

LITTLE BOOK OF  
**BADMINTON**

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First published in the UK in 2013

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Printed and bound in Europe

ISBN 978-1-782815-21-1

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# Introduction

**B**adminton is famous for two things: the shuttlecock game first played in the hall of the house and the world famous Horse Trials. *Little Book of Badminton* is about the latter. Badminton is one of the great sporting events in Britain, and draws crowds of up to 150,000 over the four days of competition in early May each year. It is situated at the Duke of Beaufort's estate on the Gloucestershire and Wiltshire borders and has been run since 1949. There have been just one or two cancellations in that time, when either the weather or foot and mouth disease has put paid to the competition.



*Badminton today*

Badminton is the pinnacle of the sport of Three Day Eventing, which will be explained in more detail in the next chapter. In basic terms it is the test of all round horsemanship in three phases, with the rider on the same horse for all of these.

About 80 of the top horse/rider combinations in the world take part, and in terms of difficulty and challenge it supersedes the Olympic Games. The most popular day is Cross Country day, when the competitors tackle a fearsome four-mile course with over 30 solid and varied jumps.

As the numbers suggest it is a very spectator-friendly event, where children and dogs are welcome (the latter, and sometimes the former, on leads). There are also over 300 tented trade stands with 500 outlets, to cater for almost all shopping needs.

In *Badminton Revisited* (JR Books 2009) I gave a very personal account of the famous Trials. *Little Book of Badminton* is designed to be a pocket book containing history, profiles of some of the stars and people who make it all happen, how it has changed over the years, and how to enjoy it best as a fan or spectator. For obvious reasons the basic historical facts of both books are what they are, but the approach to my favourite subject is very different, and should be seen as a companion volume to those who have my first book on the subject, but more importantly a one-stop information repository for those who want to know what lies behind one of the world's great annual sporting 'Events'.



*Badminton past*

# What is a Horse Trial?

The sport of Horse Trials, also known as Eventing, has its origins in the old cavalry schools of Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. It was once described by American general, Tupper Cole as 'A military event based on the duty of the officer courier who got through, or died.'

For the many centuries that horses were the main military form of transport, the need for correct training was imperative. As far back as 365 BC Xenophon wrote, 'As there will, doubtless, be times when the horse will need to race downhill and uphill and on sloping ground; times also, when he will need to leap across an obstacle, or take a flying leap from off a bank, or jump down from a height, the rider must teach and train himself and his horse to meet all emergencies. In this way the two will have a chance of saving each other.'

There were three distinctive attributes that had to be trained for, and which eventually became the basis of the competition to test this training.

First was the need to have the horse under control. If the rider couldn't achieve the basics of stop, start, left and right, a glorious, but futile death would be assured. This part of training has taken the name Dressage, which in its most elevated form is a type of ballet on horseback. Some of the more sophisticated moves, as demonstrated by the Spanish Riding School in Vienna are in fact battle manoeuvres. The Levade, where the horse stands on its hind legs, protected the rider from a thrusting sword, and the Courbette, where the horse leaps into the air and kicks back, was designed to boot the opponent off his horse.



*A Cavalry history*

The second attribute needed was bravery and skill across country, as Xenophon described. For this, horses had to learn to trust their riders and the riders needed to train their horses to be fit for a long day's battle or march.

Finally the riders had to balance the need for speed and daring, with the responsibility to make sure they still had a sound animal to ride the following day.



*Italian Cavalry test*

The French can probably claim to have staged the first recognisable competitive three day event. In 1902 the Championnat du Cheval d'Armes was staged, for officers only. The obligatory set Dressage test, which was ridden on the first day, was a fairly simple one, but extra points could be gained in the optional reprise libre, or free style. Some took this more seriously than others; suffice it to say that the overall winner of this stage offered a move known as shoulder in, serpentines up the arena, sideways canter, 180 degree turns on the back legs and also the front legs. In the canter he got the horse to lead with alternate legs, did the on the spot knees up movement, the Piaffe, then did it going backwards, did the Spanish walk forwards and backward, and finally a backwards canter.



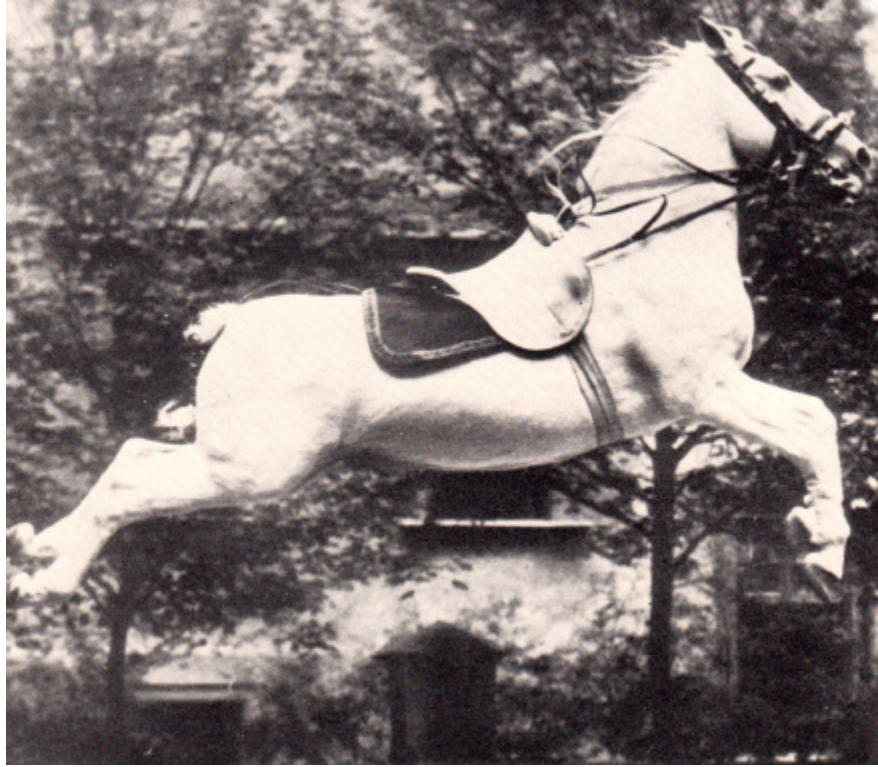
### *Military Trick Riding*

Unsurprisingly to the British, more used to racing and hunting, this over keen interest in Dressage was described thus: 'The prevalent notion of the Continental horseman was somebody who spent his time bumming around an arena teasing his horse.' (Col. Hope, *The Horse Trials Story*).

It is the Cross Country phase which distinguishes Eventing from other equestrian sports. For both horse and rider the learning needs to start at a very novice level, with best results achieved when one part of the combination acts as school master to the other. An experienced rider will help a novice horse, and a well trained horse will give a novice rider confidence.

The earliest report of Cross Country jumping instruction is that of the cavalry of King Charles XI of Sweden as they schooled over natural fences in 1688 to the instruction of the riding manual: 'When jumping a fence the rider will grab the mane, close his eyes and shout "Hey".'

The sport has had many names in its relatively short history. Until the 1980s it was still referred to on the continent as 'Le Militaire', although it had been open to civilians for many years. The military influence was still in evidence as late as 1981 when the main committee of the British Horse Society included no fewer than two generals, 13 colonels and 13 majors. The French have described it as 'L'épreuve au fond', the deepest test. The Swiss called it 'Gebrauchspferdeprüfungen' and in Britain it was known somewhat prosaically as 'Combined Training', and its current alternative name, 'Horse Trials'.



*The Courbette*

Eventing has been an Olympic sport since Stockholm in 1912. (It was suggested for London in 1908, but never materialised). The format took many years to settle into the sport we know today. Competitors would go one at a time, with three or four minute intervals between each one. The Stockholm event was open to chargers and consisted of five tests over four days. This was the schedule: Saturday - Roads and Tracks Endurance (50km), Cross Country (5km); Monday - Steeplechase (3km); Tuesday - Show Jumping; Wednesday - Dressage.



*Cross Country*

The Games resumed after the Great War at Antwerp in 1920. Here there was no Dressage phase at all but two Endurance sections. Day one involved 45km Roads and Tracks and 5km Cross Country, followed by a day off. Then came a 20km Roads and Tracks followed by a 4km Steeplechase, another day off and finally the Show Jumping.

At Paris in 1924 the order we know now was introduced, but with days off between phases. The number of competitors made the Dressage stretch over two days followed by a bye day, then Roads and Tracks and Cross Country with a total distance of 36km, another bye day and finally Show Jumping. It is now universal that Dressage takes two days at the big events and there are no days off between, instigated at Amsterdam in 1928. From this date the anomaly that Three Day Events last for four days was born.



*Dressage*

As explained, Eventing started as a male, military, officer only sport, but now it is one of very few sports in which everyone – of any sex, rank and age – competes on the same terms. Before World War II, however, when it was still officer only, the Germans promoted their top rider Capt. Stubendorff, from the other ranks, so that he could ride in the Berlin Games, allowing him to take gold on Nurmi.

The next Games after the war were in London in 1948. This competition held on land between the two army towns of Aldershot and Sandhurst was the catalyst which would lead first to the inaugural Badminton and then to an explosion of interest in the sport. It paved the way for Britain to become the Eventing centre of the world. In its post war infancy the sport became less widespread and The International Federation has succeeded over time to open it up to new emerging countries to join the established European, Antipodean and American participants. Many international riders, however, either base themselves in

Britain, or spend some time here to take advantage of a well developed sport.

In a rather peculiar way the sport was created at elite level and has spread downwards. After the first Badminton in 1949, it was sensibly decided that some form of warm up competitions might be a good idea. The first public one day event was run by a stalwart of the British equestrian world, Henry Wynmalen on 29th March 1950. Britain now has five major three day events, Badminton, Burghley, Blenheim, Bramham and Blair Castle, and over 175 one day versions, spanning levels from advanced to tiny starter classes which are mainly patronised by hobby riders.

The scoring system is somewhat arcane. The Dressage test, rather like compulsory figures in ice skating, is performed in an arena in front of a judge or panel of judges, depending on the grade of competition. There are different routines for each level involving walking, trotting, halting, cantering in circles, serpentines, diagonals and a salute to the judge at the start and finish. The positive marks for each movement are then converted to a penalty, so the lowest score is the stage leader.

In Three Day Events the Cross Country comes next. The Endurance sections of Roads and Tracks and Steeplechase began to be phased out in 2005, and were gone by 2006, so riders now set off on a course of up to 6,840m which will include about 30 numbered jumps, some in combinations of two or three on a turn or down a dip. Unlike racing, the jumps change with each running and can include rails, logs, gates, walls, ponds and brush fences. These jumps don't knock down. Penalties are given for a refusal of the horse to jump, and elimination will occur with three stops at a single fence. In the past the old and bold used to remount after a fall and continue as a matter of pride. Safety concerns now mean a fall also means elimination. There is also an optimum time to complete the course, and penalties for going over it.

In the spirit of animal welfare, all the horses still in the competition get checked over before they are passed to take on the final Show Jumping. This is the phase which tests that the riders have left enough petrol in the tank to 'fight another day'. These coloured poles do knock down, and to keep tension right to the end, it is the overnight leader who jumps last. Many a big event has been lost in that final round as a pole hits the floor.

One of Eventing's unique aspects is that it takes both competitors and organisers to fabulous parts of the countryside which would only otherwise be accessible by following hounds. Indeed the early competitors, when not from the army, tended to come from the hunting field.

The atmosphere is very friendly, as the sport relies on a large number of volunteers. Each jump on the Cross Country phase has a judge who will mark any faults. There are collecting ring stewards, commentators, grooms, score collectors and sport representatives.

The sport used to be the preserve of thoroughbred horses, but various cross breeds have been successful at the top level. At the more 'fun rider' level almost any breed will do. Children can get a taste of the sport at the national network of Pony Clubs, who run junior versions of the adult sport, though in recent years young riders on ponies have taken on the lower levels of the affiliated sport.

Turnout is important at all levels, and at the advanced end the Dressage uniform is top hat, cutaway tail coat and buff waistcoat. For Cross Country, riders choose their colour schemes for the shirt which will be worn with a body protector, and a silk covering for their crash hat. For the Jumping, a fitted jacket will be worn with a specialised Show Jumping helmet.