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# CONFESSIONS OF A SELECTOR



RICK STRANGE/ALAMY

*This title may grab your attention, but before you switch on Twitter hoping to discuss a revelation on the machinations of Team GB selection, I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you! There will be no secrets or gossip, just an insight into what's involved*

FOR 20-plus years as a rider and Coach, I thought it was pretty obvious which horses and riders should be picked for teams. I have now had the honour of two years as a Senior Selector for Britain's Eventing team. I have seen the information that has to be digested and the many factors that come into play. I now realise that the decisions are, shall we say, less obvious.

The first and most relevant observation to make about equestrian sport is that it is unique in involving an animal, which can't talk. As my old vet Roger Johnson used to

say, "if only they could talk and tell us what's ailing them, my job would be a lot easier". As a rider all you can go on is the feel they give you, and as a Selector all you can go on is how they look and the results they turn in. With that as the backdrop we move on to more tangible evidence.

This starts with those results. The Selectors keep an eye on the performance of elite combinations throughout the year, but as selection time approaches, they compile and review a table of results for all qualified horses and riders. This is not as long a list as you might think. Ideally they look for Advanced level results with dressage scores that are over 70 per cent, an average of not more than one show jump down and consistently clear cross country rounds close to the optimum time.

At this stage the list is getting quite short. The Selectors then look at the relative importance of the results. For example where was the score achieved? A win at a CIC3\* in Poland with 15 competitors may not warrant the same attention as a place at Blenheim with 80. It is also worth noting whether certain horses seem to do well (or otherwise) on certain types of terrain or conditions, and consider what the Championship venue is going to be like in relation to that.

It is important to consider the circumstances around results. The Selectors, with input from the performance management team, need to determine what is relevant to both unusually poor and unusually strong performance. Sometimes we all come up with excuses, and other times there are genuine one-off circumstances to take into account. As an example, this year's Mitsubishi Motors

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Badminton results were hard for anyone to interpret. Considering the changes to the course and the going on cross country day, did the results truly reflect the quality of the field? Or was this a one-off result where horses and riders with particular skills claimed the podium? And will the same skills carry equal weight at the World Equestrian Games? The debate will continue...

In other sports, final trials are used to pick teams. The Americans are very keen on this and apply it to many of their sports, including some equestrian ones. This is probably partially to avoid legal challenges. The system does have its merits. However, great horse-and-rider partnerships do have "off-days", often with no real explanation, and you could end up not being able to pick the best combination because of a result on one day.

Another aspect that has to be considered is the level and location of the Championships. This year's Championships are the World Games, which are CCI4\* level, and ideally horses and riders would have consistent 4\* form. But, there are only six 4\* Events in the world and of them, only four are reasonably accessible for British riders. This limits the amount of form that can be attained at this level. One good run at 4\* may be misleading. There is no doubt that it's a strenuous



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experience and a Championship is not the time to have a horse tell you that once was enough. But equally, experience at that level isn't everything. Sometimes a less experienced horse on an upward curve may be a better bet than a seasoned 4\* campaigner that consistently posts average results. From previous Championships you can work out statistically what a winning team's score is likely to need to be. You can then work out what your best combinations are likely to score, and what the other combinations will need to score to achieve this. If the result of this falls short of what you think you need, then you are relying on the other teams to trip up. This is not a comfortable place to be when the stakes are high; we have to believe that each member of the team is capable of achieving a particular result.

Another troublesome issue with horses is soundness. I'm of the belief that soundness in a horse is a temporary state of affairs and in some horses, quite fleeting. As with any athlete competing at top level, the wear and tear on the body is high. Given time the body will heal itself, so it is important that top-level horses are not over competed. Their fitness regimes have to be monitored and managed carefully. This limits the number of runs for selectors to review. It also means that they have to look behind the figures. For example, if a horse ran up a lot of time penalties on a 3\* course, or was retired on the cross country, was this because of a problem or because of a rider on an experienced horse wanting to save legs for another day?

So you are beginning to see the conundrums that face riders trying to impress Selectors, and Selectors that are trying to pick their best team. We see as much as we can first hand, we study the statistics and we consult with the performance teams. We try to understand the qualities such as mental and physical toughness, experience, reliability and downright ability that make up the magic mix for horse and rider. Oh, and a little luck goes a long way too, so we keep our fingers crossed that Lady Luck offers us a dance!

By the time you read this WEG will be underway. I hope that we triumph and qualify for the Olympics, and no one will think twice about the Selectors. Or, God forbid, we will not have succeeded and the Selectors will be vilified! Either way it is an honour to be asked to select your national team and we do our best to get it right. 🐾

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