When to Move Up

Except for those people who remain by choice at the relative safety of the very lowest rung of the eventing ladder, this question always arises, "When can I, or my horse, or both of us, move up to the next competitive level?"

Terrence Watkins made an interesting point that she wanted her students to have the confidence and the horsemanship to be able to move the horse a choice to do events where he had to have a choice of whether to go or not. An example of this might be to slow down on cross-country if the weather is extreme or if a horse is tired, even if it means staying on a leg to the next event. In other words, "think like a horseman!"

This past weekend at the Green Mountain Horse Association event in So. Woodstock, VT, I had the opportunity to get the opinions of a number of well respected coaches, trainers and competitors on two related questions. The first of these was, "When a student asks you whether he and his horse are ready to move up, what factors do you weigh most heavily in reaching an answer?" The second question was, "How do you decide when the horse you are training and competing is ready to move up?"

Virtually every coach agreed that safety was the number one factor which they evaluated in trying to decide whether a student was ready to progress to a higher level. And safety applies particularly to the cross-country test. (There are those who would accurately argue that "safe cross-country" is a contradiction in terms. We are again speaking about relative safety.)

Some typical comments:

"I'm not too worried about the quality of the dressage. That will come if they want to work at it. What concerns me is that they can safely handle the cross-country."

"I don't care if they've won their first three novice events; I don't want them to go training until they are really solid and really experienced, even bored at novice, before they move up."

"I want the rider to be really exceptionally confident in her own mind that she can handle the bigger fences, higher speeds and more technical questions."

"Speed! I want them to know how to handle galloping at speed, galloping up and downhill,
being able to slow down or stop whenever they want to, not when the horse decides to."

"I think the biggest, most potentially dangerous move up decision is from training to preliminary. I want my rider to know how to handle ditches and drops, angles and corners, bounces and trekkeners. I don't want him out there with any holes in his preparation."

Torrance Watkins made an interesting point that she wanted her students to have the confidence and the horsemanship to be willing to make the hard choice to do what would be in the horse's best interest. An example of this might be to slow down on cross-country if the weather is extreme or the footing bad, even if it means giving up a lead in dressage and hence losing the event. In other words, "think like a horseman."

Mark Weisbecker feels that young riders, especially, are pushed into higher levels before their confidence level is solid, and hence they can become literally frightened. He differentiated that fear as real physical fear which is different and more dangerous than the general nervousness that even well-prepared riders feel "before battle." I believe that what Mark was saying was "don't push them (or let them push themselves) to higher levels until they are emotionally prepared for the greater stresses.

Other coaches made the point that once the decision to move up has actually been made, it becomes important to find real "move-up courses." someone said, "Don't let Groton House II be their first preliminary. Find something easy." There was regret expressed that the USCTA Omnibus fails to have any method of rating the various courses in terms of degree of difficulty, making it almost impossible for a newcomer to an area to choose which events to enter.

Several coaches stated that a really confident, experienced horse can alleviate much of the potential problems a less experienced rider can get into at a higher level. Virginia Leary said, in effect, "If a rider makes a green mistake, I want a horse experienced enough to jump out of trouble anyway, not get taken into trouble by the rider." This is the "bail-out" concept, that
the good horse should be able to save the skin of the greener rider!

To sum up, I would say that the three prerequisites most mentioned by most of the coaches were safety, preparedness and confidence.

I got a bit of a different slant though, when I asked the rider-competitor-coaches how they determined the readiness of their own horses to move up in the ranks. I wouldn't say that they are unconcerned with safety; I think they were generally self-confident enough to take safety for granted. Instead, most of my respondents stressed that the horse be very prepared and be very self-confident. Most of them were willing to forego preparedness in dressage if he was bold and capable in cross-country. Torrance Watkins, though, believed that a horse's total dressage background did often make a substantial difference to his cross-country competence.

What I call the "yo-yo factor" was stressed by a number of the riders, that the horse be allowed to move up and down from one division to another as he is developing skill and confidence. For example, a horse might have done five or six training events and be pretty solid at that level. Then he might do a couple of move-up preliminaries, but if the slightest thing goes wrong, he should be moved right back down to training. Then the rider would reestablish his confidence, then try again at preliminary, and sort of ease him up to that level so that he keeps feeling good about himself and doesn't ever become discouraged or demoralized. Another example given me was that a solid preliminary horse toward the late summer or fall of the year might do one or two intermediate horse trials. But even if he did them brilliantly, he would not be asked to do an intermediate three day event that fall; he would run in a preliminary three day event instead.

I once read the following statement about Rodney Jenkins, something to the effect that "Rodney's horses progress very rapidly because he almost always does one of the very best things you can do for a young horse. He gets them to the right take off point for the jumps." I
think this same thing applies with the really good eventing trainers. They can often move up quite rapidly because they aren't so likely to put their horses in jams that the horses can't extricate themselves from. It's the opposite of the experienced horse having to save the green rider; here the good rider keeps the youngster out of trouble.

All the riders spoke of the need for solid basic preparation to the point that they seemed to feel it was self-evident. The horse must be able to gallop, speed up, slow down, turn, and handle all the possible kinds of questions that can be reasonably asked at the proposed level. Some spoke of the desirability to test the horse's ability over show jumping obstacles first, to know that a horse can deal with a 3'7" high, 4' wide preliminary cross-country fence because he can confidently jump a 3'11" high, 5'6" wide oxer in the ring. For the big divisions, intermediate and advanced, and the the "mega-division," Badminton, the World Championships and (sometimes) the Olympics, the horse must possess vast self-confidence, boldness to the point of aggression, and scope, which is defined as the ability to easily jump obstacles which are both high and wide.

Each of the trainers I interviewed felt that the decision to move up, whether pertaining to a rider, horse or combination was important, serious, and laden with responsibility. Each of them had obviously thought about the issue at length and in great detail, and I was impressed and gratified to feel that the American eventing community has the benefit of the concern and expertise of serious and dedicated coaches and trainers such as those I interviewed.

I'd like to thank the following for their assistance in writing this article: Chris Barna, John Bourgoin, Bruce Davidson, Jane Hamlin, Suzi Gornall, Virginia Leary, Bruce Miller, David O'Brien, Jim Stamets, Torrance Watkins, Mark Weisbecker, and anyone else whose help I've overlooked.