



F & I Study Day with Eric Smiley FBHS

Report by Anne Bondi

There were no fair weather riders to be seen at Moores Farm on Friday 31st March, which turned out to be one of the wettest days we have seen this year. The spectator group enjoyed watching riders Helen Martin, Hannah French, Karen Whiston and Lauren Betteridge. All the hardy souls made it to the end of a full day, motivated and captivated by watching and listening to a master at work.

Asking the riders to introduce their horses at the beginning of their session, Eric asked them to say two things that they liked about their horses. We can all fall into that trap of starting a training session by thinking about the faults that need correcting rather than focusing on the positives that we enjoy. The riders were then invited to say just one thing that they would like to improve in the session.

We had a taste of things to come when Eric jumped onto his soapbox to rant about his loathing of the gag bit, its misuse and its implication in unsafe jumping techniques. This coach voices strong, but very well considered opinions and is totally unafraid to express honest, forthright views. His logical arguments however, always clearly on the horse's side, left everyone nodding in agreement.



I have always appreciated Eric as a thinking rider's coach but had no idea that he is also a talented stand-up comedian. The conversations that he had with his imaginary horse were pure class and his many anecdotes had all of us laughing out loud too. One such story went something like this: Eric had asked a top level Irish show jumper for some help and they were walking a track together. The rider was silent as they walked around, so Eric enquired when he was going to give him some help. The reply came, "To be sure, you can read the numbers, can't you?"



Key to the day was Eric's coaching philosophy and what he described as his "predictability"; he uses the same words, consistently in the same way, to deliver very simple messages. Some pearls of wisdom included:

- Think of impulsion as "available energy". If it's not there, you can't use it. If you can't get at it, you still can't use it!
- Don't ride corners, set up and look for strides to fences; ride a curve, then every stride becomes a balancing stride. Turns and set ups are an interruption to the arrival at the fence.
- Jump horses need to look "along a line". Allowing the horse onto the line can shave two seconds off your time and give the horse ten meters more thought processing time, which might be very valuable.
- In jumping, you only need three canters: short, middle and long.
- Focus on the approach and don't think about the jump. Improving the take-off or technique can only happen when the arrival is consistent.
- Giving the horse responsibility for the jump gives him confidence.
- "Don't talk to me about *bend* - that's nonsense! Talk about **straightness**" Bend is only to see if you can.
- "Suppleness" is a red herring. Horses are born supple. It's simply an indication that they accept and understand the rider's aids. It's about asking them to do what they do naturally.
- Forward, straight and regular. Nothing else is necessary [in eventing]. From 1.30m and onwards it will be necessary to develop the "vocabulary" needed for more challenging and technical tracks. Below that, just a quality canter is all that's needed.
- The concept of the "Scales of Training" confuses many riders. It is after all only progressive training! Instead, think about the "Riding Qualities" which are: Forward, Straight, Regular, Contact, Connection, Consistency. These are all **tangible** qualities. Live and ride them!



The horses that we watched throughout the day represented a wide range of abilities and experience, but Eric demonstrated a consistent approach, emphasising that the riders had to allow the horse to take responsibility for the jump and learn from his mistakes. The simple exercises were the same throughout and the riders were all challenged without any of the small fences being raised. This was a perfect example of coaching to achieve rider education in parallel to developing confidence in the horse.

Interesting, wide-ranging discussions during the day included the topic of why there are fewer entries at Badminton. The conundrum of how to create a safer sport at the top level has resulted in fewer riders being able to qualify and Eric described in detail the difficulties that rule makers face in devising a qualification system that gets the right combinations to the top events, thereby producing good images that promote the future of the sport.

Enjoy some golden moments in the chats that I recorded at the end of the day with first of all, some reflections on her day from Helen Martin, who is gearing up to tackle her first Badminton next month. No apologies for the sound quality - it was the end of a wet day and it was still WET! So, rain hammering down on my iPhone during the recording just transports you to the atmosphere of the day. The clip ends rather abruptly as I try to avoid dropping my phone in the lake-size puddle that was forming rapidly around us as we chatted. Second is a chat with Eric next to the roar of the gas powered space heater as we attempted to warm up and dry out. This chat is full of absolute gems and will *really* make you wish you had been there.

A huge thank you to Moores Farm for hosting the day and to Jude Murphy for doing such a sterling job of organising it all.

Eric has just published a new book which explains his down to earth approach to training: **Sport Horse Problem Solver**, which is available to buy from his website: <https://ericsmiley.co.uk/books/>



Every picture tells a story.....not even the inclement weather could dampen the enthusiasm, passion and animation clearly present in every session