

► BETWEEN ROUNDS WITH:

## JEREMY STEINBERG

### The Idea Of Fair Sport

*Our columnist sees the exclusive nature of equestrian sports as a threat to their future with the Olympic Games.*

**W**ith the 2016 Rio Olympic Games (Brazil) just a year away, the hype is starting. The ad campaigns are running; the qualifying competitions are beginning, and the feeling in the air is sweeping us up as it does. It's magical.

When I was young, I used to dream of competing in the Olympics, as many kids do. The older I get, the more this dream, in realistic terms, drifts further and further from my thoughts. As life progresses, priorities and responsibilities change, and things seem to run their own organic course. Nevertheless, the dream is still there, as it is for many of us.

I remember being glued to the TV for the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles when the U.S. men's dream team won the gold in gymnastics. It was also the same year Mary Lou Retton won the women's all-around and scored those perfect 10s on the floor exercises and vault. At that time I dreamed of being a gymnast. I could see myself right there with Bart Conner or Mitch Gaylord; they were awesome, and they were tangible.

In 1988 I was still mesmerized by the Olympic gymnastics, but this time it was the Soviet Union that was winning the men's gold. I started riding in between the 1984 and 1988 Games, and by 1988, I was following the dressage medals as well. I started to realize a gymnastics start at the Olympics was not in the cards for me, but the possibility of riding a horse and competing on that front became my new focus. I heard talk of the U.S. riders, knew people who knew them, and for the

first time it started to feel possible. By 1992, it was definitely a possibility, and I was doing everything in my life to make it happen someday. It drove me and pushed me and was something I wanted more than anything. I still do.

#### Olympic Evolution

The modern Olympic Games were based on the idea of an amateur athlete who competed and showcased his skills against other amateur athletes from around the world. Over the years, many adaptations have been made based on political, economic and technological advancements, bringing the Games into a more professional-based athletic endeavor fit for the modern world.

We now have full-time sponsored athletes, more and more global competitions, and far more international media coverage, bringing the Olympics to a wider audience and making the dream possible for more people—as well as making it a huge business in and of itself.

Simply put, it's adapt or perish when it comes to Olympic inclusion. The equestrian competition was long held by the military and only included men. This was one of those changes that was inevitably going to happen, and by 1952, civilian men and women were allowed to compete. If the equestrian sports hadn't opened their doors beyond the military, they would have ceased to remain in the Games.

Equestrian is one of the few Olympic sports where men and women compete equally as it's not a test of strength, size, power or speed, but one more of finesse and of the horse. Not that the human isn't an athlete, but it's the horse's ability, talent and strength that is more on trial. It's probably one of the most special things about our sport and one that deserves a huge amount of emphasis. In playing that up, however, we have to agree that



Olympic gold medalist performances like Reiner Klimke and Ahlerich in 1984 (left) and Charlotte Dujardin and Valegro in 2012 (right) give young riders something to dream about—but our columnist worries about how much longer equestrian sports will realistically remain in the Olympic Games.

the horse does play a very large role in the equation and is probably the larger contender of the pair.

#### An Un-Level Playing Field

When I stepped down as the USEF Youth Coach I was frustrated with a lot of things. I saw more and more kids being “produced” into top riders and talk of becoming a top rider based on purchasing or leasing a trained horse or one that is destined for an Olympic start. So many of the kids I worked with wanted to become future Olympians, which is a fantastic thing, but they were also told that the only way for that to happen was to find a sponsor and buy an expensive and special horse. They always looked to their role models, many of which, *but not all*, were doing the same thing and securing spots on Olympic teams time and time again on horses purchased for them by sponsors just so they could compete at the Games.



KAT NETZLER PHOTO

Over the last few years since the 2012 London Games, there have been a few international level horses already competing at or near that level purchased for Americans to ride in hopes of making “The Team.” Now believe me, I understand the drive and would not turn the opportunity down by any means; I don’t think anyone should. But I also have to ask myself, when we do this, are these the best riders in the country, or do they just have the best horses or best access to horses? Does the rider make the horse an Olympian, or does the horse make the rider one? Is it really the best of the best human athletes competing against each other for a slot on an Olympic team, or is it a few fortunate ones who find themselves on the best equine athletes at the right time?

I look to the other events in the Olympics and wonder if runners could buy shoes that gave them a distinct advantage over the rest of the field, would that still make for fair sport? Think of it this way: There are a few sets of shoes in the world that cost \$5 million dollars or a lot more for that matter; they only come in a few sizes, and by wearing them, you can shave a few



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seconds off your time. Those shoes only come around every so often for purchase, and you have to find just the right fit, but they are out there, and more and more people keep trying to make more of them. Sometimes, if you offer enough money to the owner of a set of shoes or one of the runners who use them, it's possible to get them for yourself.

If a few runners had them, would that still make for a fair competition for the other runners? Would it turn the running world into a business of buying and selling shoes versus producing good athletes? Wouldn't every runner spend most of their waking hours trying to find a faster or better shoe or a sponsor to procure those shoes for them?

You'd be silly not to if you were a runner, and if you were a shoe company you'd also be silly not to try to create or own all of the shoes. If you had lots of money or could get access to it, liked running and were an average athlete, you could then compete with the likes of Usain Bolt based on the sponsorship you secured or the money you had yourself to buy those shoes. You'd still need to train, learn how to use the start blocks, be fit, run relatively fast, etc., but would you have to be the best in your country? How long do you think running of any kind would stay in the Olympics under this scenario, if the premise of the Olympics is fair competition regardless of political, socioeconomic, ethnic, global or financial background?

The fact that running fast is not based on the shoes you own or can buy is what allows men and women from Italy, Ethiopia, Japan, America, Korea, Ireland, Portugal and more to compete on a completely level and fair playing field and one of the big reasons it will be included in the Olympic Games for as long as there is Olympic competition. This does not hold true for horse sports, unfortunately.

The ideal of the Olympic Games is supposed to be fair sport that crosses borders. Regardless of where you come from, what god you believe in, how rich or poor you are, if you're the fastest runner or skier, paddler or gymnast, your chance of making a team is based on talent. Not that those athletes don't need money, sponsors, time, good training, luck, etc., and not that there aren't politics in their respective sports

as well, but those athletes compete more or less purely based on their own abilities. There is no x-factor horse or shoe that skews the equation in favor of the wealthy or the sponsored.

I wonder how much longer equestrian events will be included in Olympic competition. We all seem to agree that the more visible and the more recognizable the sport becomes the more success we'll have for our own U.S. team, as well as the sport as a whole. Yet I wonder if that really is the case. The more media attention and money involved, the less fair the competition becomes. It's a hard and somewhat unfortunately needed evolution, but one that might prove to be the catalyst for extinction.

Most of my business is my clinic work, and I see many riders with talent that is crazy impressive, riders with an innate feel that would land them at the top of their sport if they only had the right horse. I sometimes wonder if they were runners, showing the same amount of talent, would their day of Olympic stardom have already come to pass?

I see a lot of these riders working, studying and bettering themselves with the knowledge that an Olympic start for them is most likely never going to happen. I see them train great horses of average quality to become exceptional—but none that will land them on a team. Not that they don't dream it or want it, but they know the chances are not in their favor regardless of their talent, when they have to compete on such an un-level playing field.

I see riders throughout the world who have made it to the big time charge rates according to their "team" status. They become experts based on the purchase of a horse or horses for them, but I often find that other, lesser-known riders are by far the better horsemen and women,

with a greater skill set than their Olympic counterparts.

I see an evolution of competition that is swinging equestrian events far outside the premise of a fair and amateur-based sport. For people needing to earn a living in the industry, this is good, but for longevity as an Olympic event it's not healthy or sustainable.

Do I hope equestrian events stay in the Olympic line-up forever? Yes, without a doubt. But I also see equestrian events as not long for this Olympic life.

Equestrian events are currently slated for the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo, which I am thrilled for. Maybe you or I will be on that "Dream Team" or maybe we won't, but will it be the last Olympics that include the sport?

What will our future look like if equestrian sports get bumped from the Olympics to make room for a new sport? Would there be an even greater divide between what people refer to as classical and modern dressage? Would there be less stress about keeping a pure and traditional base of the sport, as we wouldn't be involved with the International Olympic Committee and their governance? How would it change the education of our young riders and their dreams and goals if becoming an Olympian wasn't a possibility for them?

I don't have any amazing ideas on how to secure equestrian sports in Olympic competition, but it deserves a great deal of thought. Not just in how to make it more widely known, spectator friendly, lucrative or the like, but also in what keeps the sport in the tradition of the Games themselves, so when the IOC reviews its inclusion, there is no doubt that the roots are so strong and deep, its evolution so harmonious with Olympic growth, that it must remain—and kids who ride can keep dreaming of being an Olympian. 🐾



COURTESY FRASER PHOTO

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Jeremy Steinberg was the U.S. Equestrian Federation Youth Coach from 2010-2014. He's a well-known rider, trainer and competitor based out of Del Mar, Calif. He's also a selector for the Developing Horse Program and one of five clinicians who works with the U.S. Dressage Federation in its Platinum Performance/USDF junior and young rider clinic series. He worked with long-time friend and mentor Dietrich von Hopffgarten extensively until his passing in 2004. Jeremy has trained and shown many horses up through the Grand Prix level. He now runs a small "boutique"-type training business and travels the country giving clinics. More information can be found at [steinbergdressage.com](http://steinbergdressage.com).