

The Next Generation of **LICENSED EVENTING OFFICIALS**

Who will keep our sport kicking on?

BY LESLIE THRELKELD

As the sport of eventing grows, so must the people with it. The future generation of competitors, organizers, owners, and officials must be proactive and get involved as soon and as much as possible to preserve and support the sport. The judges, course designers, and officials today have seen the sport change dramatically in recent years, from the establishment of the short format at the upper levels and the subsequent changes in course design to the increasing importance of dressage scores and the advanced emphasis on safety. Eventually, the current officials will retire, and the next generation will take over. The USEA Training Program for Licensed Officials was run as a pilot program in 1999 and fully launched in 2000. The Training Program may be something you would like to explore to become an official or learn to improve as a competitor.



How Do I Get Licensed?

ONE DOES NOT SIMPLY BECOME A LICENSED OFFICIAL. HOURS OF TRAINING, STUDYING, AND TESTING ARE REQUIRED to become a licensed eventing Judge, Technical Delegate, or course designer. Such dedication is required, however, for quality preparation. “The training programs are in place to make sure we develop good officials. We want to give them as much education as possible,” said Nancy Knight, the USEA’s Director of Education.

In addition to the training programs, potential licensees are required to apprentice at events. “Where they really get value and education is from the apprenticing. Prospective officials not only gain experience working with a current licensed official, but they may experience any number of the many things that can go wrong at an event like score discrepancies, removing a jump from a course, bad weather, etc.,” Nancy said. “They have to be evaluated on their problem solving skills. You cannot just memorize the rulebook, you must be practical and confident in your decisions.”



CAN I BE A COMPETITOR AND AN OFFICIAL?

Absolutely. Valerie Vizcarrondo of Blue Clover Eventing is an active Advanced level eventer. She feels that being a competitor gives her a special perspective as a licensed Judge, and she is thrilled to give back to the sport that has given her so much.

What inspired you to pursue an eventing judge’s license?

I am lucky enough to be mentored by two of the most awesome ‘O’ judges in the world, Linda Zang and Marilyn Payne. I seek their advice daily at times! They always have the most amazing perspectives, and I want to be that person for my own students. The process to become a licensed official certainly weans out those who are not committed and qualified, and I feel like such a better rider, trainer, and instructor because of everything the program helped me accomplish. At the same time, I feel very privileged—the best of the best are the instructors at the seminars, and for days on end you get to listen to and learn from their experiences and points of view. As with any program, you get out of it what you put into it. I want my owners and my students to feel confident in what I teach, and I want those that I judge to take away something positive and constructive from every ride. I feel that the event judges licensing program is designed and run by an amazing group of people that are not only gifted officials but are dedicated enough to our sport and our riders to give back and ensure that there will be quality officiating for years to come.

With your eventing judge’s license, you can judge not only the dressage but also the show jumping. It is the most grueling license to receive. As a dressage judge you can be nominated to be President of the Ground Jury. At that point in time, you are responsible for EVERYTHING! You need to make judgments and approve of both show jumping and cross-country courses. You are more or less the final say on all sorts of eliminations, and you can almost bet that you will be judging the most advanced dressage division of the competition. In order to receive that license, you must fulfill all of the requirements for both dressage judge and technical delegate. Needless to say, I spent many hours in seminars and apprenticing!

What is your strategy balancing Blue Clover Eventing with judging on the weekends?

Sometimes I look at my schedule, and I get a little overwhelmed. That only lasts a moment, however. I thrive on the challenge of finding time to sleep. I think I have found a pretty good balance of judging, competing, and coaching. I plan the schedule for my “big horses” about six months out, and then I fill in judging and competing the youngsters on the weekends in between. I am ideally located, based out of Maryland for most of the year and Aiken for the winter. So I have events to pick from nearly every weekend of the year. This season, I did quite a few judging obligations before the big competitions got going, and I judge just a few here and there until the spring three-days are finished.

I want to ride in the Olympics before I judge them, and so riding is my priority right now. I feel, however, that the two are very complimentary. As a current Advanced level competitor, I bring a perspective to my judging position that advocates the competitors—I know what it is like out there and how hard it is to do everything we do! I walk around a course to approve it, and I get a real feeling that I do not think any training session could teach you to have. I think that really is a secret weapon of mine: I am there doing it right now just like all the competitors riding in front of me. That also makes me very approachable as an official, which is an important attribute.

Do you think the standards of judging the sport of eventing has evolved over the years? How and why?

Our sport has changed so dramatically in the recent past, of course officiating has to not only keep up with the changes, but stay ahead of them. Honestly, one of the most important decisions I struggled with upon getting my license was liability; going through the licensing process makes you realize (or wonder) why on earth does anyone want to do any of this? I challenge every professional out there to volunteer at a competition and get a real feel for what just one day is like in the life of an organizer, an official, a steward, a volunteer. I find myself focusing more on safety now than I think officials had to in the past. At the end of the day, a competitor must be responsible for his or her own actions, but you do not really want anything awful happening on your watch. I am so fortunate to do what I do for a living, to be involved in so many ways in what is arguably the best sport in the entire world. I want to contribute to the growth and enjoyment of eventing, and I want to inspire others and be a sense of direction and balance for them as so many outstanding judges have been for me. Years down the line I want to continue to serve as a role model and proponent for all things great about our sport.



Why Should I Get Licensed?

Becoming a licensed official is not for everyone, but in order for the sport of eventing to continue in its current capacity, judges, designers, and technical delegates are required. Licensing takes time and commitment. Some competitors have found that going through the program has been a world of good just from the perspective of an active competitor. One who attends a course design training program may never walk a cross-country course the same again. Auditing a dressage training program may make you think differently about what the judge is looking for during a dressage test.

Is Officiating Right for Me?

The training programs are open to anyone who wants to attend for a nominal fee, and the investment may prove to be priceless as a competitor. You might find yourself interested in attending the next training program as a full participant.

Former Advanced eventer Michelle Henry has a “very stressful, time-consuming day job” as a Government Contractor that prevented her from getting back into the eventing world as a full-time competitor, but she was anxious to get involved. Her mother encouraged her to attend the first class in the Training Program to see if it would be a good fit for her. She contacted the USEA soon after and began the process of getting licensed. She began the coursework in November of 2009 and officially received her judge and technical delegate licenses in May 2011.

“Eligibility includes minimum riding requirements followed by mandatory training sessions and extensive hands-on field work such as ap-

LEFT: Valerie Vizcarrondo is an advanced level competitor and feels that it gives her a unique perspective as a licensed judge. *JOSH WALKER PHOTO*

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prenticing, scribing, and sitting with licensed judges and technical delegates,” Michelle said. “Each mandatory session was a minimum of two and a half days and carefully crafted to fine-tune the candidate’s eye for detail and awareness. The apprentice work was quite extensive, but essential. I attended a recognized event approximately two weekends a month for a year. It was certainly a commitment but worth its weight in gold.”

Michelle listed a multitude of things she learned during the apprenticing hours, from filling out official paperwork to pacifying upset parents. “As an official, you have got to know what to do, how to do it most effectively and efficiently, and most importantly, you have to know how to maintain control of the event while all of this is going on. You learn quickly, that to be successful, you are only as good as your team!

“I learned to observe and soak up as much as I could; it is an essential part of your training. Ask questions afterwards, follow their lead, and be as helpful as possible. You are still learning, but you are also being assessed with how you will handle similar situations.”

Once Michelle earned her licenses, she sent hand-written thank you notes to the officials and organizers who helped her. These same contacts helped her get her first jobs as an official, and she has been judging for just over a year. She continues to volunteer in her area whenever she can to keep her eye fine-tuned and socialize with her peers. Throughout the entire experience, she said the biggest lesson she learned so far is that it is all about teamwork: “If you can remember that, things just seem to run really well.”

For anyone thinking of pursuing a license, Michelle offers this advice: “Be prepared. It is definitely a commitment, but the more you put into your training, the better prepared you will be when you are the one making the calls!”

In Issue 6 of *Eventing USA*, 2009 Worth The Trust Scholarship winner Kyle Smith will recount his experience using the scholarship funds to become a licensed Technical Delegate.

For more information on becoming a USEF Licensed Official, visit

www.useventing.com/education/officials

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HELPFUL HINTS FROM FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE

Sarah Connell started pursuing her small “r” in course design in 2010 while she was working as Co-Director and the lower level course designer at Plantation Field Equestrian Events. She was the assistant course designer at Plantation Field Horse Trials in 2008 and 2009, which was an important part of her course design education. She is now the Director of all the horse trials at the Carolina Horse Park as well as the course designer for the lower levels. Being in the unique position as an event organizer and a licensed course designer, Sarah offered a list of helpful hints from both perspectives for those interested in pursuing a course design license.



As a designer:

- Ever heard of the 10,000 hours theory? To be a true professional at the very top tier (think about how many horses Phillip Dutton rides a day) one must reach 10,000 hours of practice. I am not even close to that yet with my course designing, but my point is practice, practice, practice, and then practice some more.
- Shadow as many good course designers as much as you can and see if you can assist with the lower levels. You learn to course design by doing. You cannot merely fulfill the minimum requirements if you want to be a good course designer.
- Watch the courses ride. It is one thing to go out with your tape measure and check all the distances; it is quite another to go sit at a jump and watch fifty horses jump it. Go to an event, walk one of the courses, and come up with a plan of how you think it will ride. Then watch all the horses go. Did it ride the way you thought?
- Talk to the professional riders. I always try to chat with a few riders who have ridden my courses to see what they thought of a particular question or the overall flow.
- All course designers make mistakes. Realizing you will make mistakes is important; it is how you handle the situation after you have made a mistake that counts. We all mess up; handle it with modishness.

As an organizer:

- Always ask both the organizer and official you wish to apprentice with if you can attend the event as an apprentice.
- Be as helpful as possible. The organizers and officials are doing you a favor.
- Before you get to the apprentice phase, ask to help out in other ways: scribe, fence judge, scoring, steward, or ring crew. Try setting up a dressage ring or flag a cross-country course. You need to learn how an event runs before you can even think about being a technical delegate or judge, and just being a competitor does not count.
- When you apprentice judge, bring your own scribe and dressage tests; do not expect the event to provide them.
- Listen more than you voice your comments; you will learn a lot more. Ask questions and show some humility.

My Journey into the “Official” World

Amanda Miller Atkins earned her eventing judge's license early this year and plans to take her Technical Delegate final in August. She wrote about the licensing experience for her local association's newsletter, and the North Carolina Dressage and Combined Training Association has graciously allowed *Eventing USA* to reprint her story.

By Amanda Miller Atkins

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IT ALL STARTED WHEN I WENT TO THE USEA [ANNUAL MEETING AND] CONVENTION IN DECEMBER OF 2010. ONE OF THE SPEAKERS TALKED ABOUT THE EVENT JUDGES PROGRAM. I always wondered what it would be like to have a view from “C.” When I got home I looked into the program and never knew I was qualified. Little did I know they were holding dressage training sessions in Florida in January and April. I did not even take another thought and signed up.



ABOVE: Dinner after the final day at Morven Park. From left: Todd Trewin, Nanci Lindroth, Holly Matt, Amanda Miller Atkins. TOP LEFT: Amanda Miller Atkins in the judges booth.

BOTTOM LEFT: The show must go on even in the rain; drying dressage tests. PHOTOS COURTESY AMANDA MILLER ATKINS



The first session was four very long days at Longwood Farm in Ocala. We learned about theory, biomechanics, gaits, collective marks, etc. By the end of the week we were judging full tests orally and on paper. In my training group we had people attend from all over the country! It was great meeting new people and possible future co-workers. After the first session, we independently scribed for different judges and observed some judging at events. At the next training session in April, we immediately started judging tests with different riders. We were lucky enough to judge some great riders such as Cathy Wieschhoff and Darren Chiacchia. After this two-day training session we were able to start apprenticing with event judges. We had to judge at least 75 dressage tests at recognized events

with four different judges.

The next training session was held in Texas in conjunction with the Greenwood CIC. This session was the cross-county and jumping training and was open to potential judges, course designers, and technically delegates (TDs). We learned about cross-country safety, emergency procedures, rules, and judging stadium jumping to name a few topics.

Once we came home with all this knowledge we still had a long road ahead. We had to apprentice with at least four TDs at four different USEA events, with two being “R” licensed. We also had to scribe and sit with two different stadium judges at two different events and do some cross-country jump judging as independent studying. With so much to get done in a short amount of time, I headed north to Maryland and Virginia for many weekends! I was able to work with some talented officials. It is amazing how much goes on behind the scenes; it takes a great group to work together to make all these events happen while keeping safety in mind.

All of the apprenticing and independent studies prepare you for the final test. Leading up to my final, I studied quite often to be prepared to answer anything. My girls from the barn would help quiz me on rules, and then I would have to locate it in the rule book. My students all came together for a mock dressage show to help me practice judging again right before my final. Then it was off to Morven Park for the final which ran in conjunction with the Advanced horse trials in October.

On Friday we had to walk the cross-country courses and measure some fences and prepare an evaluation. That afternoon we went back to the hotel, and I embarked on the longest test of my life – the written exam. Saturday morning started early; lacking some sleep, we started judging first thing. The weather did not cooperate with the examiner's plans, and we had temperatures in the 40s with driving rain and no shelter. If they wanted to see what we were made of, this was it! It became very hard to write on wet paper and keep your concentration going, but we all seemed to make it work. I felt bad for all the horses in these conditions: tense became a common word I had to use. All of our tests were so soaked we had to hang them to dry. Later that afternoon we started the oral exams. In these moments you feel so nervous awaiting your turn, and when you look back these are the few moments that change your life. Once the rain cleared we walked the stadium course and did another course evaluation. After our long day we were ready for some great food that Leesburg, [Virginia] had to offer!

The last day of the final included some more oral exams and judging stadium. When I was told I was done with the exam I took a deep breath. I made it through, but the worst part was yet to come: the dreadful waiting to see if you pass or fail. Weeks went by, and I believed that “no news is good news.” Then I received an email saying I passed! You would think that this would be it, right? Now I had to compile a list of references to turn into the USEF, and 18 of them had to be from officials. All your references have to respond in order for your potential license to be reviewed by the Board. The Licensed Officials Committee only meets three times a year, and I was lucky to have everything ready for them at the January meeting. I knew the day they were meeting, and I kept my fingers crossed all day.

A letter arrived in the mail almost two weeks later. I opened it slowly and started to read...“Congratulations you have received your “r” eventing license!” I was so elated I let out some happy tears! I could not believe after all this hard work I achieved my goal! I could not have done it without my wonderful support group and family. Now I am the youngest to join an elite group of only seven event judges in North Carolina. I look forward to seeing you at “C” in the future! 🐾