

Photos by Cealy Tetley



One of Robert Jolicoeur's famed courses at the Capital Classic Horse Show in Ottawa, ON (above), Jolicoeur (right), an expert on ring construction and footing, began designing courses in 1976



Robert Jolicoeur - Olympic Course Designer

HITS PAY DIRT

by Jennifer Ward

How many people in the equestrian industry begin their careers by course designing at the Olympic Games? For Canada's Robert Jolicoeur, that is exactly how his road to success began.

A hunter/jumper rider alongside his brother, trainer Pierre, Jolicoeur got his start by telling show organizers how poor their courses were. Organizers happily invited him to 'put his money where his mouth was', and Jolicoeur did just that, designing courses at local shows around his native Montreal. When the 1976 Olympic Games came to town, a young Jolicoeur was appointed assistant course designer to 1968 Canadian Olympic show jumping gold medalist, Tom Gayford. The accolade would become a turning point in his career.

While almost all of the equestrian events were held in Bromont, the final day of team show jumping was to be held in Montreal's Olympic Stadium, followed by closing ceremonies.

Other sports had been using the Olympic Stadium field throughout the Games and, at midnight, just hours before the show jumping competition was to begin, the final soccer match was played and the field was handed over to equestrian. Immediately recognizing the problems footing was going to present, Jolicoeur quickly re-did the course plan, moving the triple combination out of the center of the field where the mud was the worst and instead placing three double combinations along the side where the footing was more solid.

"Everyone was scared about the footing, but 75,000 people were in the stands and it was televised, so there were no thoughts of cancelling," recalled Jolicoeur of the scene over 25 years ago. "So we reduced the size of the oxers and kept the high verticals. We installed a few shallow cups. No one got hurt that day, but the horses didn't jump well and we had no clears after two rounds. That was the moment I realized that the key to good competition was good footing. I can't build something if the horse is not comfortable and secure."

Inspired by the landscape architect responsible for decorating the show rings at the 1976 Olympic Games, the self-admitted 'late bloomer' returned to school at age 28 and spent four years

earning his degree in landscape architecture from the University of Montreal. Upon graduation, Jolicoeur founded International Equestrian Design in 1981, a Montreal-based company specializing in the building and design of equestrian facilities ranging from commercial racetracks to Olympic stadiums.

"In the last 25 years, so many horse farms have been built and I realized that footing was always an issue," said Jolicoeur. "It was hard for show organizers to lay their hands on experts, to find people who knew how to build something as simple as a sand ring."

Indeed, Jolicoeur is renowned as an expert in ring construction and, most importantly, footing. He has designed many of Canada's foremost equestrian facilities including Thunderbird Show Park in Langley, B.C., host the 2003 Pan American Games Selection Trials for show jumping this spring, and the grass grand prix field used by Ottawa's Capital Classic Horse Show who are currently adding a second grass field to be used in 2004. South of the border, Jolicoeur has left his mark on numerous show and private facilities, including the Palm Beach Polo Equestrian Club in Wellington, FL, and The Oaks Blenheim Riding Park in San Juan Capistrano, CA. Internationally, Jolicoeur designed all the equestrian facilities, including the steeplechase track, for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. The only portion he was not involved in was the cross-country course. Similarly, at the 1999 Pan American Games in Winnipeg, he was again responsible for all the rings, with the exception of the cross-country and steeplechase tracks.

While you may not be building a world-class competition facility, the greatest secret to building your dream ring is to do it right the first time. Jolicoeur firmly believes that a ring can be built to suit every taste and budget, as long as this basic principle is followed.

Take your time and study your location. Start with a vision of what you would like to achieve. Think about future development, how other items you might want to add to your property as time passes

will effect your ring. Give it a lot of thought. Determine the size of your ring based on what you will be using it for. Will you be riding dressage, training jumpers, or running a riding school or small horse shows? All of these factors must be taken into consideration as they all have an impact on the type of ring you build. How many horses will be using the ring? Are you a private owner who wants to ride two horses a day, or do you have boarders and lessons that see 30 horses in your ring each day?

Location is also a key factor. While good drainage is always a must, there are many more factors to be considered, especially when building outdoor rings.

ROBERT'S RING TIPS

Do

- take your time, with every aspect of building your ring
- get an expert's advice for good planning
- build your ring the right size in the right place
- use a proven concept and design that works
- consider the comfort of the horse and ensure he does not get hurt in training
- build with safety in mind
- follow a maintenance program and schedule

Don't

- use a footing product just because it is the latest one on the market
- use the first contractor that you meet – shop around for a good price
- rush your construction schedule – building the perfect ring takes time

Never

- add organic materials – manure, shavings, sawdust – to your ring
- improvise - the safety of horse and rider could be jeopardized
- use the ring as a paddock – never leave a horse unattended

"You want to think about having a fence, wall, or trees to break the wind, horses don't jump well in a windy area," reminded Jolicoeur, who likened an outdoor ring to an amphitheatre. "You don't want to be too close to the road, especially if there is much traffic. You don't want to be on top of a hill, you don't want to have cows in the next field; all these things will distract your horse from his job. Safety is also a key consideration. You don't want your ring too close to the barn, but you do want people working around the barn to be able to see the ring because accidents do happen. All of these things are examples of planning and taking the time to consider all the factors."

While level land is preferable, your land does not always have to be perfect. As an example, Jolicoeur said, "A grass field used for training jumpers at home does not always have to be level, but you need a few flat places where you can put your triple combinations."

Another trap people fall into is thinking that building a ring is going to be easy. Hiring the right contractor is the key to solving this problem. A contract specifically describing the work to be done and the material to be used is necessary so that, for example, when the sand you ordered based on a sample is delivered full of rocks, it is very clear who is responsible for their removal.

"A lot of time when people build a ring, they have no grading plan, no material specification and no documented contract," said Jolicoeur simply. "When things go bad, there is nothing to go back to. So often there are disputes between the builder and the contractor – and neither side is happy!"

Many customers are concerned about price, but what they don't pay for up front, they will pay for later, often making their investment much more costly than if it had been done properly the first time. Another common mistake is trying to build on a tight schedule. Be sure to give yourself lots of time.

"This is a problem most common to show organizers," said Jolicoeur. "They are anxious to improve their footing but are very limited with time. They may run four shows

a year and are trying to improve the quality before the next show. Don't try to beat the clock – it will end up costing you more in the end. Footing is built in layers and you need to let each layer sit before you add the next one. The best way to build a ring is to let it sit. In Canada, I advise people to put their material down in the fall, let the snow sit on it all winter, then start working again in the spring.”

Next comes the question of what type of footing to build your ring with.

“I am open to anything,” insisted Jolicoeur. “I don't sell products, I sell ideas. If a company has a new product, I get a sample and do some testing. To evaluate surface materials, we use a machine that simulates a horse's hoof hitting the ground and researchers are able to measure the shock absorption of various materials. I am always looking for new surfaces. Using a good quality product is the first step to success.

“When I begin work, I look for local materials first in order to keep costs down. I adjust the recipe for the footing depending

on the material we can find. Climate is also a big consideration – a ring in California will be built very differently than one in Toronto.”

And just because your ring is built doesn't mean it is finished. Footing changes with time and use and requires regular maintenance to keep it in top shape.

“People need to pay attention to simple things,” insisted Jolicoeur. “Take care to pick up all the manure in the ring because, in just one year's time, your footing could be ruined. In busier hunter/jumper rings, you should remove the jumps once a week and work the footing with the proper equipment. Little things like this can save you thousands of dollars in the long-run.”

Jolicoeur often sees people trying to make up for a lack of maintenance with a 'quick fix'.

“Some people try adding organic material such as shavings, manure or sawdust to their rings,” said Jolicoeur in disbelief. “This may improve the footing for a few weeks or even months, but, because the material is

organic, it breaks down and becomes very volatile. Not only does the footing become unstable putting both the horse and rider at risk, but both are inhaling this matter, which often contains dust and moulds.”

Investing the time and money into building your ring right the first time will give you pleasure for years to come.

“In the end, you want your ring to be aesthetically pleasing,” said Jolicoeur. “A ring always looks better if it is surrounded. You could put fencing and trees or shrubs around your ring, and you always want freshly painted fences both in and around your ring! The overall presentation should be pleasing - it is a reflection of your business and yourself. Of all the rings I have built, which must by now be somewhere around a thousand, very few are ever the same.”

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