



History of the Essex Horse Trials

By Sally Ike

It is hard to believe that it was almost fifty years ago that a few of us got together to help Roger Haller with his vision of establishing a high quality event for the preliminary level competitor.

As Roger explained in the 1995 Essex program "It was during the summer of 1968. The Team was training at Gladstone, getting ready for the Mexico Olympic Games to be held in October. The group included Jimmy Wofford, Michael Plumb, Michael Page, Kevin Freeman, Mason Phelps, Rick Eckhardt, and Sally Lord (now Ike). We were at Jim and Gail Wofford's party. Our conversation turned to the fact that we had some nice three-day events, some decent high level ones, but we didn't have any quality events for lower level horses. We realized that was our greatest need. For some reason, my mother said, well, Roger has been talking about building a course on our property and my husband and I would be happy to do it."

That was the beginning, and the first Essex Horse Trials was held that September at Jean and Elliot Haller's Hoopstick Farm. The stories about Roger being notorious for not getting the cross country course finished until the very end are all true. I well remember looking for him on Friday evening that first year, and finding him building a ditch by headlights that would be jumped the next day!

With a few breaks, first because Roger was named to the Eventing Squad and then because he had been appointed as the Course Designer for the 1978 World Championships at the Kentucky Horse Park, Essex stayed at Hoopstick until 1979. Jean and Elliot had sold Hoopstick Farm, and the decision was made to move the competition 'up the street a few miles' to the U.S. Equestrian Team's Headquarters at Gladstone. This move put Essex back on the map, and the event was run continually at Gladstone until 1998. It became a Three Day Event in 1979, but was still oriented toward the preliminary level. By 1989, Essex was recognized by the Federation Equestre International (FEI) as an international competition – offering by the mid-90s, competition at the CCI One and Two Star levels. 1989 was also the first year that M&M/Mars became the main sponsor.

The Essex Horse Trials became a destination event for event riders up and down the East Coast. Looking through the 1995 list of competitors brings back fond memories and familiar names who are still involved today: Stephan Bradley, Sally Cousins, Bruce Davidson, Phyllis Dawson, Phillip Dutton, Wendy Furlong, Kevin Keane, David O'Connor, Karen O'Connor, and Mark Weissbecker to name a few.

But as many famous personalities (both human and equine) who competed there, my overriding memory of Essex was the community involvement and support it received. And it is for this reason that the rebirth at Moorland Farm is so exciting. Through the generosity of Guy Torsilieri and the Far Hills Race Committee, we have a venue which we believe is 2nd to none from a cross country perspective, and which we look forward to developing further. With the support of the community, title sponsor M&M/Mars and many others, the Essex Horse Trials has a bright future ahead. We indeed have a tiger by the tail. I am proud that I was there at the beginning and look forward to staying involved in the years to come!