# EVENTING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

**PART 2**

## USING TECHNOLOGY FOR TRAINING

By Leslie Threlkeld

Much of the globe has gone digital, and the world of eventing has, too. Everywhere you look, "smart" devices capture the action as it happens, and it appears online nearly instantly. Digital technology is being used to promote, socialize, and learn. In a two-part series, we investigate the ways eventing has joined the digital discussion.

*Last month, we explored how industry professionals utilize digital and social media to promote themselves and their businesses, but how might the casual competitor thrive in the digital age? Sure, a proud horse owner is likely to share his or her eventing experiences online, from hand grazing to crossing the finish line. That path to success requires hours of training and dedication, and a great variety of digital tools might assist riders in improving themselves, their horses, and their competitive results.*

### eCoaching

You are probably familiar with email, eCards, and eNewsletters. What about eCoaching? The concept is relatively new, but it appears to be gaining ground. Instructors are beginning to capitalize on the popularity of digital technology and are looking for every possible way to share their knowledge.

Lesley Stevenson, the proprietor of My Virtual Eventing Coach, saw an opportunity to not only extend her clientele but allow horse lovers of all levels and incomes learn from each other by asking questions. She came up with the idea about two years ago and says it shows great promise: "My goal is simply to provide a platform where riders can get help with their specific training issues, learn lots of new ideas and theory, educate and develop their 'eye,' and become a part of a supportive community."

The process of eCoaching is similar across the board: Email questions, photos or videos to your instructor and wait for his or her answers and critiques. While a private eCoaching "lesson" is a two-way street, My Virtual Eventing Coach gives others the opportunity to participate and learn. "They can make comments and join in on educational discussions right on site."

Lesley thinks some people might be afraid to "take the leap" to virtual coaching. Some people, she said, never ask questions but fervently read the content. "Interestingly, a large number of members are teachers of some sort. Either riding instructors looking for ideas for coaching their own students—one member is a former Olympic rider who teaches—or amateur riders who teach in some other capacity. I think the members that stay have an obvious passion for learning."

Lesley says that virtual coaching was "just bound to happen" and riders are "smart to take advantage of every available opportunity to improve." However, she does

not recommend using virtual coaching exclusively; it is still important to get one-on-one lessons and training with a "live" instructor. "[Virtual coaching] works great as an adjunct or supplement to a rider's 'in person' training," she said. "The riders that need this the most are those that live in areas with limited access to good trainers or those that cannot afford to take as many lessons as they would like. It also allows riders to be productive in continuing their education during down time or in times of inclement weather."

One member of My Virtual Eventing Coach said that while they have a great trainer, Lesley's site gives her a chance to think meaningfully about riding when not in the saddle. Lesley agrees: "If a rider only takes a lesson a week at home, there is only so much they can work on in that hour. My Virtual Eventing Coach allows a rider to spend many more hours a week improving their knowledge and understanding of riding skills and techniques. They can make a plan with new exercises for improving their next ride while in their pajamas at midnight on their computer, and go out the next morning and execute it!"

Utilizing the internet as an educational tool might be right for some. Other individuals prefer having a tangible resource like the many self-improvement books and magazine articles that are out there. Lesley points out, however, there is one significant way pixels beat paper. "Unlike a magazine, the site is uniquely interactive and personalized. Members can request topics, ask for clarification about any part of an article or answer, or ask how to apply it to their own riding. Where else can you read a book or an article and ask the author to help with your specific issues on the topic?"



## Application Education

It seems like there is an "app" for just about any topic or activity you fancy. Equine enthusiasts and organizations are creating apps, too: veterinarians may have an entire database of pharmaceutical products and recommended treatments for quick reference, and competitors can store and practice their dressage tests on an interactive display. The possibilities are, as they say, endless.

In addition to simply using a mobile hard drive as a pocket-size encyclopaedia regarding all things horses, a multitude of applications that may improve training and competition results are finding a niche in the equine market. One such application is Speed Check, devised by Lloyd Raleigh. An amateur competitor himself, he found he was struggling to maintain a consistent pace on cross-country, and the app came to exist for his own benefit before it was released to the market.

"For training, the biggest benefit is taking the guesswork out of how fast and far you are going," Lloyd explained. "People have said to me 'does it really matter if you are doing a training gallop and you plan to do 500 meters per minute for three minutes, but you are actually doing 580 meters per minute.' My answer generally is, 'for the average amateur rider, it probably does not matter, but if they want to be competitive, why leave things up to chance or guesswork?' And no matter how amateur a rider is, they all want to be competitive."

Speed Check is an application for the iPhone. As you head out to do gallops and practice pace, you can set your target speed, which it tracks through the built-in global positioning system (GPS). Speed Check can track your distance, too, and show you a graph analyzing your speed consistency over distance. This can be particularly helpful when schooling over fences as it tracks your average speed, which is your target in competition. To help you learn how a pace feels, the phone will "talk" to you. For instance, if you are competing at Novice level and the speed on cross-country is 400 meters per minute, you might go out in the field and use this application to get a feel for exactly what 400 meters per minute feels like. The app will let you know if you are going too fast or too slow by beeping different tones. Once you have a feel for galloping on the flat at a certain speed, add in fences and terrain and see if you can maintain that average speed. You may find you cross the finish line closer to optimum time if you apply in competition what you practice at home.

Times have changed. It is not so common that children begin learning pace on their ponies as their trainers tic off distances and set up cones in large fields. For the average adult amateur, it is all they can do to get to the barn after work, much less walk out X amount of meters before it gets dark. As cities and suburbs expand onto farmland, some people simply do not have the space. "The training galloping around fields, we do not do that anymore. The kids have never been timed around an oval going down the hill. It has disappeared from training," Lloyd lamented. "When they get to an event they have no idea how fast they should be going. Send the kids around the paddock and let them listen to [the beeps on the application]."

## DIGITAL RECALL

When Jose Diacono saw an interactive Badminton course application, she decided to put her computer mapping background to use and create something similar. "It hit me as I was watching riders wheel a course that we could create an app to track and measure a course with GPS and calculate the minute markers," she said. With the help of her son James and daughter Helen, the CrossCountry application was released in September 2011.

Like Lloyd and his Speed Check app, Jose's daughter, the eventer in the family, found personal benefit from the CrossCountry application before it was ever released to the public. "The first time we tested the app at an event was Quirindi (AUS) last August. It alerted us on our course walk that we had missed jump nine, which was hidden off in a loop. Without the app, we might never have noticed, and Helen would have been eliminated," Jose said. Consequently, one rider from California recently emailed Jose and said she bought the app after making that very mistake while lying in second place at an event.

The app was created to help riders of all levels memorize their courses and minute markers by virtually walking the course after returning to stabling or the hotel. As you walk a course, you can take pictures, videos, record voice memos, and track minute markers or compulsory flags. "Lots of websites have photos of jumps, but with CrossCountry you create a total record of a course with audio comments from the course designer and course builder, striding and distances, photos of take offs and landings, commentary from riders about how they think the course will ride, and videos of how it actually rode. It would be a valuable educational tool for budding course designers."

## CHECK OUT THESE GREAT COURSES FROM CROSSCOUNTRY

- Learn how course designer Mike Etherington Smith and coach Wayne Roycroft viewed the 2012 Sydney International CCI3*.

- Olympic medalist and popular course designer Ian Stark explains the trickier jumps and combinations on the CCI3* course at Bramham in June. "It is a wonderful showcase and is still being downloaded from *crosscountryapp.com* by eventing enthusiasts all around the world," Jose said.

- Eventing photographer Libby Law recorded the 2012 Luhmuhlen CCI4* and Barbury Castle CIC2* and CIC3* courses.

- Olympian Amanda Ross gives an in depth explanation of how to ride the one-star course she rode at Melbourne. "It really feels like Amanda is standing next to you explaining how she will ride each fence," Jose said.

- Get an idea of how the Novice course will look at the 2012 AEC with a Chattahoochee Hills photo gallery, then take a look at the Beginner Novice water jump at next year's AEC venue, the Texas Rose Horse Park.



## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Combining the various technological tools allows for a well-rounded education. Lloyd's and Jose's applications both utilize eCoaching: Riders can email their gallop graphs, statistics, or courses they've walked so that their trainers can provide feedback from afar.

"We are in the process of setting up a web portal to accept uploads from the app. This will then allow riders and coaches to log in and view recorded sessions on our server, comparing data over a period of time. This of course will eventually lead to real time recording, where coaches or owners will be able to log in and view their horses' activities as they are happening," Lloyd said. "I think that eCoaching will be used more and more in the near future. Technology is becoming so cheap and readily available that a coach could be sitting at their desk half way around the world and still be providing a rider with valuable coaching advice."

As Jose's application developed, it became a popular tool to allow riders to share and view recorded courses from all around the world. She hopes the library of guided course walks with top riders continues to grow. "I also want to support officials in using it as a collaboration tool. The course designer, builder, technical delegate, ground jury, public relations person, and volunteer manager can all share the course privately by email or publicly via their own or our website," Jose said. "The beauty is you can build on someone else's recording, adding your own photos or comments and then share it again."

## PRACTICE TO NEAR PERFECTION

When it comes to horses, there is nearly always room for improvement, and technology can help us reach our goals as riders. Lesley wants to make knowledge available to a wider audience and give people who might not otherwise have the

The USEA has joined the digital discussion!

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means to communicate the opportunity to share their own thoughts and ideas. Lloyd hopes that his application, borne out of a need for improvement in his own riding, will show others how technology can be used to benefit horses and riders and maybe come up with useful applications of their own. Jose wants CrossCountry to be a platform for preparation for riders coaching.

Yes, we did manage just fine without digital tools in the past, and applications do not replace physically walking a course or working with a coach. However, Jose believes that because technology is so widely used outside of the sport, it will continue to grow within it; technology and digital applications can save time, reduce stress, and help riders be better prepared, in addition to entertain and teach! "I would not be without the blogs, live streaming, and apps that take me to live results with a simple button," she said. "It is fantastic that a rider in America can go on a virtual course walk with Amanda Ross in Melbourne, and I am looking forward to going on some virtual U.S. course walks!"

We have hardly scratched the surface of eventing in the digital age. The more we looked into the topic, the more sub-topics we found! Why, we have not even mentioned media coverage, live scoring, or entering horse trials online! So, we want to hear from you: Riders, parents, owners, instructors—how has eventing in the digital age affected you? What are your thoughts on eCoaching? Is there an app not mentioned here that you want to share with the community? Has digital and social media changed the way you run your business? Email your thoughts to lthrelkeld@useventing.com.