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Coaching Pentathletes: World-Class Riders and More

BY ANNE LANG



In Athens, the pentathletes that Colonel John Russell coaches will face somewhat smaller fences than the ones he conquered at the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, Finland, riding Democrat on the first civilian US Equestrian Team's jumper squad.

HERE'S AN OLD ADAGE ABOUT sports in America, says US Pentathlon Team coach Colonel John Russell: "If you can't throw it or kick it, forget it." For almost fifty years, however, the two-time Olympian and former career Army officer, now eighty-four, has been making the case for why a sport that doesn't entail throwing or kicking anything—modern pentathlon, whose origins can be traced to the ancient Greek Olympics—deserves to be supported and promoted, not forgotten.

The original five-event Greek pentathlon (long jump, discus throw, 200-meter dash, javelin throw, and 1500-meter run) was created as a test of the versatility and athleticism of military messengers. The modern pentathlon (riding, shooting, swimming, running, and fencing) retained military overtones when it was introduced at the Olympics of 1912—the first Olympic games to include equestrian sports. In that era, most members of world-class equestrian teams were military officers. (Not until 1950, the year after the US Army disbanded its horse cavalry, was the first

civilian US Equestrian Team formed.)

When Colonel Russell—a member of both the last US Army and first civilian USET Olympic show-jumping squads—took over as Officer in Charge of the pentathlon team in 1956, the sport was "pretty rough," he says. "For the equestrian phase, you rode cross-country about 2.5 miles, over fences almost 3 feet 9 inches high, on a horse you'd never seen before and had only twenty minutes to get to know."

Fence heights have increased to 4 feet during Colonel Russell's nearly five decades of coaching, and the course of sixteen jumps is now laid out in an arena, but the horses are still unfamiliar—the country hosting the Games provides them. And riders still have only twenty minutes to try out their mounts before entering the ring. Each competitor begins the round with a score of 1200 and loses points for each lowered rail and for exceeding the time allowed.

The unique aspect of riding in the pentathlon is that, challenging though it may be, it's only one of five sports in which the athletes need to excel—and

natural talent in other phases may be more important to success. "If you can't run or swim well, you're probably not going to make it," Colonel Russell says. "We look for runners and swimmers first; then we can usually teach them the 'skill' sports [riding, shooting, and fencing]." However, he adds, learning to ride can be daunting for athletes already accomplished in other phases: "A world-class runner or swimmer comes on board for pen-

entathlon training, gets on a horse for the first time, and feels helpless!" Interestingly, he's found that Pony Club experience can be helpful preparation for the demands of pentathlon: "Pony Club even has an event called tetrathlon, in which competitors run, swim, shoot, and ride."

Training for international pentathlon competition is a full-time occupation. This year's Olympic pentathletes trained in riding and running at Colonel Russell's Russell Equestrian Center in San Antonio, Texas, and worked on their shooting, swimming, and fencing at other facilities nearby. The Equestrian Center keeps "a broad mixture" of horses—most of them donated to the program—to accustom team members to riding many types.

Although the host country's pentathletes have the "home-court advantage" of familiarity with the horses to be used in competition, Colonel Russell does have ways to provide his team members with some advance information about their equine partners. Coaches can watch as competition horses are ridden for an international jury several days before team members draw for their mounts; at that time, he and Shane Brasher (who shares coaching and supervisory duties with him at the Equestrian Center) videotape the



Colonel Russell today at his Equestrian Center in San Antonio, Texas.

rides and take notes about the horses. And in the event itself, most of the horses are used more than once, "so you might have a chance to see another rider go on the horse before it's your turn."

US pentathletes have brought home medals from the 2000 Olympics (women's silver) and the 2003 Pan Am Games (men's gold and silver, women's gold and bronze). They won the World Team Championship in 2000 and claimed two gold medals in the 1999

Pan Am Games.

Colonel Russell thinks that the current Olympic team—Vahagashvili; his wife, Mary Beth Larsen-Iagoashvili; Chad Senior; and Anita Allen—have a good chance to win medals in Athens. He's proud of their riding: "They could ride with a lot of show jumpers today, and a lot of show-jumping people wouldn't want to ride the kind of horses these guys ride." But his optimism is tempered by consciousness that pentathlon remains an obscure sport in the US while its popularity is "booming" in such very competitive countries as Hungary—"Pentathlon is the national sport there"—Russia, China, and Mexico.

Because of the sport's low profile here, Colonel Russell says, "Getting adequate funding is always a dilemma. Other countries' teams are supported a lot better than we are." Pentathlon does receive some funds from the US Olympic Committee. And corporate sponsors—including a major shoe company—are slowly starting to come on board for the US team.

While hoping that enthusiasm for pentathlon outside the US will raise the sport's profile at home, Colonel Russell continues to enjoy the basic satisfactions of his coaching role: "taking a good athlete, making that athlete world-class, and seeing him or her win against the best." **FH**