



Course Design as Leo see's it

Holly Grayton

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LEOPOLDO PALACIOS

Course design is always a hot topic at the horse shows. And most often at the world-renowned Spruce Meadows, the common discussion is about the level of difficulty. Leopoldo Palacios is the long-standing chief course designer at Spruce Meadows, having worked there for 21 seasons. He has been designing since the 1970's, and having been a rider before that he knows a thing or two about testing riders. That is exactly what he hopes to do.

Leopoldo describes Spruce Meadows courses by saying, 'At Spruce Meadows every competition here is real. Here is not for building horses; here is the final exam for everybody, every day, and every class. Even the small rings.' It is clear at the outset that Leopoldo sees his role is to build a very difficult test for horses and riders every time they enter the show ring at Spruce Meadows.

'In our job as a course designer we have to have two important things: we need to [think of] the safety of the horses and the riders, and we squeeze the horses to the max. It is a fine line at Spruce Meadows.' Leopoldo gets excited just talking about designing at Spruce Meadows! He adds, 'It's very exciting and there's a lot of adrenaline in what I do. My mistake will last two hours; the mistake for the riders will be only one minute.'

Using the skinny jump, the plank and a natural fence are all staples in every course here at Spruce Meadows for Leopoldo. The 400 metres per minute speed requirement makes these jumps especially difficult, and the occasional jump with shorter poles causes the riders to slow down briefly, again playing with the minds of the riders.

Jumping at Spruce Meadows is unlike most other venues for North American show jumpers through the rest of year. Leopoldo is emphatic that if it were up to him he would 'prohibit the sand. The beauty of the sport is on grass. In my opinion sand is aggressive. My heart is with the grass; my queen is the grass. The problem of the grass is always the same – the weather. With the sand you are always covered for the weather, but a good grass ring? Nothing is better.'

One jump that is often seen on course at Spruce Meadows, especially in the major competitions of the week, is the water jump. This obstacle has been seen as controversial of late, with riders, trainers, and even the legendary George Morris offering their thoughts and opinions on the size and use of the water jump on course. Some people think it is old-fashioned, and no longer required or relevant in today's sport. Leopoldo disagrees: 'Old fashioned? Show jumping is old-fashioned. If you take out the roots of the tree, it will fall down. If you take out the roots of the sport, it will fall down. In my opinion we need more natural jumps in the Grand Prix.'



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What should riders think when they are jumping Leopoldo's courses? 'The way that I'm designing I try to have sympathetic faults: horses just touching the jumps. Short distances and long distances are more for the mind of the rider.'

If and when you come to Spruce Meadows, be prepared for the 'final exam' and be ready to really think while on course. If Leopoldo has it his way, get ready to see all of the natural fences too!