

### ***Show Jumping chef d'equipe Robert Ridland gets an assist from Lakers' prime era.***

*by Alicia Jessop*

Children growing up in Los Angeles in the late 1960s through 1980s had no shortage of sports stars to admire, with Elgin Baylor, Wilt Chamberlain, Jerry West and Magic Johnson suiting up for the Los Angeles Lakers.

What may surprise some, though, is these superstars' impact on the leadership development of those outside of basketball.



The Lakers' success during the days of Baylor, Chamberlain, West and Johnson was punctuated by its ability to not rely on one player to win, but rather move the basketball around using teamwork to drive its offense.

Watching his basketball idols as a child in Pasadena, current U.S. Show Jumping Chef d'Equipe, Robert Ridland, found a coaching strategy that would make the U.S. Show Jumping team one of the best in the world.

"It all goes back to Jerry West and Elgin Baylor. I was a Lakers fan from the get-go. Magic Johnson was one of the greatest players of all-time, not because of what he did with the basketball, but because of how well he passed the ball. His teammates were better when he

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was on the floor,” Ridland remarked.

Taking the reins of U.S. Show Jumping in 2013, Ridland’s coaching methodology relies heavily on the teamwork emphasis he saw the Lakers successfully utilize. The method has arguably proven successful. In the last year alone the team earned nine FEI Nations Cup podium appearances out of 11 competitions. The U.S. is also the only team globally to medal in four consecutive championships: the 2014 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games, 2015 Continental Pan American Games, 2016 Olympic Games and 2017 Nation’s Cup, as well as be on the podium in the 2016 Nations Cup Final and have the reigning 2017 World Cup Finals Champion.

Ridland attributes much of this success to a strategy focused on mixing veteran riders with developing talent.

“We didn’t reach the good place we’re at with a small group of elite riders we called on all the time. The U.S. has the current World Cup Champion and the top two riders in the world ranking list. We easily could’ve called on them more times to achieve our record. That wasn’t our intention, though. We achieved nine first or second place Nations Cup finishes this year with 21 athletes and 30 horses. That was our intention from the beginning: to spread the load,” Ridland discussed.

Ridland’s strategy isn’t the norm for show jumping globally, where many top teams rely on a handful of experienced athletes to produce their success. Along with the recent notable finishes, however, the current strategy of the U.S. Show Jumping team will have another long-lasting effect: Strengthening the development system for the sport in the U.S.

“Thirty six-percent of the Nations Cup starts this year were from U25 athletes—athletes under the age of 25. That bodes incredibly well for our future. Several years ago I laid out my 3-2 plan, which is to pair up two young riders with three veterans for as many Nations Cups as we can. In developing this plan, I had the analogy of the Lakers’ success in mind; to me, the best way of developing young basketball players isn’t so much a development league, but pairing the star young players with a player like Kobe Bryant. You’re going to have a much greater chance at sinking the basket when someone gets you the pass at the right time. We’ve been doing that the last few years by pairing our elite riders with our top up-and-coming riders. I’ve always believed success begins with success and builds on it,” Ridland said.

### Pathway To Top is Delineated

To execute this strategy, Ridland arguably rose in U.S. Show Jumping leadership at the right time, as the sport's American development system is in its most established position to date.

"There aren't very clear ways to get to the top of the sport, but in the last two-years, the U.S. Equestrian Federation has been keen to properly articulate the pathway of three clear levels: Emerging, Development and Elite. U.S. Equestrian has worked closely with the U.S. Hunter Jumper Association on competitions and programs (emerging) at the grassroots level that are growing hugely across the U.S. At the top end of the sport, when you go back to 2010, there was one five-star level event and 38 recognized international events in the U.S. Next year, there will be 13 five-star events and 61 internationally recognized events," U.S. Equestrian's Director of Sport, Will Connell, said.

The emerging and development programs and growing recognition of the U.S. as a force to compete with in show jumping is generating competition and fundraising benefits for the team. "The landscape in the sport has so changed from the way it was back when I was a competitor. In the past, we had a lot of young riders, but you had to dive off of the cliff into a big pool right at the start of your career, and sink or swim. Now, we have much more extensively developed programs from a competition standpoint that enhance opportunities for young riders, which are consistent with the rest of the world," Ridland remarked.

The U.S. Show Jumping team is looking to next achieve success in the FEI World Equestrian Games Tryon 2018 and the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games. From a sponsorship standpoint, the team finds there is no better time to be aligned with the sport.

"The team's successes put us in a great position. We've been building off of the outstanding results that we've seen to create energy behind our fan base. We've put a real focus on our social and digital aspects, making it a priority to stay on the cutting edge of that. We are seeing a lot of growth with our younger audiences through this focus," said U.S. Equestrian's chief marketing officer, Vicki Lowell.

The United States Equestrian Team Foundation recently launched its fundraising campaign for

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the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, but notes that it has seen an “incredible increase in the number of supporters” over the last three years. “American programs are funded by the amazing generosity of donors who give through the U.S. Equestrian Team Foundation. This support shows people recognize what Robert [Ridland] is providing on the field of play. The support for the U.S. team is heartfelt across the spectrum,” Connell remarked.

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