

T3D Destination by Brad Turley

(Editor's Note: Mr. Turley won his division at the GMHA Three Day Event in August.)

The Goal

Each year I set a destination: the goal for the year. One year was to compete at Millbrook; the next the AECs; this year a Training 3 Day. Each time, I thought the goal was aggressive. Millbrook was beyond my ability the first time I went. The year I went to AECs, I was just hoping I would qualify. When I did, I hoped not to embarrass myself on the national scene. This year, the T3D . . . well, I wasn't even sure I was ready to move up from Novice let alone complete a long format test at Training level. (But what's that old saying? "It is better to try and fail rather than fail to try.")

First, a few thoughts on moving up. You never seem to be completely ready. The Novice to Training move seemed easy before I started training for it. Having to do transitions at the letter was more difficult than I thought. And those odd shaped 15 meter movements I started out doing did not really look like circles to the casual observer. Practicing in the large ring with those party letters got confusing. On cross country the jumps looked much larger when walking the course. Fortunately, they looked smaller when galloping up to them and concentrating to get the right distance. The coffin complexes, jumping over a log and dropping into water, and combinations placed in ridiculous places seemed a bit daunting. In Show Jumping, I got worried when walking courses that had 11 jumps with 9 of them requiring me to count my strides. I nearly had to write the numbers on my arm to remember all of them. My fears were realized in June when I missed an oxer at Groton House and ended up hanging on to Ratzi's ears with the onlookers applauding because I stayed on. I thought the T3D was going to be a long shot.

Getting Ready

It was time to get to work. My trainer, Marcia [Kulak] put together a schedule for me. Tuesdays and Saturdays were conditioning days; two days were dressage days, and the other days were for jumping and gymnastics.

I also needed to learn to gallop. Right after Millbrook, Ratzi and I went over to a nearby hay field, measured 500 meters, warmed up and galloped around the field. I was pretty sure I was riding at 650 mpm rate or more – in fact I was certain. But after crossing the 500 meter mark in about 1½ minutes I realized I had to step up my game. I caught my breath, got up in two-point and said to Ratzi, "OK old boy, if I get off your face, can you carry me around this field a little faster?" The next lap only took about a minute and ten seconds. On the third, we nailed it. After I stopped smiling and started breathing, I thought my goal might be possible.

The next week, Ratzi and I were in the state park doing trot sets at 7:30 a.m. It was just us, on a cool summer morning. The sun was coming through the branches highlighting the brilliant green and mist in the low areas. All of a sudden this three day thing took on a different meaning. It WAS about horsemanship and spending time together in the saddle getting to know each other better. From that point on, the training became more enjoyable. I got to gallop, go on trail rides, and just have fun and call it training. It seemed like a new sport.

The Tests Begin

Finally, the big day is here. We get the trailer packed, load Ratzi and head to GMHA in South Woodstock, VT. When we arrive, as Ratzi comes off the trailer the vet checks his vitals, does a once over and watches a quick jog. This is done even before he sees his stall to get a starting point to rate his condition over the next few days. We pass the first of the 11 tests we will face.

Next, there is a mandatory rider meeting – a briefing to let everyone know what to expect. The judges talk about the jog the next morning where the ground jury will check the horse for soundness. There is a story about women wearing short skirts and men wearing bright ties in their attempt to distract the jury from a lame horse. I only packed bright ties. I hope that Ratzi will strut his stuff and take the attention away from my tie.

Day 1

Friday morning dawns a beautiful day. We get up early to braid (well at least Sara does), put on the clean bridle and number and head to the inspection. “Number 110 is accepted.” Check off test #2 from the list. Next is the dressage, which is to be ridden in a large ring with a judge at both C and B. The large ring gives more time to ride, the transitions come a little slower and there is time to actually enjoy the test. We halt, salute, and test #3 is over. I am very happy to get an “Awesome effort” comment from one judge and a good score in the low 30s.

The next task is to walk the Endurance Day courses. It have to figure out where I need to go, how fast and what to consider for each phase. The Vermont hills are much easier on horseback than on foot, and I am huffing and puffing after the first 100 meters. Phase A is 2200 meters trotting at 220 mpm to be completed in 10 mins. Phase B is steeplechase with a distance of 1500 meters galloping at 500 mpm for 3 mins. Phase C has a distance of 3800 meters at 160 mpm in 22 mins. The 10 minute box is at the end of C. Then the cross country course is Phase D, which is 450 mpm (with 8 water crossings) in 5 mins and 47 seconds. Unlike most people, I need to walk my X-C three times or more so I finally go to sleep around 11:00 p.m. I wake at 3:30 a.m. to walk my Endurance tests in my mind. What’s that, rain on the roof? I mentally re-walked with the rain factored in -- deeper footing, faster water in the stream crossings, glasses I can’t see through . . . It’s time to get some sleep.

Endurance Day

We start off on Phase A and Ratzi is ready to go. We trot up the hill that took my breath away less than 12 hours before but Ratzi isn’t even puffing. We do a few canter transitions to see if I can set him up and bring him back and finish a little early. Test #4 is over.

“30 seconds Brad”. And so begins the most fantastic three minutes of my adult life. Through the flags, track left and pass jump 2/4/6 to get to jump 1/3/5. We are going 500 mpm through the puddles where the ducks are swimming. We head to the first jump -- the moment of truth – do I have enough confidence in my horse to let him do his thing? Keep my balance, let him focus, and he strides over the jump like it is not even there. Now I’m not breathing due to sheer exhilaration. This is no longer about nerves, this is just plain . . . I’m not sure how to describe it. I’ve yet to come up with the word. Jumps 2, 3, 4, 5 and bumper, only #6 left till the finish line. It just keeps getting better and better. Wow, what a ride! Through the finish, track left and the 5th test is over. Test #6, Phase C, begins.

We head into the rest area and the clock is ticking. Ratzi gets a drink, we readjust the tack, and head back onto Phase C. We do the first kilometer in 9 minutes; the second in 12 mins. We are going too fast. Ratzi sees another horse on course. We have a debate about whether or not we should be trying to catch him. I win and we stay behind. Coming to the 3K mark we are definitely too fast. We walk the last 800 meters, and spend a few extra seconds in the stream before the 10 min box. The vet yells over, "Trot up the rise please." Test # 6 is over and we're into the 10 min box.

Test #7 is the 10 min hold before cross country. I'm off Ratzi within seconds of entering. Ratzi's vitals are checked and I get to relax. My team and the vets treat Ratzi like a king. It's all about him! I get some water, clean the raindrops off my glasses and take a breath. Ratzi's temp is 101.7 and respiration 20. He is jogged out one last time. I get a leg up and head to test #8.

Time to rock and roll! This is the best ride at Disney – the Cross Country. It is still raining, the footing is deep and the streams are running about 12" to 18" deep instead of their usual 6". He takes jump 1 and 2 and we slow down for the first water crossing. Ratzi says, "Bring it on!" OK with me. We're a bit behind at the first minute mark, but with conditions the way they are, I feel better to be safe than sorry. We are still behind at the 2 and 3 minute marks. Coming down the hill to jump #12, a drop into the water off a steep hill, Ratzi and I have a bit of an attitude adjustment (I adjusted him this time) and we step off into the water at a safe pace. Through the deep footing in the back field, we go over the table, trakehner and the chevron-water-chevron question. It rides better than I expected. We gallop the long stretch to 18 and 19ab. At this point, we're doing more than 500 mpm. We sail over 18 and keep booking along the road to 19ab. I hope I can get him back. I tap the brakes, and he settles down. That's a first. We do the two stride combination, take a hard right down the hill through the 8th and final water crossing and up to the last question. We made up some time but were still about 7 seconds behind coming across the finish line. Who cares, we had a fun, safe ride and probably our best XC ride ever. We were really a team! What an experience! We wait in the release box for the vet to give Ratzi a quick once over and allow him to go back to his stall. Ratzi gets the nod.

Ratzi is cooled down and doted on for the next couple hours. I bring back the tack, buckets and other things we had at the 10 min box. Then it's off to walk the show jumping course. By myself, with Marcia, then by myself again and again.

The Last Day

Only two tests left to go. I'm up early Sunday morning to get ready for the final inspection. Ratzi looks like a million dollars. That's a good thing because my second tie is louder than the first tie. We walk over to the jog. The first official I see jokingly says, "Nice tie - hope you don't have a lame horse." I look at him and say, "No, he'll be better on his second jog than he was on his first!" Loud tie or not, we jog. "Number 110 is accepted." Test #10 is over. We've got one more test: Show Jumping.

About an hour later we go to warm-up. Ratzi is feeling better than ever. Maybe I haven't been warming him up enough in the past. This long format thing seems to have done him well. "Number 110 please enter the ring." So, the 11th and final test begins. Jump #1 into the big puddle. Between the puddle, my poor driving and balance, jump #1 is poorly executed but clean. The setup to #2 is a bit awkward but we get the job done. The rest goes as planned. The tight rollback to #5, the 2 to 1 for 6abc, the continuing 4 between 7 & 8 and the hard rollback to the Swedish Oxer (note to self, practice that one some more) to

the final bending six through the finish. The final test, number 11, is over. Ratzi and I have completed our first Training 3 Day.

Back at Home

We head home, and a few days later the vet comes by for a post-event check-up. Ratzi gets a clean bill of health and the vet thinks the conditioning and stretching associated with our preparation has improved Ratzi's overall health. He is more supple than previously, his flexions are the best they've been and his jog is more solid than ever.

When all is said and done, here's what I've learned from my T3D experience. First, it is not as hard as I thought. In fact, the overall test seemed to be better for us as a horse and rider combination. Phases A and B let him get into his groove without getting worked up in a warm up ring with a dozen other horses and it gave me more time to get together with him before XC. Second, the training to prep for it has opened up new avenues for us to enjoy each other. Like most amateur adult riders I spend most of my time in a ring practicing my flatwork or show jumping. The T3D forced me to go beyond the arena and do things with my horse that I should have been doing all along. And finally, although I've heard all the big names say it, I finally got the opportunity to learn how to ride and jump at speed and to trust my horse to do his job.

My advice, regardless of your level, is to use the long format as a means to become a better horseman. Push your trainers to share with you the core training required to actually do this someday. The trot sets, gallops and overall conditioning is great way to really enjoy your horse and let him have some fun too. The T3D is a fantastic destination.