

Open water — what's the problem?

At Hickstead two weeks ago, several combinations had their Derby dreams dashed with a foot in the water. Why does this traditional fence cause so many problems and are they avoidable? Martha Terry finds out



How far?

Hickstead water jump	4.57m
Olympic water jump	4.5m
CSIO****	4-4.2m
Foxhunter second round	3.65m
Newcomers second round	3m
Pony showjumper of the year	3.65m
Men's long jump record	8.95m



4.57



8.95

“The idea of a water jump is to break a horse’s rhythm. You have to attack it, but if you go over the top, then you’ll be out of control for the fences that follow”

Graham Fletcher

that most riders rig them up at home. It’s not worth winging it in the ring.

As David Broome says: “Water jump training should be commonplace, just like you train over oxers. You need to be able to produce the change in pace, the technique to jump high and wide, and the control on landing to negotiate the next fence.”

A spate of wet hooves at Nations Cup and grand prix level provoked World Class performance manager Rob Hoekstra to initiate a rule change regarding water jumps at national competitions. The amendment, brought in on 1 April, means that more poles have to be used over water jumps to encourage horses to jump up and out.

Now, according to Corinne Bracken, riders need to work on approaching the same jumps without poles. It’s a major focus in the youth ranks and Corinne believes training should start young.

“As soon as a horse can jump a jump with a rider, I like them to go over anything you can put on the ground — water, ditches or trays,” says Corinne.

She starts training over a small tray with an ascending spread, building up to a 10ft (3m) water jump with triple bar and eventually no poles and a small take-off wall.

“I even encourage paddling in the river and the sea because I like them super-confident,” she says. “Many of the girls I teach do not have much leg power to drive a horse over, so the horse must not be scared.”

But Tim Stockdale says the fear factor can be used to advantage. One of his best water jumpers, Parcival, was initially terrified of water.

THE length of most water jumps — up to 4½ metres — is barely longer than a horse’s natural stride when travelling at 350-400m per minute. Regular fences require more physical effort. So why does that shimmering water blot so many otherwise perfect rounds?

Is it simply that it’s different, a bright blue, flat anomaly among the big, square poles that throws a spanner in a horse’s rhythm? And is it a fair test of a horse that has been bred and trained to jump big and high?

What’s the problem?

ASIDE from dimensions — which range from a small tray up to 4.6 metres — a major factor is a water jump’s appearance. Many modern showjumpers back off and take off either too far away or with too little impetus to carry them cleanly over the Plasticine strip.

“The glistening water makes for a bold jump

for today’s jumpers, who don’t even go out in the rain,” says Tim Stockdale. “In the old days, horses saw puddles. Even if they weren’t hunters, they were used to natural obstacles.”

German course-designer Christoph Johnen, who designs at grand prix level, says that the reflection of the sun and movement of the water make it difficult to estimate. The more natural the water’s colour, the harder it is for the horse to judge.

“If I need to make the water jump easier, I add blue colouring so the reflection is not as strong,” says Christoph. “If it needs to be more testing, I leave it natural so that the horse thinks he has a black hole to jump.”

The fence “dressing”, too, has a role to play in how the horse reads the jump. Young rider and junior chef d’equipe Corinne Bracken remembers a young rider competition where 85% of the field faulted at the water because the take-off element was confusing.

“The boards were the same colour blue as the water and the horses couldn’t differentiate,” she says. “Also, the more solid [the small take-off fence], the more jumpable.”

And top USA course-designer Anthony D’Ambrosio — responsible for the World Cup finals track in 2009 — says designers use decorations to encourage horses to jump up and out.

“We can decorate the sides in a fuller and taller way with shrubs to make the jump more impressive and encourage more bascule,” he says.

Related distances are another vital issue in a water jump’s difficulty. Graham Fletcher warns that they “must never be taken in isolation”.

“The idea of a water jump is to break a horse’s rhythm,” he says. “You have to attack it, but if you go over the top, then you’ll be out of control for the fences that follow — often a double of verticals.”

David McPherson says the distances to and

from the water can be problematic, particularly in the Hickstead Derby. The horses are going uphill and often seem to “lose ground as they back off and deal with the hill”.

“They are often on a half-distance, say 7½ strides from the preceding fence,” he says. “If you’re on a big-stepping horse, you can probably take a stride out and still make it, but if you’re on a short-stepper, you’ll never get there with enough pace.”

Anthony D’Ambrosio says that some designers use tricky distances to increase the difficulty of such a fence.

“The most difficult test is to force riders to add a stride in front of it from a related distance, in order to negotiate the next test,” he says. “Another tough test is to have a rollback turn, which must be shorter than one would prefer due to a very tight time allowed.”

A tough test, but is it a fair test?

Tim Stockdale likens the water jump to a “razor blade”.

Picture by www.trevor-meeks-photography.co.uk

WHAT MAKES PROMISED LAND SO GOOD?

PROMISED LAND was named as being an exceptional water jumper by every expert *H&H* asked. Graham Fletcher says that last year's Hickstead Derby winner is "the best water jumper there has ever been".

"He's never been in the water in his life," says Graham of the 17-year-old. "However many water jumps he's seen — portables or solid — he has always maintained his youthful respect. He looks amazing in the air. You think, 'When is he going to come down?'"

"He has always been exceptional, although Tina [Fletcher, his rider and Graham's wife] does tend to have good water jumpers. She doesn't often get a bad stride into a water jump, but is able to move horses on and give them a chance to jump it."

Bring 'em on: Promised Land and Tina Fletcher show how it should be done at the Great Yorkshire Show in 2010



The Olympic champion Hickstead, who died last year, was known as an exceptional water jumper

"A good water jumper should be scared of it because they need a bit of fright to jump it with respect," he says. "They will only jump it if they have confidence, which means you have both the respect and the boldness if you go about the training in the right way."

"If I have a five-year-old that is not scared, I wouldn't expect him to be a good water jumper in the future. With 10 raw horses, the one that's genuinely frightened at the start will be the best if you train it right. It's about nurturing that lack of confidence."

Start practising at home

TIM believes too many horses experience their first water jump in the ring.

"I often hear riders at the Foxhunter second

rounds saying, 'My horse has never seen one of these before, I don't know if he'll jump it,'" says Tim. "That has to be the worst preparation."

Tim's method of practising water jumps is gradual and consistent, working up from a plastic tray to a 12ft (3.6m) solid water jump with boards — "a real horror" — first practising over a flimsier version alongside. He says marker poles at three strides from the water are vital.

"This encourages the horse to stay level on the approach and helps the rider meet the fence right," he says. "You need to sell this kind of jump to a horse. They inevitably back off and marker poles help horse and rider to attack the fence with panache."

"If you are half a stride wrong, you add six feet [1.8m] to the length, which will cost you at top level."

With this sort of methodical training, it's perhaps surprising that water has become a bit of a *bête noire* for the British team. But Corinne Bracken believes we're on the way up.

"We get bad publicity for our water jumpers, but we've vastly improved because we're working on educating riders early," she says. "You cannot underestimate how big the waters are at Nations Cups."

"No matter how much you prepare for every scenario at home, it still depends on what the course-builder decides to put before and after."

It may be a rhythm-breaker, a technicality or an unfair test. But when you see a horse like Promised Land soar over 4½ metres of rippling blue, it's definitely worth the spectacle. *H&H*



The Plasticine never lies, but was it a fetlock — allowed under the rules — or a foot? For some Hickstead Derby competitors it was the end of the road

Troubled water

➤ **Hickstead Derby:** "It's like a canal," says Tim Stockdale. "It's very wide and imposing and frightens horses to death."

➤ **European Championships 2011, Madrid:** Half of riders faulted in round one, failing to differentiate between the white take-off boards, clear water and yellow landing tape. This was changed, with darker frontage, potted flowers, red landing tape and blue dye in the water, and caused fewer problems.

➤ **Hamburg Derby:** Christoph Johnen says: "The open water is particularly hard there because there is no take-off element."

➤ **Bratislava CSIO****-W:** course-designer Eduard Petrovic says: "It's between the trees and in the shadows."



Nestled between the trees and full of shadows, the open water at Bratislava