

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

*Lexington, VA, May 28, 2016* - In December 2015, Virginia Horse Trials (VHT) announced the creation of the [Course Designer Mentor Program](#) intended to encourage the future development of the sport and provide a valuable educational opportunity for someone pursuing a career in cross-country course design.

“It is an important process to help young designers learn from senior designers. By doing that we develop the pool of designers in this country,” said VHT organizer Andy Bowles. “Part of our role as event organizers is to support bringing in new designers and help train them.”

Designer John Michael Durr was selected by an independent panel to participate in the program's first cycle. Durr is an upper-level event rider, a USEF “r” Eventing Course Designer and the current designer at Woodland Stallion Station in Woodland, Calif.



*John Michael Durr designed the Beginner Novice, Novice, Training and Preliminary courses at the May Virginia Horse Trials. Photo by Leslie Threlkeld*

“One of the key decisions in choosing John Michael was that he has a feel for 'old-school' thinking,” Bowles said. “Not everything is made of machined timber. It’s open and flowing with natural fences and the idea to train the horses through the levels. He also has a desire to learn.”

As part of the Mentor Program, Durr would take over designing the Beginner Novice, Novice, Training and Preliminary horse trials courses at the Virginia Horse Center in Lexington, Va. He would also work closely with VHT’s FEI course designer John Nicholson for an initial two-year period. Nicholson is the designer at The New Zealand National 3-Day Event Championships and the course director for the FEI International Course Designers Seminar in Ireland.

“John Nicholson is a master. It’s nice to go through a program like this and have your own side of the road (the facility has two sides) where I get to do my own thing, but I get to ask questions if I want help setting something, or he’ll tell me how he might do something differently. It’s still my course, still my work, but I can get to have his input and I get to reach out for help when I need something,” Durr said.



*New, frangible open oxers on the Training and Preliminary cross country course at Virginia Horse Trial.  
Photo by Leslie Threlkeld*

Durr's goal as a designer is to create courses that educate the horses. He believes that no matter what the rider does, a good course will result in a more educated horse at the finish line. "Course designers in the sport have huge responsibility for the education of the horses and riders, second only to the trainer. It's really important. The right course design can set the tone for a horse's career," Durr said.

At VHT, Durr aims to prepare the lower level horses and riders for the questions they will see as they progress up the levels so they develop good instincts and continue to have positive experiences. By creating a foundation for learning at the lower levels, horses and riders are better prepared for technical questions presented to them later.

"One of the big things I believe in is a horse needs to be able to read a ditch and jump over it, not just run over it. So you'll find the Beginner Novice and Novice [at VHT] jump a little ditch off of a curve. They can't run at it. They have to slow down, assess it, decide it's a ditch and step over it," Durr said.

"By the time you get to Kentucky and they're jumping straight down into a coffin, they don't get to read and assess. They have to know what a ditch is. I know it seems like a far stretch, but at Beginner Novice here is where that education has to happen."

The challenge, he said, is presenting questions that can be negotiated by horses and riders new to the level as well as experienced pairs that are ready to move up.

"Especially at the lower levels, you're constantly designing for the middle. I can't design something that only I can ride, but I also can't design something that everybody can ride that my horses won't get any education from.

"For example, a Beginner Novice coffin has to be simple enough for that horse's first horse show, but it also has to be complex enough for that person moving up to Novice at the next show. You have to keep this person safe and you have to give this person the experience and you have to mesh them in the middle."



*The brand new picnic table at fence 2 on the Novice course. Beginner Novice, Training and Preliminary each have a similar new fence number 2. Photo by Leslie Threlkeld*

VHT has plenty of terrain, giving a designer a lot of options but also challenging them to make the “ups and downs and sideways,” as John Michael puts it, flow together.

“In California, we go and look for every piece of terrain and exploit it for every level. Here I spent the first half of the day doing that and realized it wouldn’t work. It has been a really good exercise to do the opposite of the course I designed two weeks ago.”

Several new jumps were created for both the horse trials and the FEI divisions over the last year and more will be constructed for the future. Bowles and his team at VHT have worked hard to take the facility to a new level, and including the Mentor Program in that progression is the chance to develop the sport as a whole.

As for Durr, he plans to get a USEF “R” Eventing Course Design license, and he has a long term goal to receive his FEI 3\*/4\* design license. “I’m not in a rush. I think it’s an art. I think it takes time and I think it takes practice.”

Learn more about the Virginia Horse Trials at [www.vahorsetrials.com](http://www.vahorsetrials.com).

Learn more about John Michael Durr at [www.durreventing.com](http://www.durreventing.com).

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