



BICTON ARENA

Behind the scenes at the Horse Trials – by Helen West

Instalment Two:

The week of the event has arrived. I am now obsessed with the weather app on my phone and if I don't like what the Met Office is telling me, I try the BBC Weather app and then I go "International" and try the Norwegian site yr.no. As I mentioned in my previous blog, we have very free draining sandy soil at Bicton, so I don't normally get too stressed about the going on the cross-country course as it handles rain very well. It is more the setting up of trade stands and the lorry park side of things that causes us a headache if it is very wet. I will make sure I have a good supply of stone at the ready and make provisions to have plenty of tractor power on site if it looks like we will need to tow anything.

It is not unheard of for us to aerovate in April. If we have a dry spring then it has been known for us to use the small aerovator on the cross-country tracks. We generally do not get cold winters down with us, so grass growth is not an issue and we have a good covering of grass for the April event. With the sandy old loam turf, once you break through the top of it, we have great going under foot. I will make sure I have the machines I need ready for the week of the event in case it looks like we might need to use them. We own a terra Spike Verti-Drain which we use on all of the grass jumping arenas as well as the dressage field, but the BE machine works better on our cross-country tracks, so I will make sure this has been delivered to us for the week of the event.

I am fortunate that the BE machine is based with our TA (Technical Advisor) Simon Bere, so he can drop it down to us when he does his pre-event visit. This will be the second visit the TA makes to us, having previously visited the site along with the BE Steward two or three weeks prior. During the initial visit the TA and Steward will have walked the tracks and had a good look around the rest of the site to make sure everything is taking shape as it should be. This is a vitally important opportunity for the BE Officials to go through any timetabling issues with the organiser, as well as looking at logistics and checking all the correct medical and veterinary provisions are in place. I am extremely fortunate that both Simon (TA) and Nicky Salmon (Steward) are very much a part of the Bicton Team and I value their advice hugely.

When Simon makes his second visit, he will measure all the cross-country fences and detail the dimensions of every single fence. By this stage, the courses will be flagged and numbered, and most of the dressing will have been done. This will give him a much better feel for the tracks than when he walked two weeks prior. If he has any concerns after walking the tracks, he will come back to me, as course designer, with a list of points which we will then talk through and then action appropriately. An example would be that he asks for a toe rail on a ditch, to keep the horses in a better shape over the ditch. Touch wood, we are yet to disagree on anything major! This doesn't mean that my list comes back empty I can assure you, but it does demonstrate that we are singing from the same hymn sheet and that we have fundamental principles that align.

Nicky and Simon will always come the day before the event commences to walk all the cross-country tracks ready for them to be officially opened at 2.00pm for the public to walk. Simon will check he is happy with any frangible devices I am using on cross-country fences, which could include MIM clips or frangible pins. Frangible pinning kits have been mandatory on all suitable fences since 2006 and



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since 2012 have been supplied free of charge to organisers. Reverse pinning kits have been free of charge since 2014 and the latest technology, MIM clips, since 2016.

The frangible pin is a safety device that can be fitted to a range of post and rail type fences. The frangible pins sit under the rail (one at each side) and are designed to break when a certain force is applied to the rail; for example, in the event of a horse impacting a fence, it will allow the rail to drop, thus reducing the risk of a rotational horse fall. The rail is connected to the post with a system of ropes or wires so that the rail is retained and does not hit the ground or roll. The pins can be fitted in two ways, conventionally with the rail on the take-off side, or reverse with the rail on the landing side. With the same aim of reducing the risk of a rotational fall as the frangible pin, the MIM clips (which are fitted to each side of the rail) break when impacted horizontally by a horse, which allows the rail to fall. The rail is connected to the post with a hinge, so it folds away from the horse.



It is crucial that these devices are fitted properly, and that they haven't been compromised on existing cross-country fences that have been used previously. Simon will also wheel the distances of the tracks during this visit, which we will then compare with the distances that I have got and agree what the official distances will be for the competition. On this day before visit the Officials will also check the dressage arenas, walk the first showjumping track and generally satisfy themselves that everything around the site is ready to receive 300 competitors the following day. Miranda will be on site and fully set up in the scorers' office and will have printed numerous lists for Nicky and Simon including any competitors who are on the "Incident Log". This is an internal, confidential list of riders who BE Officials have identified as needing an eye kept on. It is a vitally important safety measure which is for the benefit of riders within the Sport.

During the event Simon's role as TA encompasses many duties with the overall objective being to oversee the safe running of the event. Nicky as BE Steward is the official representative of British Eventing at the event and has overall responsibility to ensure the event is conducted throughout in accordance with BE rules, including handling all disciplinary issues. The primary role of the BE Officials is to make sure the Sport is safe and secondly to ensure the competition is fair.

An important job that we do in the last 48 hours before the event commences in the staking and twining of the cross-country courses. Now you may think this a pretty straightforward job, I certainly never gave it much thought when I was galloping between fences but let me tell you this particular task causes much debate and stress for me as my husband Andrew takes ownership of it! I must be honest, he is very good at it, by my word he drives me to distraction in the process of doing it. He insists that every stake is facing the same way with the BE logo to the outside and that there is an equal distance between every single stake. There is a particular way of wrapping the twine around the stakes, a particular thickness of twine that must be used, and now his latest obsession is biodegradable twine! It must be highly amusing for any observer of said process, as I dutifully follow



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him along in the gator (with packs of stakes in the back), whilst he yomps off with a bundle of them in his arms, meticulously counting his stride pattern before thrusting one into the ground (the right way around of course), and beckoning to me to provide him with more stakes when he is empty. We frequently come to blows when it comes to riding a line to a fence when he is wearing his TA hat (Andrew is also a Technical Advisor) and I am wearing my riding one!

Suffice to say, it is always a relief to me once the tracks are strung, the cross-country warm up is ready with appropriate fences in place and all the crossing point signs and bins are in place on course. My next most hated task is the banner placement. Andrew point blank refuses to do this one with me, as it would almost certainly result in divorce, so we normally rope poor Mark Piddington into it. Mark makes all our signage at Bicton Arena including all the cross-country banners for our sponsors. Rewind a week and Beccy will finally have pinned me down to do the "XC Banner Spreadsheet". Now Matt thought my cross-country fence list spreadsheet was one of beauty, but it pales into insignificance when this one is finally produced. I have sponsors for most fences and a colour to denote the type of banner each sponsor has provided (correx boards infinitely easier than canvas banners). I then have another colour code for how said banner is to be fixed at each fence i.e. spax screwed to back of fence or attached to two posts driven in to the side of a fence. Much consideration goes into how we can get maximum exposure for sponsors, so it is important to get the banners in the right place to feature in the cross-country photographs.

Whilst I am preoccupied with things out on the cross-country course in the week leading up to the event, thankfully my capable team are busy ensuring other aspects are being catered for. Normally our dynamic duo of Marion Pascoe and Sue Gawler arrive on Tuesday to set up dressage arenas under Gemma's guidance. They have this art perfected and I always marvel at how quickly and efficiently they get all nine arenas set up. Gemma ropes the dressage warm up and the dividing line between our upper and lower dressage tiers. I usually bring my lorry over for the dressage scorers to use. We have Wi-Fi down at the dressage field so all scores can be entered onto Miranda's system and go live very promptly.

Beccy draws the short straw and is point of contact for the trade stands. She will map the trade stand lawn on a clever piece of software the Estate use which works well if people have been accurate with their trade stand dimensions on their application forms. It is incredibly frustrating when poor Beccy has staked out the entire trade stand lawn to find someone arrives with an extra 2m of frontage which completely blows the whole thing out of the water. If the Horse Trials gets any bigger, I have promised Beccy that we will get a "Trade Stand Manager" in to coordinate this side of things. It can also be an extremely political affair; trade stand holders have a lot riding on the success of sales at an event, so understandably want the best pitch and not to have too much competition from conflicting stands. Emotions can run high!

Once the trade stand village is in place, the event really begins to take shape. For us, this is the biggest difference between a normal sized event and a higher profile event whereby public might attend, as we do not have trade stands at the former. We take delivery of six brand new Volvo cars normally on the Wednesday of this week. This always provides much excitement as to who is going to purloin the keys first and offer to position said vehicles. The biggest challenge is keeping tabs on the keys and I am always mightily relieved when all six cars have successfully been collected on the Monday following the event. Somewhat less excitement surrounds the delivery of the Volvo flags and banners which need assembling. We have all got well-rehearsed at this now, but it is a rather thankless task and plays havoc with my fingernails. They look superb once they are up and in place on the drive and certainly help to create a wow factor upon arrival. Next time you see them please spare a thought for my chipped nail varnish!



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One of the last jobs to be done is the showjumping course build. This takes place the day before and we have our regular build team in place to help with this. Super Steve is a key part of this group of muscle and is ably assisted by a couple of other guys. We bring out one of our three sets of competition showjumps for the Horse Trials and go to town with the artificial flowers to give extra visual impact. The showjumping phase takes place in the NAF Five Star arena which is surrounded by the trade stand village, so the natural amphitheatre gives a real sense of atmosphere to this phase. Young horses can often go in and be slightly overwhelmed, but the all-weather surface assists them hugely. Practice showjumps are set up in the W.H Bond arena (also on a surface), strips placed on the wings (to demonstrate the maximum height for each level), and both arenas are graded ready for the commencement of the competition.

One of the final jobs we do the night before the competition commences takes place in the scorer's office. Miranda will have printed all the cross-country timecards with 4 competitors to a sheet of A4 paper. Nicky usually sits down with Miranda at this point in proceedings and dutifully cuts them into quarters i.e. one per competitor, whilst having a well-earned cup of tea. These are then ready to go to cross-country control for the start of this phase. Roget Trivett normally arrives with the programmes around now (Roger is both cross-country controller and owner of Acanthus Printing, so does all our programmes for us). Simon and I will join Nicky for a cup of tea (or something stronger in my case!) and go through the programme to pick suitable rider representatives for the duration of the competition. I will then get in touch with said riders and check they are happy to fulfil this role.

We all try to leave the site before it gets dark ready to convene in a few hours' time. It always worries me when I go home the evening before an event feeling as tired as I would expect to feel on the last day, but somehow the adrenalin never lets me down and I awake buzzing the following morning. My commute to the event takes all of 8 minutes and I reflect on the fact that as I am no longer wearing my riding hat, but my organising one, at least I have afforded the luxury of a good couple of extra hours in bed. The day has arrived...