

The Road to the Olympics - Part III

The Olympic Selection Process Narrows the Field of Competitors

BY ROBIN STANBACK

A person inclined to bet would have to give short odds to the American three-day eventing team in the upcoming Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia. Four United States Equestrian Team (USET) three-day event riders were named to the top ten world-ranking list for the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) in June. First place is held by David O'Connor of The Plains, Virginia, followed by Abigail Lufkin from Middleburg, Virginia. Bruce Davidson, Sr. of Unionville, Pennsylvania is in seventh place and Karen O'Connor, the distaff side of the successful Team O'Connor, is tied for eighth place. Four of these riders were tapped by the USET to be on the short list for the Sydney Games. The list is comprised of seven riders with 12 horses. Nine additional riders and nine more horses rest on the alternate list to be tapped to fill a position on the



Photo by Charles Bishop



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Above: Phillip Dutton and Show of Heart clearing the Keeneland fence in the show jumping phase of the Rolex Three-Day Event.

Top, right: David O'Connor receiving his award for placing second at the Rolex Three-Day Event.

Far right: Karen O'Connor returns to the barn after a flawless performance in the show jumping phase of the Rolex Three-Day Event.

team should any competitor be forced to withdraw. Unfortunately for Mr. Davidson, a five-time Olympic veteran, his horse, Eagle Lion, had to be dropped from the list for veterinary reasons.

All of the horses on the short list and those that have been chosen as alternates will be quarantined at Foxhall Farm in Newnan, Georgia this month where they will train with USET chef d'equipe, Captain Mark Phillips. The horses and riders are scheduled to compete July 21 and 22 in the Cosequin/USET Mandatory Short List Outing at Foxhall Farm. Following this competition and the quarantine, 12 horses will be shipped to Australia from Louisville, Kentucky July 31. The final squad of horses and riders will be chosen after their arrival in Australia.

For Kentucky Equine Research and its Team Member Pennfield Feeds the selection process and advance preparation have been an exciting and busy time. Two of the riders tapped for the United States short list are part of their sponsorship program. David O'Connor has three horses that have qualified for the short list: Rattle N Hum, a nine-year-old Thoroughbred gelding owned by David S. Lenaburg; Giltedge, a fourteen-year-old Thoroughbred gelding owned by Jacqueline B. Mars; and the 15-year-old

Thoroughbred gelding Custom Made who is owned by Joseph Zada. Karen O'Connor has two horses on the short list: Regal Scott, an 11-year-old Thoroughbred owned by Ms. Mars and Mr. and Mrs. Richard Thompson; and Ms. Mars' Prince Panache, a 15-year-old Thoroughbred gelding. Should the O'Connors be named to the final team of four horses and riders and one alternate horse and rider combination that will compete in the Sydney International Equestrian Center in Horsley Park in September, it will mark the second time the O'Connors have had the honor of representing their country in the Olympics. In 1996 they were members of the silver medal-winning United States Team.

Another rider sponsored by Pennfield Feeds is Phillip Dutton, a member of the 1996 Olympic gold medal-winning Australian three-day eventing team. Mr. Dutton, who trains his horses in West Grove, Pennsylvania, will also be shipping horses from the United States to Australia where he will compete again for his home country. His horses will be quarantined in Pennsylvania but will ship to Kentucky to make the journey to Australia with the horses from the United States Team. House Doctor, owned by Nina Gardner, and Show of Heart, also owned by Ms. Gardner, will be making the trip. They were each selected by the Australian nominating committee to be a part of the 21 horses short-listed for their country's three-day eventing team.

The Australian Equestrian Teams are automatically qualified for the Olympics as theirs is the hosting country, but their three-day eventing team is in a unique position to vie for an unprecedented third Gold medal. Australian three-day eventing teams won the team Gold medals in Barcelona, Spain in 1992 and in Atlanta, Georgia in 1996. The short list of horses for all the Australian Equestrian Teams will be carefully scrutinized through August, with the entries closing on August 25, the final date for announcing teams and official reserves. The exception to this is the seven final team and individual entries for the three-day eventing team, which will not be made until the final horse inspection on September 15. Australian equestrian pundits expect to see Mr. Dutton and one, if not both, of his horses make it through the final selection process.


Another rider heavily favored to make an Olympic appearance is Alison Firestone, a Pennfield Feeds-sponsored equestrian who has been named to the USET Show Jumping short list. Ms. Firestone garnered a fifth place tie on her mount Jox at the \$100,000 Rolex/USET Show Jumping Championship late in June. Jox is owned by Ms. Firestone's parents Bert and Diana Firestone. With a long list of accomplishments in the jumping arena behind her, including a Pan American Games Team gold medal and a win at the Olympia Grand Prix in London last year as well as wins at Grand Prix events in Helsinki in 1997 and in Gothenberg in 1998, Ms. Firestone has a wealth of international experience from which to draw. Bizzie Madden riding Cockney II, another Pennfield sponsored rider, narrowly missed making the cut as they finished 14th. The top 12 horses will compete again in California August 5-8, a scant seven weeks before the Olympic competition in Sydney, to determine the final team of four horses and riders and one alternate combination that will make the trip. 



Photo by Catherine Bishop