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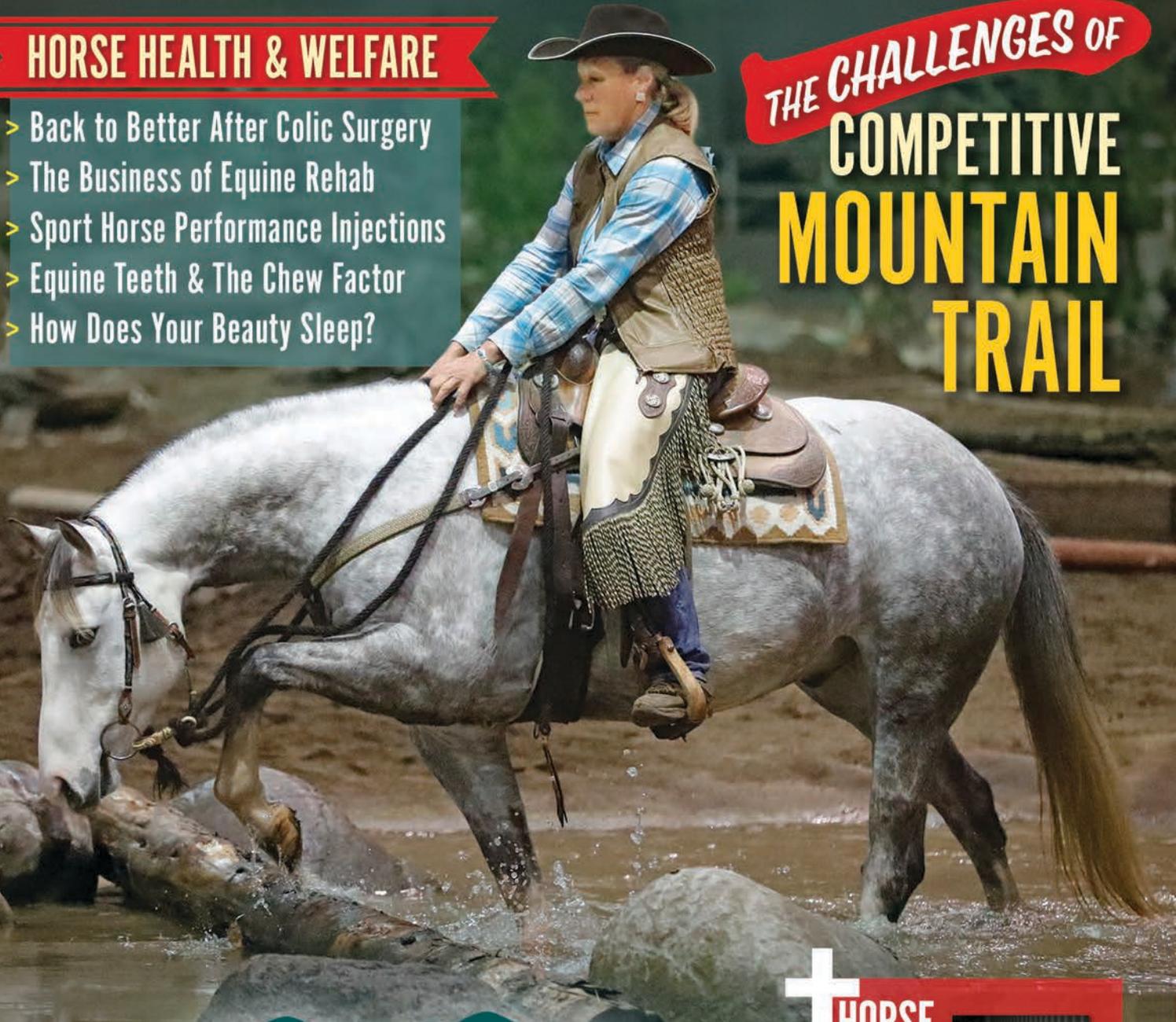
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## THE CHALLENGES OF COMPETITIVE MOUNTAIN TRAIL



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# Competitive Mountain Trail provides New Challenges

By Tania Millen

Twenty years ago, the Oregon Horse Center in Eugene, Oregon held an indoor trail competition using log obstacles, water ponds, and dirt embankments to transform their arena into mountain trails. That event was the beginning of competitive mountain trail, where neatly dressed riders navigate an untimed, subjectively-judged course of obstacles typically found on wilderness mountain trails. In Canada, two

organizations promote the sport — International Mountain Trail Challenge Association (IMTCA) Canada and the British Columbia Mountain Trail Association (BCMTA) — and each has their own rules, judging criteria, and obstacles.

IMTCA Canada is based in Ontario and supports challenges (competitive events) held at two courses in Ontario, a new park in Saskatchewan, and one location in Nova

Scotia that uses portable obstacles. It's part of IMTCA, which was created by Mark and Lee Bolender of Silver Creek, Washington, to promote competitions that test the partnership of horse and rider while navigating obstacles. The organization has expanded to Australia, Germany, Italy, and Canada and has its own rules, obstacle specifications, judging certification, and membership requirements.



The discipline has been described as testing the partnership between rider and horse. Competitor is Gordon Lee.

PHOTO: KARI SCHMULAND



Debbie Hughes of Hanging H Quarter Horses in Chilliwack, BC competing at the Oregon Horse Center.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DEBBIE HUGHES

Each obstacle is designed to replicate part of a trail that could be found in the wilderness. Competitors are David and Danielle Ciriani.



PHOTO: PAUL EVENDEN



PHOTO: PAUL EVENDEN



PHOTO: TANIA MILLEN

^ The majority of competitors are women, many of whom are looking for a new challenge.

< Mountain trail builds trust between horses and riders. Competitor is Benny Kerner.

Anita Durant is the President of IMTCA Canada and owns Oak Springs Farm in Pontypool, Ontario, where the first IMTCA-certified mountain trail course was built in 2016. Durant discovered competitive mountain trail in 2013 and believes the sport helps create braver horses and riders, and improves riders' feel and timing while building trust between horses and riders. She says the sport appeals to riders in many disciplines. "Eventers come out to school and compete, dressage riders, jumpers, Western pleasure riders — a whole assortment."

She continues, "Each obstacle is designed to replicate a situation or part of a trail that you would find out in the mountains. For example, when trail riders are going up a switchback, over a bridge, or along a steep mountainside, they ride in the centre of the trail, so competitive mountain trail riders are judged for how well they stay in the middle of the obstacles."

IMTCA competitions have three levels of classes (Levels 1 through 3) with Level 1 classes having the easiest obstacles and Level 3 being the most difficult. Each level



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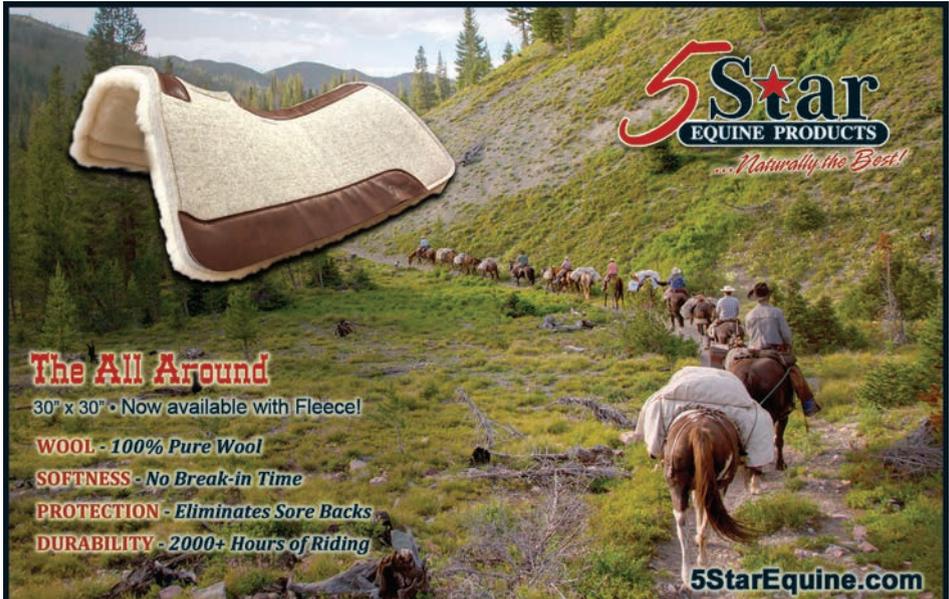




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Debbie Hughes says that the object of mountain trail is for the rider to get the horse to the obstacle and then to stay out of the way and let the horse carry you over it.

is further divided by rider age and experience and there are both in-hand and riding classes. When each rider enters the course to be judged they start with 70 points, plus they can gain or lose five horsemanship points depending on their turnout and horsemanship. Each obstacle is worth nine points — two points for the entry to the obstacle, five points for the main part of the obstacle, and two points for the exit.

“If a rider goes straight through the obstacle with no mistakes they don’t get any points added or subtracted and will remain at 70 points after that obstacle,” says Durant.

Points may be subtracted for wiggling off the obstacle’s centreline or hitting an obstacle, for example, while up to three points can be added at each obstacle for “wow!” factor.

Although there aren’t many competition-ready mountain trail courses across Canada, Durant says, “Anyone can build a course, have it certified [by IMTCA] and run challenges under IMTCA. You need a minimum of six obstacles to be certified and obstacles at every IMTCA-certified park have the same specifications. So, my obstacles [at Oak Springs Farm] ...are the same as those at a certified park in Germany or Italy, Australia or the USA.”

That’s not the case in BC, where BCMTA encourages mountain trail courses that are unique and fit into the lay of the land. The courses, rules, and judging criteria for BCMTA challenges

have been evolving since the organization was created with support from the Oregon Horse Center in 2016. Debbie Hughes, a mountain trail competitor and coach who is one of the main drivers behind BCMTA says, “Mountain trail can’t be taught in a flat arena — it needs to be three-dimensional. So BCMTA courses have five main components — a water pond or crossing, hills, ditches, rocks, and logs. That’s the basics and then you can go crazy after that depending on the terrain you have.”

Typical obstacles include stairs to go up and down, bridges of various widths, logs in different configurations, switch-backed trails up and down hills, a rock garden, and water obstacles. Additionally, BCMTA classes can include tasks that replicate mountain riding such as putting on a slicker, opening a gate, ground tying, mounting, or dragging a log.

In BCMTA challenges, classes have names such as green, explorer, novice, and open, and include in-hand and ridden challenges based on rider age, horse and rider experience, and mountain trail class winnings. According to BCMTA judge Cat Armitage, courses may be divided into two sections, each with their own judge, and before BCMTA riders begin each section of the course they are expected to acknowledge the judge by nodding their head.

Hughes notes there are now four courses in BC that have all the necessary course elements to offer mountain trail events plus suitable stabling and parking

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Larah Pincott and her confident horse ride up the steps (above) and through the crossbuck.




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to host challenges, although there are several private mountain trail courses. There are also many other obstacle and trail courses in BC and Canada plus clinicians who teach obstacle and trail clinics. However, competitive mountain trail obstacles have specific criteria and the sport of mountain trail requires riders to navigate obstacles in a specific manner. Hence, courses that are not built to competitive mountain trail specifications or obstacle lessons that are taught by those unfamiliar with mountain trail competitions may be different from those required by the sport of competitive mountain trail.

One of the unique aspects of mountain trail challenges in BC is the BCMTA scoring system. Each round is judged a bit

like a dressage test whereby every obstacle is worth ten points and a perfect ride through one obstacle would garner a "ten." To determine the rider's score for one class, the points from each obstacle are added up and whichever rider has the highest score wins that class.

Armitage notes that although courses are primarily completed at a walk, it's not just how the horse moves through the obstacles that matters but the whole picture they present while on course. Horses that are confident, purposeful, and mentally and physically engaged garner more points. Hughes believes that competitive mountain trail helps horses develop those winning attributes, along with acceptance of new things, bravery, awareness of surroundings, and



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My Horse My Passion  
**MY MAGAZINE**



PHOTOS: TANIA MILLEN



◀ Tammy Bittner and her equine partner go confidently around the turnstile (top), over bridges (centre two), and under an underpass (bottom).

**Want to Learn More?**

For more information about Competitive Mountain Trail visit these websites:

- **BCMTA**  
[bcmountaintrail.com](http://bcmountaintrail.com)
- **IMTCA Canada**  
[www.imtccanada.com](http://www.imtccanada.com)

Or contact these competition-ready courses:

- **Dragonfly Stable**, Bruce Mine, ON (on Facebook)
- **Grasswood Horse Park**, Saskatoon, SK  
[www.grasswoodhorsepark.ca](http://www.grasswoodhorsepark.ca)
- **Hanging H Arena**, Chilliwack, BC  
[www.dhughesquarterhorses.com](http://www.dhughesquarterhorses.com)
- **Oak Springs Farm**, Pontypool, ON  
[www.oakspringsfarm.ca](http://www.oakspringsfarm.ca)
- **Sagewood Trail Course**, Kamloops, BC  
[www.circlecreek.ca](http://www.circlecreek.ca)
- **Shumway Lake Equestrian Centre**, Knutsford, BC (on Facebook)



surefootedness. She says, “[The horses] are going forward to somewhere, not just going around and around and around, so they stay brighter and more alert. Plus, we stress cadence and control up and down, so the horses have to be sound and strong.”

But it’s not just the horses that benefit. The riders do too. Hughes says, “The object of mountain trail is that you get your horse to the obstacle, then let your horse carry you over the obstacle. But a lot of riders can’t let go of that control; they think they’re helping but they’re not. So, a lot of riders realize [when doing mountain trail obstacles] how they get in the way [of their horse] rather than helping their horse. It makes riders aware of where they lack communication and aids. Riders sometimes don’t trust their horse and after doing mountain trail they’re more confident knowing they can handle whatever comes up.”

As with any horse sport, men and women compete on equal grounds. However, Hughes has found that the majority of riders are women, saying, “It appeals to former women professionals who have shown working cow or cutting and are looking for something else. I’ve encouraged the reiners and cutters to

**Mountain trail helps create braver horses. Sue Downs Saunders and her horse go up the steps.**

come out, too. There are also women who just have a nice horse — a warmblood, dressage horse, reining horse, working cow horse — and want to do more with it.

“It can be a bit too technical for children, although it gets the kids thinking more about their horses and what they can do,” she says.

Hughes adds that although lots of local shows — in all different disciplines — have declining support, the number of entries at mountain trail challenges is increasing. She says challenges in BC are well supported and usually have about 45 entries, with each horse and rider combination competing in a variety of classes. As such, BCMTA is excited to see where the sport goes in the future.

Ultimately, Hughes believes the sport will appeal to a variety of riders, saying, “Mountain trail is very technical. I’ve ridden my whole life in all different disciplines and I think it’s the toughest thing I’ve ever done.”

> **Tania Millen** is a regular contributor to this magazine — read her bio on page 82.

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