

Advice from the leading experts



■ Emer Bermingham

DESPITE heavy flooding playing havoc around the country, equestrian enthusiasts travelled from near and far to attend the Equine Hedge School at Killashee House last Tuesday. Presented by the Showjumpers Club and run in association with Connolly's Redmills and *The Irish Field*, the day proved to be most informative, with experts giving advice on everything from feeding to producing a top class horse and rider.

The morning session began with physiotherapist Niall Madden speaking on rider injuries and how this can affect overall performance. For Madden, alignment was one of the most important factors which can affect a rider's performance. He recommended that all riders should be assessed at the start of the season to ensure that there are no alignment issues and preferably, this should start from the teenage years. For him, a rider is an athlete who needs to be in

good shape to deliver results and they can't do this if they are in pain.

Equine physiotherapist Davide Focardi gave a fascinating insight into the horse's correctness and balance and how he assesses each horse individually. He outlined factors that play a part in how much attention a horse should be given.

The horse's overall movement and conformation is important. Focardi said bad movers are more likely to pick up an injury because of their way of going. Past injuries, as with humans, can come back to haunt a horse and will therefore require more attention. The level of competition is also a factor as the higher the level and the more frequently the animal performs, the more attention the horse will need.

Focardi identifies three key elements which signal a problem and he refers to them as the three S's - Sound, Suppleness and Symmetry.

Sound - this does not necessarily mean lameness, rather it means is there any restriction in the horse's movement?

Suppleness - is the horse able to perform the same movements equally on the left and right rein?

Symmetry - is the horse equal on both sides?

Similar to Madden,



A view of the crowd gathered to hear the morning panel of Niall Madden, Brendan McArdle MC, Davide Focardi and Gisela Holstein at the 2016 Equine Hedge School

Focardi advised that young riders should be taught from an early age to identify any signs of discomfort in an animal.

IT'S ALL IN THE FLATWORK

Dressage trainer Gisela Holstein wrapped up the morning session with her advice on how to build up muscles with flatwork and correct saddle fitting.

Holstein believes "95% of a show jumping course is flatwork" saying: "It's the bit between the fences that makes your round."

Holstein urged riders to start early to straighten the horse on each side and to gain perfect control of the horse, both physically and mentally. She advised on assessing the horse's weakness and strong points before

training and to "develop the horse to perform to the best of their ability."

The trainer spoke about the muscles on the horse's back and how they need to be correctly developed to take a rider's weight. Two important elements for Holstein was to feed the horse well, as muscles need nutrition, and to develop the muscles through flatwork. She then moved on to look at various saddles and how they sat on the horse. She spoke about the effects of badly fitted saddles and girths. Ideally, every horse in the yard should be fitted with its own saddle but she acknowledged that this was not always possible and advised on how to recognise an ill-fitting saddle and using pads to rectify problems. The late morning session saw nu-

tritionist Nia O'Malley speak on equine feeding from the foal up to the performance horse. She urged horse owners not to put extra weight on foals as it puts strains on the legs and said ideally good pasture was the best feed for young horses in particular.

When it comes to the various horse feeds on the market, O'Malley urged owners to familiarise themselves with the ingredients in complete horse feeds. Factors to consider include what stage your horse is at, for example, a mature horse does not require as much protein as a younger one. Too much protein, amongst other problems, can put pressure on the kidneys and the liver and O'Malley highlighted ways to identify dietary imbalances.



Gisela Holstein and Davide Focardi advising on correctly fitting tack



International course designer Alan Wade

Aiming for the top – Wade and

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INTERNATIONAL course designer Alan Wade needed very little introduction. Renowned for his course designing across the world, Wade gave an insight into his role and how he goes about designing five-star courses.

"Everything is built with safety in mind and the aim of the design is to test riders' ability to get horses to the correct take-off point with the horse focused on the top rail," he said.

For Wade, he likes to get the horse and rider into a nice rhythm and build courses that require them to

both shorten and lengthen.

Wade also gave some insight into his favourite fences and obstacles which he uses to test the horse and rider, such as solid poles and optical fences. He spoke about the various surfaces in use and the pros and cons of each.

When it comes to show jumping at five-star level, one of the key points for Wade was that if a rider is not up to the task at that level, he or she will be exposed very quickly.

Riders need to have the capacity to deal with challenging lines and stiff fences at the top level.

As riders become more competitive, more and more are engaging the advice of coaches, from pony riders up to professional level.

Level three coach and Horse Sport Ireland tutor, Ian Fearon, spoke about his role as a coach and distinguished it from the role of a trainer.

For Fearon, coaching involves many elements, it is not all just about giving a lesson. He said coaches need to know the rider and become a friend and even a psychologist in some cases.

For him, coaching starts way before the lesson actually begins. Before you take a rider on, you need to set

down a plan. You need to ensure that both horse and rider are fit and healthy, you need to look at the support structure of the rider, i.e. the family and grooms that support the rider, the facilities and tack.

Coaches then need to set goals. "Start with the small ones, i.e. good balance and control," he urged. Fearon's motto is "train to perform".

Indeed Fearon's methods have worked well with show jumpers and eventers alike and he played an important role in Ireland bringing home many international medals at both junior and senior level.