Pennfield Feeds, were particularly focused on three riders: Phillip Dutton and Karen O'Connor, who are sponsored by KER and Pennfield, and Kim Severson, who is sponsored by Pennfield. These competitors, who planned to ride five horses throughout the weekend, have many years of Rolex experience between them. Each usually finishes well up in the standings, but every horseman knows that anything can happen at this, the highest level of equestrian competition.

Dances with Horses. In dressage, the first phase, 41 horses were scheduled to complete their tests on Thursday or Friday. A dressage test consists of a series of movements in which the horse is asked to lengthen and shorten strides at each gait and to move smoothly backward and sideways as well as forward. Each movement is scored for accuracy, balance, and regularity by three judges spaced at different points around the arena. In addition, scores are given for the horse's impulsion and submission to the rider's cues, and the rider gets marks for position and use of the aids. At this four-star eventing level, horses are in superb physical condition, eager to gallop and jump on the cross-country course the following day. Maintaining the rhythmic precision of a dressage ride is sometimes a tall order for a powerful and spooky animal that is bursting with energy. The test is an excellent measure of the obedience and cooperation necessary to safely negotiate Saturday's imposing and sometimes tricky obstacles.

After the dressage scores were totaled, Becky Holder and her Thoroughbred gelding Courageous Comet stood in first place, closely followed by Heidi White and Northern Spy.



PHOTOGRAPHS | LEFT TO RIGHT
CHARLES BISHOP, BECKY YOUNG,
BECKY YOUNG,
CATHERINE BISHOP

Phillip Dutton waves to the crowd during the awards ceremony. KER- and Pennfield-sponsored riders compete in various phases. Phillip Dutton flies high on Connaught, Kim Severson gallops Tipperary Liadhnan between obstacles, and Karen O'Connor guides Theodore O'Connor through his dressage test.

Phillip Dutton and Connaught rounded out the top three spots, with Stephen Bradley, Corinne Ashton, and Bonnie Mosser also well up in the placings. Completing the top-ten list were Young Rider representative Emilee Libby, British rider Polly Stockton, and Mike Winter from Canada. Kim Severson, Karen O'Connor, and Phillip Dutton were bunched in the middle of the rankings, and Karen's talented pony Theodore O'Connor tailed the sponsored riders in twenty-fourth place.

Big and Bold. The second phase of the event, the cross-country test, sends horses and riders on a hilly, winding course of almost four miles. Moving at a fast gallop, the horse encounters more than 30 massive obstacles, some requiring two or more separate jumping efforts. Ditches, bridges, logs, banks, and water complexes come in fast succession, testing the horse's boldness and confidence in his rider. With the largest fences standing almost four feet high and six feet wide, often with an uphill takeoff or a turn immediately after the landing, jumping errors are hard to

avoid. Competitors use the skills displayed in dressage, regulating the horse's positioning and stride length in order to reach a precise take-off spot. There's no way to slow down and still produce a winning effort, as an optimum completion time has been set, and every second of overtime accrues penalties.

Despite the added pressure of knowing that this year's Rolex event was a U.S. Equestrian Federation selection trial for the upcoming Olympic Games, most riders negotiated the cross-country course with few problems. There were some refusals and a few unplanned partings of horse and rider, but for the most part, the horses flew over the obstacles with sufficient speed to avoid piling up time faults. Sadly, two horses had falls that resulted in life-ending injuries.

When scores were posted on Saturday afternoon, the leader board showed Becky Holder still in first place after a double-clear ride (no jumping faults and no time penalties for cross-country). Holder had been stopped on course because of a fall by the previous rider and had



Kentucky Equine Research is proud to support these champion horses and riders, and wishes them continuing success.

incorrectly reset her stopwatch, forcing her to ride the last part of the course without a reference as to pace. She made the best of the mistake, however, and used the situation to concentrate on riding fast and clean. “I got my opportunity to focus on one jump at a time,” she said at the post-ride press conference.

Phillip Dutton, who added just 0.4 penalties for time, moved into second place on Connaught and was tied for seventh on Woodburn, his second horse. Stephen Bradley also had two horses in the top ten; Kim Severson and Tipperary Liadhnan were sixth; and Karen O’Connor’s flawless ride on Theodore O’Connor had moved her into eleventh place.

Jumping for the Prize. Cross-country course designers plan for a top-level course to significantly challenge the horse’s physical fitness and jumping ability. Time penalties or jumping mistakes will be the downfall for some entrants, while others will complete the cross-country effort but will be too tired to attempt the third day’s jumping efforts. The 2008 Rolex course was no exception. Of the 41 horses ridden in the dressage phase, only 28 lined up for the final day’s round of show jumping. Unlike cross-country, where the obstacles are often wider than they are high, show-jumping fences are quite vertical, with poles or panels that knock down at the lightest touch of a trailing hoof. Riders put their horses into a more collected frame, asking for power and precision to clear the rails. Speed is still a factor, as riders must finish within the allotted time to avoid penalties.

In the show-jumping phase, the order begins with the horse in last place and progresses toward the leader. Each rail that is knocked down adds four penalty points to the score,

and with horses that may be feeling the effects of a tiring cross-country day, it’s hard to avoid “pulling” a rail or two on the intricate course. To save time, some riders take the fences at a slight angle, effectively making the jump somewhat wider. Others present the horse to a jump following a tight turn, allowing only a few strides to judge distance before the take-off. For a perfect round, power and speed must be balanced with obedience and flexibility.

As horse after horse completed the course, spectators became familiar with the thud of rails hitting the ground. The standings fluctuated as overnight leader Becky Holder added eight penalty points, dropping her into second place. Stephen Bradley on Brandenburg’s Joshua and Phillip Dutton on Connaught produced the day’s only double-clear rounds, moving them into fourth and first by the end of the competition. Missy Ranshousen claimed third place with Critical Decision.

Victory Gallop. At the awards ceremony, riders sponsored by Pennfield Feeds and Kentucky Equine Research took their places among the best performance horses in the world. Ribbons streaming from their bridles, the horses made a final gallop around the arena, still showing plenty of energy after a weekend of strenuous effort. With Dutton’s horses in first and tenth position and Severson and O’Connor finishing in fifth and sixth place respectively, these riders were a collective testimonial to the importance of proper nutritional support for the elite equine athlete.

Dutton, who has ridden the Rolex course for many years but had never finished in first place, summed up his victory in a few words. At the post-event press conference, he stated the obvious: “It feels a lot better to win than to be second!” 