

Hartpury 2012 – The Dramatic True Story

It can be a tricky thing being a riding club widower. Your wife or girlfriend gets hopelessly excited about anything equestrian and jabbars in a language you barely understand about things like 'surcingles' and 'going in an outline'. I was like you once and the prospect of going along to competitions and the like used to fill me with dread. I wouldn't know anyone and would be immediately exposed as someone who didn't know their square oxer from their medium trot. The idea of going away for an entire weekend to live amongst the horsey folk was too awful to imagine!

I would still think that way if I hadn't been tricked into going to the National Championships at Lincoln in 2011. It was then that I realised I was not alone – for every rider present there was a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband or wife who felt the same way I did and frankly just wanted a beer. What's more I found my fellow 'non-riding members' were a bloody good laugh and excellent company throughout the day of competition and into the night. It didn't matter if you thought spurs were a football club and a girth was something pub regulars developed. Even better, you got brownie points from your partner for just being there and 'helping' and before you know it (and quite without realising its happening) you begin to learn how it all works.

First you start picking up some jargon and getting to grips with the scoring system then suddenly you're a die-hard Lothian's Riding Club fan – egging on the riders and loudly applauding their efforts, eyeing the opposition with barely concealed distrust and drinking yourself silly with the team at the end of the day regardless of the result.

By the time Lothians ran the Area 1 qualifier in October 2011 for the indoor showjumping National Championships at Hartpury I was already deeply involved enough to be a pole-picker-upper in the arena. This gave me an unrivalled view and I watched both LRC teams put in solid performances. In a field of 19 teams the Smurfettes finished 4th and the Smurfs (of which my own girlfriend was one) won the day with zero faults. Everyone was really chuffed although I did spend some time trying to figure out how far away Hartpury was!

After Christmas the team began to get prepared and a fundraising raffle and team practises were organised. I went along to these to film the practise rounds and drink the beer I'd been bribed with. The team were getting jumpy (pardon the pun) and this is the prime opportunity for partners to put in some good work reassuring their rider and saying comforting things like "you made a lovely shape over that fence darling" and "I expect he spooked at those awful children".

Soon the raffle came around and was a great success which meant that no-one had to dip into their savings to pay for the trip. Despite this good news the raffle had taken place just one week before the competition so the team had already entered the 'bag of nerves' phase. Another great opportunity to earn brownie points with a bit of deft reassurance.

Finally the day came and we were off! Two lorries made their way slowly but surely to Gloucestershire and in the 9.5 hours it took to get there I was able to eat loads of rubbish and snooze in the back. After the horses were sorted out Jim, Phil and myself were tasked with transporting our overnight stuff to the accommodation block. Being men of resource we achieved this in record time and were only held up by an accidental detour into the bar across the road – whoops! There was time for a quick dinner and a return to the bar before getting an early night before the big day.

Up early, all the helper smurfs were kept busy grooming horses and managing hysterical riders. Thankfully the individual rounds were over an hour apart so we had plenty of time to get one warmed up and ready, rush into the gallery, film, clap and congratulate them before rushing out to get the next one going.

The atmosphere and tension really gets to you whether you're a rider or not and every time Lothians had a rider in the ring we all watched with our hearts in our mouths. I'll leave it to others to report on how well they did, suffice to say it was a rollercoaster of emotion.

Afterwards we had a nice meal together and got free NAF wristbands which repel insects and people with fashion sense. Then it was on to the bar for the celebrations – after all we had come such a long way and each rider performed admirably. The night was a bit of a blur (for the barstaff anyway) but I do remember Debbie getting her bumblebee tattoo out several times (I'm not sure I saw the 'blebee' but I definitely saw the 'bum'). Julia and Duncan had the longest game of pool I have ever seen (which either shows how tactically they play or how sh*t they are) to a rich commentary from the rest of the club. Jim got pissed and got his nose out, much to the delight of Phil and the disgust of Julia, and Duncan got all randy, causing Debbie to run away to the (temporary) safety of their lorry.

At kicking out time Julia and Jim, Laura and Phil and Jan and myself headed back to the accommodation block to drink champagne and hear stories of Jim's misspent youth before heading off to bed. We were rudely awoken around 8am by the fire alarm which had been set off by Laura and Phil's burning loins. The guilty couple had retreated outside like naughty sex offenders to await the warden, but Jim and I, being old hats at this sort of game, gave the place a quick once over to check for flames, tried to silence the alarm on the wall then retreated to our beds. The warden when he arrived was shocked that we wouldn't evacuate even when we cited hangovers as a reasonable excuse.

Drama over, everything was packed up and we were off. At least we made it half a mile before there was a problem with Duncan's lorry. No-one knows what he and Debbie got up to in the lorry the night before but whatever it was it was enough to dislodge the exhaust. Luckily Jim 'Multi-smurf' Dow had brought a worryingly large supply of latex gloves and a coathanger and was able to save the day. From then it was a simple 9.5 hour journey home.

What a weekend it was – good riding, great laughs and excellent company. In my limited experience team competitions are the most fun you can have near horses and I'd wholeheartedly recommend them to all club members. If you're a rider, get your other half along for a bit of banter and if you're a riding club widower like me who fancies meeting some like-minded souls why not persuade your other half to give teams a go – you won't regret it!