

Riding isn't the only way to learn how to tackle a Grand Prix track.

by Ginger Freeman

Watching a Grand Prix is always exciting, but understanding how to create a plan for the course is particularly energizing. With a total of 22 entries, the \$35,000 CWD Wine Country Grand Prix was a fast-paced spectacle on November 4 at the Paso Robles Horse Park. There was rain off and on all weekend and with rain clouds looming dark in the sky, I walked the course with my two trainers, Matt and Lindsay Archer, who are both veteran Grand Prix riders. My trainer, Lindsay Archer, would be competing on the careful and quick mare, Enita, (owned by Rhys Farms), while Matt would help her with strategy and warming up.

At the start of our course walk, Matt told me that before crafting a plan for the course, a rider should assess the grade, type of footing and time allowed. We concluded that the arena's footing was in good shape, but with a downward-grade toward the in-gate and that the time allowed was moderately fast. Once addressing these secondary factors, he began creating a plan for the technical 14-jump course and eight-fence jump-off.

The first round started with a wide oxer bending to a tall vertical in seven or eight strides. Matt suggested doing eight strides because the next aspect of the course was an open six-stride line off a short turn. Following the open line stood an airy fence with two poles close together on the top and base. This jump is designed to draw the horse's eye level to the middle of the fence, urging them to drop their shoulder and jump through it.

It is especially important to raise your hand-eye level when approaching this fence. Next, the rider should look around the corner to a wide triple bar standing perpendicular to the airy fence. Once straight to the triple bar, prepare for a long gallop of nine or 10 strides to a short one-stride combination. After hopping through the combination, the best track was an efficient turn around the top of the ring, away from the in-gate, to an open five-stride vertical to an oxer line.

In the air over the oxer, the rider should shift their eye to the solid wall jump that would be

December 2017 - Walking & Watching

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Friday, 01 December 2017 00:51

approaching fast. In just seven strides from the out of the open line, you would have to get your horse back with left leg to right rein while simultaneously staying on the track. After jumping the wall, you would be at the top of the ring working to put curve in the horse's body to set up the short triple combination coming towards the in-gate. Following the gymnastic triple combination, the track continued on a bend to the final fence in seven strides. All of this had to be accomplished in just over 70 seconds.

Next we walked the jump-off track, with Matt and Lindsay considering the optimal plan of attack. The track needed to be optimized for a faster pace. They determined the plan for the jump-off was Fence 9 jumped right to left, one or two in a direct seven strides by bringing in the track. Then, just around the top of the ring to fences 3 and 4 in six strides. Although there was an option to do five strides in this line, you would have too strong of a horse on landing for the technical rollback to the short Fence 11A-B combination. Doing six strides in the line would allow for a tidy rollback to the combination, setting the horse on its haunches to jump up and over Fence 11A. The final aspect was a bending eight strides to Fence 12. Matt and I noticed this track did not have a lot of inside turn options and was more of a foot race, suggesting that horses with a low jump had a slight advantage because they could go faster. Though, the horses with a higher jump are often more careful.

Next, I located myself on the berm alongside the ring to see how the 22 riders would attack the course. During the one-hour class, it rained lightly a few times but luckily not enough to impact ring quality and all the careful plans the rider had developed. After watching all the riders execute the first round, and five in the jump off, I noticed a few themes for most of the horse and rider teams. For example, some riders had issues getting up the five stride line after the short combination, causing their horses to put in a big effort over the out of the line. Thus, making it difficult to get their horses back on landing for Fence 10. Additionally, riders had trouble fitting the short strides inside the triple combination, suggesting the downgrade of the arena played a part in their horse's big step.

Beyond my own observations, I interviewed Lindsay after her clear trip in the first round to get a better understanding of how the course rode. She told me that Enita was a little fresh which made it difficult for her to have control on course. In order to achieve her clear round with control, she had to ride in the moment and deal with the challenges that came up while simultaneously following her plan. This interview inspired me to never give up on a round, and reminds me that show jumping is a test of both determination and focus. In fact, most riders this day had a similar or even identical plan of execution for the course, but had completely different experiences in the moment. Having a plan for a course works like following a road map to get to a destination; the map can tell you which direction to go, but it cannot tell you what you will encounter on your journey.

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\$35,000 CWD Wine Country Grand Prix

1. Chakira & Rachel Fields
2. Cair Paravel & Bryna Finch Closson
3. Little Gancho & Marc Grock
4. Butterfly Tibri Z & Lindsay Corinne Douglass
5. Enita & Lindsay Archer
6. Cypress VF & Soehnke Theymann
7. Colicchio & Kenneth Vinther
8. Veronica & Patrick Seaton
9. VDL Groep Cyrano Z & Rachel Fields
10. Aimee 2 & Justin Prather
11. Bolero HX & Justin Prather
12. Fina & Moummar Nawafleh