



▲ *Carrie Hopper, on Nick, rides a forward position to the jump & a slight lifting of the hand to give the horse a release.*

Eventing with Captain Mark Phillips

Tulipsprings Celebrates 5th Anniversary with Top Notch Instruction

Carol Curry

Tulipsprings achieved two milestones the weekend of October 27th and 28th. It was the five-year anniversary of our Kennewick, WA course, where we have enjoyed so many eventing activities and clinics for all levels; and course designer and U.S. Olympic Eventing Team Coach Captain Mark Phillips came to visit!

Riders have appreciated the “dry side” with good footing and a break from rain (wind, sun, ice, etc, yes, but rarely rain). Since Captain Mark Phillips designed the course in 2007 (with Mogie Bearden-Muller), I have been recruiting him to come to Kennewick to give a clinic for Area VII. His reply has always been “after London” (and the Olympics). This year it finally happened. Captain Mark came to Tulipsprings. And it rained. Buckets.

I have observed some changes in the eventing world over the last 10 years (more on that later) and was concerned that

maybe eventers have gone a little soft and would not be okay out in the elements, but boy was I wrong! Everyone went out and had a great weekend (we actually had sun most of Sunday, so that helped). Instead of whining about the rain, they found the silver lining...the footing held up! So we survived and learned! Below are some of clinic observations.

Captain Mark is just getting back to doing clinics after eight years of focusing on the U.S. Olympic Team and developing riders. He was surprised to see some of the “common wisdom” of eventing has changed at the regional level. As an amateur observer of professional trainers and their students, I have been a bit confused by the contrast between what is taught at the lower levels vs. what the World Class instructors are teaching. The biggest area of conflict for me has been position and mechanics approaching the fences.



▲ *Tammie and Molly jump into the water, with Captain Mark Phillips instructing.*

Many of us were raised to use a generous release over the fence. However, in recent years many instructors are teaching students to fix their hands, in part for balance and non-interference with the gallop. When this technique is ridden correctly, with the body fairly forward, only a slight movement at the fence is required. Unfortunately, when done incorrectly, the horse is caught in the mouth.

I was happy to see Captain Mark teaching a compromise between the old and new way. He wanted a forward, but balanced galloping position, with hands resting on the withers until you get near the fence. Then, he asked for a slightly lifted hand that can follow several inches as the horse jumps. Captain Mark's teaching is not as exaggerated as the old, traditional 'release over the fence' but it clarifies that there should be some 'give' to the horse over the fence and reduces the chances of catching your horse's mouth.

It was an "ah-ha" moment for me and I think Captain Mark also had a bit of an eye-opening, regarding how high level teaching might be getting a bit misinterpreted at the regional levels.

Most of the riders were baffled at first, by Captain Mark's approach. I heard: "My trainer tells me just the opposite," many times through the weekend. But as the rider's tried Mark's more forward position and giving hand (or better yet

as Mark got on their horses and demonstrated), most became believers and I started hearing: "It's never been this easy!" and "My horse has never gone so well." We spent a lot of time on basic position and mechanics and for most people those basics really paid off by the end of the weekend. The horses were much happier, too!

Our riders were also pleased with how dedicated and focused Captain Mark was throughout the weekend. He stood out in the rain all day Saturday (but finally put his sunglasses on Sunday!) and worked through his lunch hour to be sure everyone got all the time they needed.

Some riders had concerns, prior to the clinic, that the transition to teaching at the lower levels might be difficult for Mark or that he would be intimidating. These worries proved to be unfounded. Here are a few of my favorite rider quotes, confirming how well things went: "I was very impressed with Mark. He was gracious, kind, attentive, and respectful with everyone, regardless of age, ability, or quality of horse."

"Capt. Mark was really a great instructor. He held me to a higher standard than anyone I've ridden with and he did it in a way that didn't make me feel small or useless."

We are really looking forward to Captain Mark's return to Tulipsprings, tentatively scheduled for March 30-31. It better not rain! ❖