

Interview with Stephen Bradley on Conditioning for the Training Three Day
May 4, 2009

Stephen Bradley is a longtime upper level competitor and an active supporter of the Training Level Three Day Event (T3DE). He represented the United States in the 1992 Olympics and won the Burghley CCI**** in 1993. He won the Rolex Kentucky CCI***in 1996, and has had multiple top-ten finishes at the Rolex CCI****. He also was a member of the United States gold medal-winning team at the 2003 Pan American Games. He has coached several students to the T3DE, including one winner of the Waredaca T3DE's Best Conditioned award.

Board of Governors member and Chair of the T3DE Committee Cindy DePorter and adult amateur rider and T3DE Committee member Anastasia Curwood spoke with Stephen recently on properly conditioning for the T3DE.

AC: What do you think the T3DE can teach about conditioning?

SB: Given the right input from the right people, adult amateurs and young competitors can get their first formal education about getting a horse fit. In this day and age a lot of people do not go foxhunting, which was where many have learned in the past about maintaining fitness. Thus they need a more formal introduction to conditioning for a competition.

AC: What is the main difference in conditioning when stepping up to a T3DE?

SB: First and foremost, people need to remember when stepping up this next level, that you cannot properly get a horse fit in the ring doing dressage and showjumping only. Those skills are still integral. However, to get the horses fit they need to get out in the fields on trot sets, and up and down hills.

I consider myself very old school in my fitness program, because it has worked with upper-level and young horses, even in the new [short] format. I still use trot sets and hill work up to the intermediate level, and require them of my students.

CD: That's how I learned. What do people need to understand about this kind of conditioning?

SB: Long trots are very important. They put the base, the foundation of the fitness work, on the horse. The horses start the year building up to 30-40 minutes of trotting before competitions. It does not hurt their legs to do so much trotting. Up hills is also easier on their legs— working uphill does not subject the legs to as much concussion and helps strengthen hind ends and backs. Trotting more collected or more slowly down the hills is important for young horses learning self-carriage and for the rider's education.

CD: Which age group of horses does this kind of conditioning?

SB: Every one of my horses over four years old goes out on long trot sets two days per week. The four year olds will trot hills at least a couple of days a week. This is beneficial not only for physical fitness and building muscles, toplines, and self carriage. It is also mentally important for horses to get out of the ring, and is important for riders.

CD: When do you start your conditioning program?

SB: I try to be extremely regimented about conditioning. Going on the assumption that the horse has had time off, it should come back into work no fewer than 3 months before the first show. My schedule easily starts two or three months before the horse goes to its first competition. I'll have the schedule written out in advance. I work backward from the competition in deciding their program.

AC: What basic conditioning should a Novice/Training Level Horse have, and can you compare that to a horse preparing to do a T3DE?

SB: A Novice or Training horse going to horse trials needs to be able to go out and trot for 30 minutes on hills, though not necessarily nonstop. They can do two fifteen-minute trots or three ten-minute trots. They should be comfortable with a rider on their backs for an hour, including walking breaks. The horse getting ready for the T3DE, about a month out from the competition, needs to be comfortable going out for at least an hour to an hour and 15 minutes and doing 40-45 minutes of trotting, again not necessarily all at once.

CD: Do you add any canters or gallops?

SB: Yes, and remember that every horse is different. I primarily deal with American Thoroughbreds. Horses that are warmbloods or have some draft will need to canter more often.

Generally, my students canter one day / week. A horse trials would be considered their canter for that week, if they are competing at one. The first canters are done well before starting to show, and they begin with as little as three one-minute canters. This is gradually increased to three three-minute canters every five or six days to compete in horse trials. While they are competing in horse trials, they will increase to three four-minute canters. And for the last three or so canters they will bump up their last 30 seconds of cantering to SC speed (520 meters per minute). I have a track at my farm marked off with distances, but many of my students work at home. Therefore, I tell them to wheel or do what they can to mark off the distances so that they can recognize 450, 520, or 350 meters per minute.

CD: When would you start doing canter work if you were looking at an October date for a T3DE?

SB: First, I must say it is important that the horse has a spring season, and then a summertime break, not necessarily a full let down, before beginning to compete again in the fall. Try not to let the season go on and on all summer. Hopefully, you can get your qualifications done in the spring so you are not in the hurry to qualify in the fall. After a spring season of horse trials, allow the horse a short break, such as 2 weeks off in July, or being ponied, or being ridden three times per week. Then, assuming you have competed earlier in the year, fitness will be carried in large part into the fall season. Around August 1 they need to be building up to 30 minutes of trotting again. They do not need to be cantering intervals that early, but showjumping and cross-country schools count as

canters for Training level horses. Begin your canters or competitions again starting in early October.

CD: How important is the quality of the footing during conditioning?

SB: I typically try to stay on the best footing possible. I don't have experience with deliberately trying to use hard ground in conditioning work. There are times when you have to compete in less than ideal or wet conditions, so within reason do your daily fitness work in less than ideal footing or wet footing too. Still, exercise good judgment when the going is too heavy. Also consider the soil—Virginia clay will get heavy when wet, but other locations with sand-based footing can be great in wet weather.

CD: What training should a rider add for the Steeplechase?

SB: I think that, if the rider has a trainer available, and hopefully they are riding with somebody knowledgeable, they should do a Steeplechase school. It definitely helps the student learn to ride at a good pace down to a jump, and what do if a horse peeks or chips, or changes their balance, along with how to ride the turns and help the horse gallop quickly around a turn.

They can also take advantage of a school at the T3DE. Even if they have practiced it before, the more practice the better. We all have nerves at competition, and having another set of eyes giving you a couple of comments on what they see will be helpful. The helpers are educated horsemen, and one or two comments from them can help a rider make a few changes to help on the endurance day.

AC: How should a rider care for the horse while training for a T3DE?

SB: It's very, very important to know your horse's eating habits, personality, and legs. By running your hands down each leg before beginning any hard work, you will know how they should feel. It also never hurts to call the veterinarian to pull blood and get a CBC (Complete Blood Count), to have the horse jog for the vet, and have the vet examine the legs. If anything comes up, your vet has a baseline, and you as a rider have a baseline.

Also, I understand that many adult amateurs board their horses, so that's where you need to communicate with the barn manager or trainer and know where things are at. Find out if your horse has been eating and behaving normally. Then, every day before you get on, run your hands down the legs and look for any filling or swelling. This is general horsemanship, whether for horse trials or the T3DE.

It never hurts, if you have ice or whirlpool boots, to use them after a gallop or cross-country school. It is time consuming, so it is not always practical. Consider your horse's background when making decisions— if you have an older horse that has been around the block, he will need more attention than a young horse. Not that a young horse should not get good care, but this becomes even more important as a horse gets older.

Finally, give your horse as much turnout as possible. There is nothing better for their legs than just walking and moving around. If they need to be wrapped or poulticed for some reason, you might need to keep them in overnight. But all of my horses spend most

of their lives outside. My advanced horses are not turned out with others, but they do go out. It is the best thing for their brains.

Cindy: What do you do during the week before a three-day event?

SB: I always work my way backward to set up my schedule. I'll assume that I want to get to the event on Tuesday, in time for the jog and briefings on Wednesday. I like to be there and prepared and comfortable on the grounds, and not be rushed. If the event is under five hours away, on the Friday beforehand I will do my last jumping school. Then on Saturday I will school dressage, on Sunday I will do my last long trot before the event, and on Monday I will do my last gallop. If I have to travel five or more hours, I will push this schedule back a day so the horse has an easy day on the Monday before traveling.

CD: What do you recommend doing to let the horse down after the event?

SB: Once my goal for a horse is met for the year, I try to give at least a month, if not longer, off. Again, I turn out as much as possible. As long as they have turnout, they do not need lots of let-down work. I try to groom them since the horses expect it as part of their routine. I might ride 2-3 days/ week or pony them for a couple of weeks and then transition them into turnout only.

AC: What basic fitness level should a T3DE rider have?

SB: This depends on the particular rider. Are they young and doing other sports? Or are they somebody who sits at a desk all day? If they are at a desk all day, they need to do something outside of riding to help their fitness and be very aware of their fitness. Everybody is an individual, but even if its going out for a long walks, something cardiovascular needs to be done. Also, as we get older, this becomes more important. I've noticed that as I have gotten older, when recovering from injuries I have to be very aware of my fitness when I start riding and competing again.

AC and CD: We've asked all of our questions. Would you like to add anything?

SB: Yes, one final thing. The bottom line is that in all of this, people have to use common sense. Everybody knows their horse probably better than anyone else, including their trainer. When you are figuring out your schedule, or dealing with bad or wet weather, be flexible and use your common sense and judgment. If you have questions, call someone you respect and say, "I'm stuck—can you help me out?"

Anastasia and Cindy would like to thank Stephen for taking time out of his very busy schedule to let us interview him for this series of Training Three Day Articles. Stephen has been a long time supporter of the T3D and graciously donates his time at Waredaca for the last five years doing cross-country walks for the competitors. His dedication to the sport at this level is a testament to his commitment in assisting adults in becoming true horsemen.