



## February 2020 Update from U.S. Eventing Performance Director Erik Duvander

The Olympic year of 2020 has now arrived and our team is firstly working towards our remaining selection trials – Land Rover Kentucky Three-Day Event CCI5\*-L, Badminton Horse Trials CCI5\*-L and Jersey Fresh International Three-Day Event CCI4\*-L – and our preparation is well on its way. I arrived in the U.S. in the first week of January to travel around to our athletes to work with them and go through their submitted Individual Performance Plan (IPP). I am very pleased to see how well all the horses have come out of the previous season, and after a break they are all looking stronger and more mature. The athletes are very focused and working on the areas of improvement as outlined in their IPP. We have 13 athletes and 15 horses on our Elite and Pre-Elite training list, but I have also worked with a few athletes outside this list who are also Olympic possibilities. It is a very open book as to who will go to Tokyo, so it is up to the athletes to make sure they use every available day to make their improvements and put on the best performance at the selection trials.

In mid-January, Tamie Smith, Frankie Thieriot Stutes and I went to Coachella Valley, California to put on an exhibition for our team sponsor, Land Rover, at their 4xFAR Festival. Land Rover turned the launch of their new vehicles into a two-day experiential event with live music and 35 daily hosted events and workshops. It was the most unusual environment to bring our horses to, but Tamie and Frankie did a super job of showing what an event athlete does in their daily work on the flat and jumping with me on the mic. It always surprises me when people who have no idea about horses spontaneously applaud when the horses do something well. It also shows that we can always look for more ways to promote our sport and get people onboard to support us. We did, however, bring two miniature ponies named Justin Bieber and Dragon and a mini donkey named Donkey in case we did not pull a crowd. But we did!

While I wasn't able to attend the USET Foundation's Take Me To Tokyo gala due to being in California for the 4xFAR Festival, more than 500 people attended in support of our U.S. Olympic teams. I am told Bonnie Jenkins and her team threw a super party – headlined by Bruce Springsteen! Contributions to the USET Foundation directly support the grant we receive each year to fund the Eventing High Performance Program, and we are grateful to all the donors who support the program.

Straight from the 4xFAR Festival, I flew to Liverpool in England to participate in an unofficial annual meeting for all CCI5\*-L course designers. Every year they come together with a few athletes and coaches to talk about the designing of each course and the learnings from the event. I have been fortunate to be invited for the last six years and find it to be a time of useful conversations and sharing of opinion to keep developing our sport in the right direction. The knowledge in the group is at the highest level, and I was pleased to see a few FEI Eventing Committee members invited this year too to hear real and honest conversation from all. I believe these meetings are what our sport needs to stay healthy. Following this was a two-day FEI Eventing Risk Management Seminar and Forum. David O'Conner did a great job hosting this with great presentations and good conversations around safety in our sport and its future. It was a high turnout with about 150 people there representing most nations involved in eventing. It did feel like an opportunity for all voices in the sport to be heard.





In the first week of February, we gathered all our athletes and East Coast horses in Wellington, Florida for start-of-year evaluations. Our Team Vet, Dr. Susan Johns, spent two days evaluating the horses having already seen the horses based in California. She confirmed that all of the horses are in great shape. Our Team Farrier, Steve Teichman, was also in Wellington to look at the horses to ensure we are going into the year in the best possible way. All of our athletes also had an assessment from Andy Thomas. Andy is a very skilled and experienced Performance Biomechanics Analyst and works across all disciplines. We are putting more emphasis on the work Andy can do for our athletes this year, and he has put a plan together for each athlete and will do multiple follow-ups leading into the Olympics.

It is always tricky to get our full squad together in one place, but I believe it is important to have a time where athletes can speak and connect as a group. We held a team meeting in Wellington and had David Vos do a presentation on safety in cross country riding from the research he has done for the FEI. David's scientific research on speed and distance to a fence, combined with the horsemanship and practical experience from the group, should be a good combination of knowledge to ride efficient and fast in the cross country but in a safer manner. Dr. Johns and Andy also spoke about their thoughts on best practices leading into Tokyo. We also covered the Olympics, preparation for the remaining selection trials, improvements and new initiatives in the High Performance program, and the athletes put forward the standards they will be working within as a team.

Many of our athletes also competed in the \$50,000 MARS Equestrian Eventing Showcase that weekend in Wellington. I personally have never attended an eventing showcase before, as I have been a bit old school on this subject. However, I thought I should have an open mind to it, and I was given the opportunity to be involved in shaping its format. The venue at the Palm Beach International Equestrian Center is truly fantastic, and the surfaces are world class. It was a great opportunity for the athletes to ride the new CCI5\*-L dressage test that will be used at Kentucky and Badminton. I believe they all learned a lot from putting themselves in front of two of the Olympic judges, Nick Burton and Jane Hamlin, and next time I expect the tests to be more polished. The show jumping designed by Andy Christiansen was up to height for this time of year and also a good test to find out any holes that need to be addressed moving forward. I believe the cross country designed by Capt. Mark Phillips had the right length and difficulty for the level of fitness the horses hold at this stage of their build up. The weather was great, the cross country was exciting to watch, and it looked like the spectators were having a very good time. I would like to thank MARS Equestrian, Ocala Horse Properties and Wellington Equestrian Realty for putting on a lovely party for owners, grooms and athletes. I have changed my mind about eventing showcases after a super useful week in Wellington.

We have also expanded Developing Coach Leslie Law's program this year, and he has been traveling around working with the Development squad athletes and going through their IPP. I believe with this new system the athletes will benefit more than just turning up for a clinic. Leslie has so much knowledge and experience that you can't tap into in a clinic. It is, however, always up to the athletes to drive their own success and always ask the right questions. As they say, "Curious athletes makes the best competitors."



The selection for the Emerging Athlete Eventing 25 program has also changed and is now a two-day assessment of the athletes in person and on a horse before the final list of participants is named. Leslie held assessment sessions in Aiken, South Carolina and Temecula, California, and two sessions in Ocala, Florida. Both Karen O’Conner and Bobby Costello participated at the majority of the assessments representing the Performance Advisory Team (PAT). The sessions were also filmed and closely evaluated by the rest of the PAT members. The feedback from the athletes has been very good, and it is great to see such a talented group of athletes in the 25 and under age group.

I would also encourage athletes who are interested in being members of future U.S. teams and are not part of any training lists to put their names forward for the USEF Futures Team Challenge at Carolina International. This is an added pathway for athletes to be talent spotted and get a sense of what it is like to be part of a High Performance structure and competing on a team. It is a very important learning curve to go from being an individual athlete to working as a team. We are also holding a second Futures Challenge at Galway Downs in Temecula, California in the autumn, which will be the first time the program expands to the West Coast.

We are now into an intense competition schedule. I will be attending an event every weekend and fitting in as many training days with our athletes as possible. All our athletes have very good personal trainers, and they will be working closely with them to keep improving their performance.

We are no more than nine weeks away from Kentucky, and two weeks later we have Badminton and Jersey Fresh. Everyone on the USEF staff is 100 percent committed to all our athletes. We have very exciting times ahead for us as a team. It will in the end be a measure of the character of our athletes who will succeed in the Olympic selection. As John Wooden said, “Sports do not build character. They reveal it.”

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Leslie".