

REPORT ON MENTORING MORNING
WITH
JOHN COTTLE

We met at John's home base at Clevedon on a lovely sunny morning, early in November. All five of us really missed Sue and Jeanette, both of whom were starting new jobs and couldn't get away; however our numbers were improved by the addition of our three Equalan 'A' Instructors, Kerry, Pat and Sue, who came back from an Australian T.D conference a day early in order to be with us.

John is an Olympic rider and trainer, and we were eager to watch him teach, to discuss with him his beliefs and principles, and to discover if there were any major differences in the way he and we approached the teaching of jumping. The main idea behind the session was to improve the relationship and understanding between NZPCA and NZEF, and to introduce the idea of having a mentor.

Perhaps not very surprisingly, there were really no arguments at all!

The morning began with a ring-side chat, with John discussing his **priorities and principles**.

He felt that:

- The position and stability of the lower leg was all important
- The foot angle should be such that it allows contact with calf and heel, (i.e. slightly turned out) and prevents a swinging leg, which can happen if the toe faces the front
- Backs should be kept flat, by asking for "eyes parallel with the ground"
- On approach to the fence, he wanted a slightly forward position, from the hips, with the rider sitting lightly in the saddle. He wanted the rider to "pose" and sit still, as he felt riders frequently tended to throw their weight forward. Instead, he wanted them to allow the horse to come up in front and close the angle between them.

John proved the **value of a demonstration** by graphically showing how a human athlete approaches a high jump, with his overloaded shoulders and upper body tilted back, before take-off, in order to get his legs up in the air

In the same way a horse must be allowed to get his weight back, not have over-leaded shoulders, and be able to get his knees up

- Basically he wanted a rider to sit still, let the horse do the jumping – not over-ride or interfere but let the horse's attention go to the fence. He sees a lot of young riders getting too far forward before the fence. Then many of them take too long on landing to recover the rhythm and rebalance the horse.
- The rider was to control the correct rhythm on the approach to any fence. John felt this was the most important point to start from. Rather than fighting into the fences, he wanted to see a horse in balance, submissive, in a rhythm, coming close enough to the bottom of his fences. In the same way, in a one-stride double the horse needs to be left alone. Horses that rushed were over anxious
- He saw hand/arm positions were frequently too low and unyielding. At this level he quite liked a 'crest release'. Major emphasis was on a following hand that 'pushes the nose forward'

Jacque had recruited some excellent **demonstration Pony Club riders**, and the first three were in the C+ range

Beginning with these ponies and riders John worked them mainly in trot to develop a better self-carriage, which he felt was a pre-condition for jumping.

To improve the body position and help weight to be sent down into the heels/stirrups, he worked the riders in a half-seat in trot.

Then they worked on canter on a loose rein, to develop more self-carriage, and to ride into a low fence on this loose rein, where he did not expect them to pick up speed.

They worked over raised trotting poles, then on a circle with low fences at the half-points. This gave them practice in riding curved lines, over very low fences.

The exercise moved on to riding a straight line before and after a single fence, then halting, turning, and jumping back the way they came

A rider who rocked with her shoulders in canter was told to sit down and 'slide into the leading leg', so keeping her closer to the saddle and making an effort to sit still. The same principle applies as when a rider sits to the trot- the seat and lower back absorb the movement, not the upper body.

For landing on the correct leg, they were told to 'just look and open the rein slightly' in the new direction

His approach was very positive and encouraging; very clear, not over-complicated. None of us found anything controversial or contradictory to what we are all looking for and teaching

The second group was of two horses, one ridden by the last Inter-Pacific Captain Tom Lane, who has since spent some very useful time in the USA. Their levels were B to A. They did very much the same work, going on to riding short lines and short courses..

Great emphasis was laid on straightness of approach, controlled speed, no rushing, and keeping the horse round before and after the fence. He wanted the riders to aim at getting close to the bottom of their fence, and at this higher level John expected a much better, shorter, recovery after every fence, within a stride, if possible.

Summing up

John always commented on body position, approach, control etc and found something for the rider to work on at each jump. He was not often heard to use the word "good" lightly. He was calm and insistent on wanting an improvement in rider technique and position which in turn allows the horse to improve his style. He was not quick to raise the fences, but used small fences to allow the rider time to practice and develop the style and feel he was after.

While we were sitting having our discussion a friendly head was looking out of the box behind us. John told us that this was an Australian mare, who had been in the USA and then on to Europe, and was now going to jump with him. We were virtually getting our feed-back straight from the horse's mouth !

From previous talks I knew that John himself had recently been to Australia, shopping for horses, and then to Bahrain to train their intended riders, who will probably come to NZ to be paired up. As we left John was about to get on a flight to Melbourne to try out a competition stallion that an owner was very keen for him to take on. We all felt we had spent a most enjoyable morning with him and felt we had made a great start on our policy of professional development, being mentored by such a great expert

J.H.