



ADAM FANTHORPE

W/D

Jonathan Chapman discusses what to consider before withdrawing from competition

'W/D' – THIS IS an abbreviation you will see on many scoreboards throughout the Eventing year. Sometimes withdrawals are forced upon us by a lame horse, sick horse or broken down lorry. But sometimes they are a deliberate decision, often due to the ground conditions.

As BE Accredited Coach and livery yard proprietor, and more recently as Chairman of BE's Safety Committee, I frequently get asked "what do you think of the ground?" This is a thinly veiled way of asking "should I run my horse today?" I am sure I am not the only Coach who gets asked this, but when someone rings you from an Event you are not even at and asks this question I do wonder how I am supposed to answer it!

The decision to withdraw because the ground is too soft or too hard is not easy and is, I believe, an individual's decision. It should not be based on a lemming-like mentality favoured by many riders, that because so-and-so has withdrawn their horse I should withdraw mine. It should be based on an honest assessment of several

factors, including two important ones: first, does the horse need the run for experience or qualifications, and second, do the horse's conformation, action and veterinary history lend themselves to certain ground conditions?

1) Does the horse need the run for experience or qualification purposes?

I believe that today horses spend too much time in arenas on artificial surfaces. This has two implications. The horse's ability to adjust its action to suit the surface it's travelling over is to some extent an acquired skill. If we only work on artificial surfaces, whether in the arena or on the gallops, we limit the horse's ability to learn to cope with varying surfaces, particularly those found on a cross country course. This inability to adapt to a surface, maintain its action, balance and self-carriage will pre-dispose the horse to injury. Therefore sometimes it may be necessary for horses to run in less than perfect conditions as part of their education.

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I am not advocating running horses on tarmac roads or Irish bogs to achieve conditioning. But I do believe that we shouldn't be too precious with them. This doesn't only apply to Events. Working a horse up a grass gallop that is a bit soft, or jumping in the field when it's a bit firm, will help a horse to cope in a competitive →

environment when conditions are not perfect. Those of you that competed at Houghton 2014 will testify to how quickly the conditions on the cross country changed from near perfect for the 1* to wet and slippery for the 2*, with very little the Organisers could do about it. If you have made the time and financial commitment to do a Three Day Event you don't want to have to withdraw because the ground intimidates you. If you want to be good in the mud you have to practise in it! Perhaps try some hunting this winter to hone your and your horse's skills?

Sometimes it isn't sensible to run in challenging ground. If you are going up a level, particularly if both horse and rider are upgrading together, then you would definitely prefer ideal conditions. The pressure of tackling a bigger, more technical cross country course is enough on its own without having to deal with adverse ground

as well. When upgrading a horse and rider the most important thing is to build confidence and that is less likely to happen if you are on unfamiliar ground. But sometimes riders feel pressure to run because they need qualifications. The message here is that a well thought out competition plan should have alternatives built in to alleviate some of the pressure.

2) The second of my considerations is, do the horse's conformation, action and veterinary history lend themselves to certain types of ground?

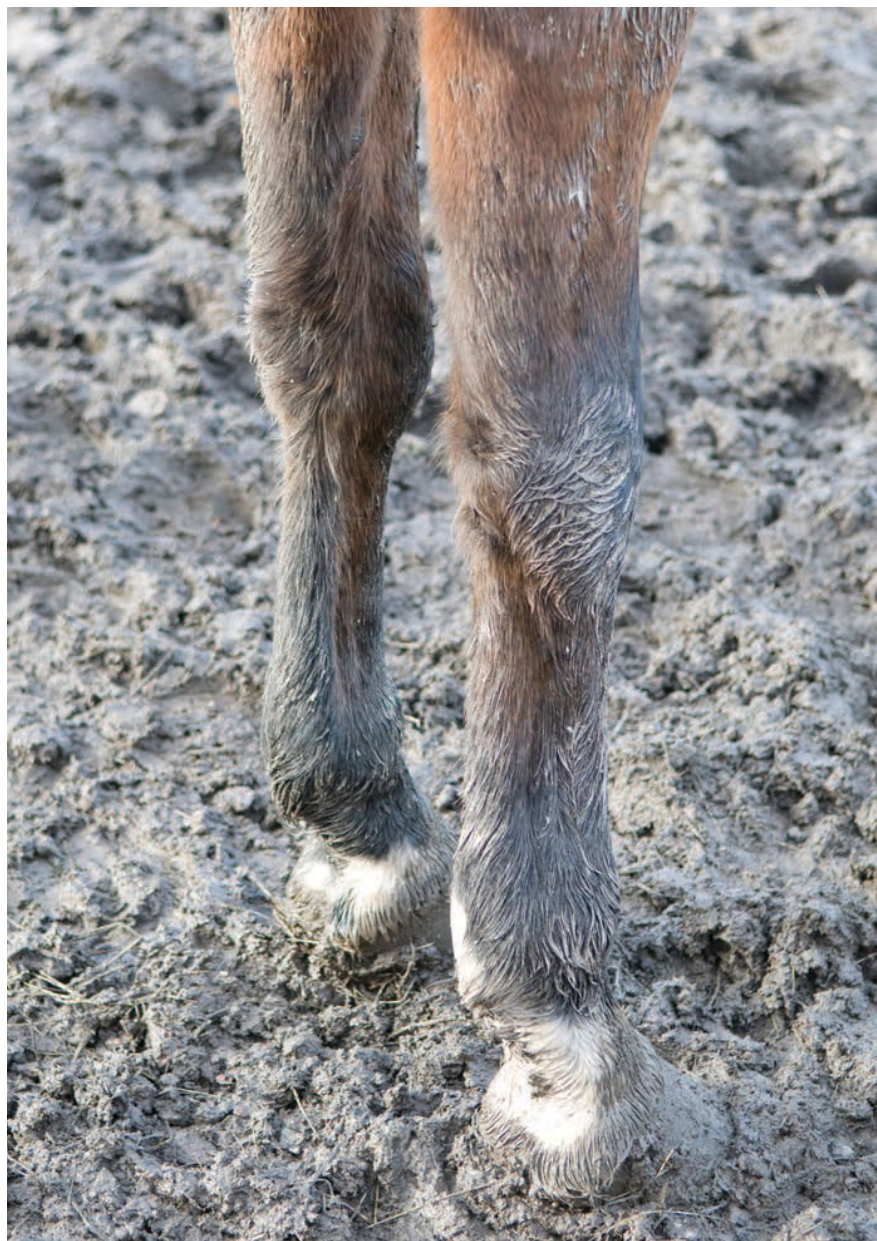
Common sense tells you that horses with significant wear and tear in their joints should avoid hard ground, and horses with soft tissue issues should avoid deep ground. I would add to this that a horse's action will influence how it can handle the ground. Horses with big floaty paces don't usually

cope well with boggy conditions, while those with short, sharp action might cope better, but may not like hard ground due to the concussive effect.

From a conformation aspect close-coupled horses with short legs tend to cope with soft ground better than long-backed, long-legged horses, who prefer firmer ground. Feet will also have an influence. Crumbly feet that do not hold shoes well are a farrier's nightmare – don't run these feet in ground that is likely to pull the shoes off! Wet ground that is drying is one of the worst culprits. Upright pasterns and boxy feet will often 'feel' hard ground but cope well with soft. Long pasterns with 'suspension' will deal with firm ground and suffer less concussion, but be prone to hyper-extension in boggy ground.

These comments are generalisations and there will always be exceptions. But the important thing is that you know your own horse and what ground it performs on better.

Having said all of this, I think I should point out that the ground that we compete on today is vastly superior to and more consistent than that of 20 years ago when I started Eventing. The landowners and Organisers of Events must be commended for taking on board and acting on the advice of British Eventing and the Technical Advisers, Technical Delegates, Regional Coordinators and Stewards with regards to ground preparation. In some cases the track is temporarily or permanently fenced off from livestock to prevent poaching. In others farm grazing systems have been altered to 'save' the ground for the Event. Longer-term irrigation, drainage and sub-soiling plans have been put in place at some Events to improve ground conditions. All these actions come at considerable expense to the Organiser/Landowner. As riders, we shouldn't just complain when conditions are not to our liking, we should be sure to say thank you to Events that have clearly demonstrated a commitment to producing better ground for our horses to run over. It is, after all, a commitment to the welfare and longevity of our horses. 🐾



INGEMAR EDFAK/ALAMY

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