

THE O'CONNOR S'

David O'Connor and Custom Made, winners of the second individual gold medal in eventing for the United States. CHARLES MANN PHOTO



O'CONNOR STANDARD

BY DAVID O'CONNOR

This Is Our Road

Happy New Year
to everyone! I hope 2014 brings a
safe, fun, and happy time to the sport of event-
ing. For High Performance, 2013 was a year of
assessment; where we are and what we are going to do
to improve our standing on the world scene. The High Per-
formance division is a small part of eventing as a whole. The
goals are to narrow the focus and broaden the reach. The goal is
to be the number one eventing nation in the world at any time. This
is a lofty goal and at times it is hard to truly set the parameters of
what constitutes number one. ● The first factor should be the winning
of gold medals in major championships. That is the easy one to gauge.
Other parameters are the health of the sport at home, number of par-
ticipants, number of events, and number of starts at each level. Also the
successes in international competitions abroad that are not necessarily
team competitions is an objective to judge ourselves by. We made a con-
certed effort to compete more on the continent this year and not just in
England. I do believe this is a positive step for our program, and this
year brought some good successes and some disappointments. Set-
backs are part of the program, and in this building time there are
going to be some things that go well and others that do not. As I
have said before, it is the response to a disappointment that
is important. The ability to realize the mistakes and make
a plan to fix them is the only way forward. ● We helped
19 combinations compete in Europe this year, and
we had a success rate on the cross-country
of just above 50 percent at the
CCI3* and CCI4*

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levels. We also have some riders that currently or previously lived in Europe for an extended period, which is a positive thing for our sport. We almost won a CCI3* (by .2) and also were in the hunt all the way to the end at a CCI4*. This shows that we are not so far out of the game.

Major things are not wrong, but this year's results show where continued improvement is needed. First off, the success rate on the cross-country has to be higher, and I believe that 75 percent of the combinations that we send overseas should have a clean cross-country round. That is the goal and this will be achieved. Competitive success still comes from clear rounds on the cross-country. There are a myriad of aspects to improving this situation, such as our own course design, our dressage basics, our jumping techniques as a whole, and these will be addressed as we go forward.

In the pursuit of excellence, I will also make mistakes. We had a horse not finish a course this year because of a shoeing situation that I was uncomfortable with but let go. That was my mistake. Believe me, in every way I learn from my mistakes. I know that all of our riders feel the same way and will do all they can to check all of the boxes before competition happens.

It can be a concern that if we send too many of our competitors overseas that it will have a negative effect on our major championships here at home. This year that was not the case. In fact, the autumn CCI3*s were the largest in years. Fair Hill continues to improve and is on track to be one of the best in the world. Galway Downs, under the direction of Robert Kellerhouse, continues to be the highlight of the west. Robert's enthusiasm drives this competition to new levels every year, and without him the western side of the U.S. eventing scene would not be as strong.

We are really looking forward to the World Equestrian Games (WEG) this August. We have traveled to the site where the Games are going to be held in Normandy, France and it is truly a championship venue. The cross-country will be a major influence on the Games as the terrain is varied between short hills and long pulls. The unusual part of these Games is that the show jumping is not on the site but an hour away in Caen. We will ship up the morning of the show jumping in a convoy. We will have our own transport but be under the direction of the organizing committee. You can imagine the logistical problems this will entail! The horses' welfare is the primary concern but I already have a great respect for all of the people behind the scenes, including our own grooms. This will be a trying situation that we must be prepared for and go into it with an attitude of problem solving to make sure the horses have the easiest time.

I am optimistic when I look at the potential combinations that are preparing for the Games. It is a good group of experienced riders that are committed to improving every aspect of their preparation. We had good talks, lectures, and training sessions in 2013 and will have more this year. These

gatherings are a time to have a two-way conversation on where they are and the steps to carry forward. I love these times. I really feel that we have everyone going in the same direction and all with the same goals. The true reality is that if you pursue excellence, achieve technical precision, strive for mental stability, and love what you do, you will succeed. This is our road. This is our goal.

We also realize that the WEG is only one step. Preparation for the Pan American Games is on the way, and certainly the Olympic Games will be here before we know it. The Pan Am Games are in Canada next July and will be held at the two-star level. This will be a mix of experienced riders and riders that may be on their first team trip. The event will be the Olympic format, with four riders to a team and two show jumping rounds. The team medals are determined by the first round and the top 15 riders jump a second time to determine the individual medals. In the past few Olympic Games, there have been five riders with three scores to count on a team, but this time it will go back to four riders with three scores to count. I personally believe this is a better system and makes the event more competitive.

The 2016 Olympic Games are in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. The equestrian competition will be held at the same site as the 2007 Pan Am Games. We have already been there and the site is a very good one for horses. I am sure riders that would like to represent our country there are already losing sleep wondering: Do I have the right program? Do I have the appropriate horses? Am I getting the right help? Am I driving myself enough? These are questions that have to run in your head all the time. Champions are made when no one is looking.


I was honored to be asked to give the keynote speech at the USEA Annual Meeting and Convention this year. It was quite an emotional speech for me as this was the 29th consecutive Convention I have attended. I was born in this sport and I have been lucky

“We all have the same goals just at different levels....From the rider at the Area Novice Championships to the rider at Rolex, there is a similarity, a connection. I believe this with my soul.”

enough to be able to make a living in this sport for my whole career. I will end my days in this sport. In thinking about the sport that we love, it made me think that realistically we are a very small sport. We have about 14,000 members in a country of 317,000,000. We have, I believe, about 250,000 people that are interested in eventing. We are a very popular live spectator sport, as the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event shows, but we are still small compared to other sports. This means it is up to each of us to be the caretakers of the future. It is up to all of us to create a sense of husbandry to what this sport represents.

We all have to play our part because there is no one else to do it. We do not have the luxury of letting others take care of the sport for us. We are one sport with no ability to divide between those that make their living in the sport and those that use their precious time away from their jobs to participate. We all have the same goals just at different levels. Some play at a level that is very public and some very privately. Is there truly a difference when you are in a start box to what outcome is desired? From the rider at the Area Novice Championships to the rider at Rolex, there is a similarity, a connection. I believe this with my soul. There are those that disagree but I can guarantee that no one could take that belief away from me.

I hope that you will join us in the journey that High Performance is taking. We are all passionate about what we do. We will drive ourselves to be the best. We will make you proud.

See you in the ring! 

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