

# Embrace Your Stage Fright

*Gold medal advice for the competition season.*

By Denny Emerson



**D**reams. Stage fright. Trepidation. Struggles. March 1973. Exactly 50 years ago, I set myself up for more stage fright than I could have ever imagined. But I lived through it and it changed my life.

In the summer of 1961, when I was about to turn 20, I was working for Art Titus as his assistant rider at Robert Lippitt Knight's Green Mountain Stock Farm in Randolph, Vermont, home of the Lippitt Morgans. Allen Leslie had heard about some three-day event championship down in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, and he and I drove down to watch.

I had never seen big-time cross country jumping, and I came back from that spectacle somehow convinced that not only would I learn how to do that sport, but that I would win a gold medal for the United States. Talk about the ignorant arrogance of young men!

I started eventing the next summer and, in a pretty much self-taught fashion, sort of fumbled along, making lots of mistakes and

having a few local triumphs, but my grandiose predictions from 1961 were becoming increasingly remote and unlikely.

By 1971, 10 years later, I had clawed my way up to the advanced level on an \$800 former barrel racing horse from Oklahoma, and that same summer I had met and competed against Jane Schemilt and her Quebec-bred Victor Dakin, a tough little horse said to be a mixture of Thoroughbred, Arabian, and Morgan.

In the spring of 1973, Jane wrote me that she was getting deeply involved in professional photography, and did I have any interest in buying Victor Dakin? We arranged to go see him in March of 1973 in the Eastern Townships of Quebec.

He was hard for me to ride in dressage with my limited skills, but he seemed to be a jumping machine so we brought Victor down to Strafford, Vermont. Forces were beginning to converge, unknown to me at the time, that would sweep Victor and me to the biggest international stage of all, where maximum stage fright would become my constant reality.

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**ABOVE:** Denny casts his 1974 Three-Day Eventing Gold Medal riding Victor Dakin as an unlikely breakthrough for a relatively young rider who rode despite having butterflies. Britain's Prince Philip is presenting the medals to (left to right) Mike Plumb, Bruce Davidson, Denny Emerson, and Don Sachey.



The headquarters of the United States Equestrian Team were in South Hamilton, Massachusetts, under the direction of the new coach (newly arrived from France), Jack LeGoff. LeGoff announced that there would be three selection trials, from which he would select a group of nine riders to train for the World Championship Three-Day Event, to be held in September at the Burghley Horse Trials in England.

Of the nine, six would depart for England where four would eventually comprise the U. S. team, the other two would ride as individuals. I entered the trials and was chosen as one of the nine for initial training. I had no illusions. I figured that I was probably number nine out of nine, and it was a now or never situation if it was ever going to happen for me, so I had better suck it up and dig deep.

In several events in England leading to the world championships, Victor just kept on jumping clear round after clear round. When we arrived at Burghley, we were selected to be one of the four horse-and-rider pairs to comprise Team USA.

I had hardly competed out of little New England. I had ridden in the National Morgan Horse Show in Northampton and in the Ledyard Farm three-day event, but apart from those, hundreds of little shows and horse trials. My sole international experience was in Quebec, an adjoining province to my home state of Vermont, so that hardly counted. Suddenly, everywhere I looked were famous Olympic and world championship gold, silver, and bronze medal winners; members of teams from Great Britain, Germany, Ireland, U.S.S.R, Poland, France, Switzerland, Italy, and Austria. The Queen of England, Prince Philip, and Princess Anne were there. On cross country day, something like a quarter million spectators lined the course. Just as Dorothy said in *The Wizard of Oz*, "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

When, as a team, we walked the gigantic cross-country course, with the magnificent Burghley House as a backdrop, I realized even more what a huge jumping challenge I faced. In those long format days, there were four sections of cross country to be completed. Phase A was 3.7 miles of "roads and tracks" to be completed at a nine-miles-per-hour trot in 30 minutes. Then, Phase B, 2.35 miles of steeplechase over enormous brush hedges taken at about 26-miles-an-hour, in five and a half minutes. Next, Phase C, another six-and-a-half miles of roads and tracks, again, at a fast nine-miles-per-hour trot for 43 minutes. Then, a ten-minute rest break and vet check, before heading out over almost five

miles of daunting cross country jumps at 21-miles-per-hour, to be completed in 13 minutes and 30 seconds.

In all, the test was more than 17 miles, 19 minutes of which were at a gallop over jumps, and the total elapsed riding time was to be one hour and 27 minutes.

When I woke up early in the morning on Saturday, September 16, 1974, for about 15 seconds I was OK. Then I remembered what day it was and that first surge of adrenaline hit me. It had taken 20 years of competing to bring me to this time and place. My first gymkhana, age 12, was in 1954. I had placed third in the 1957 Justin Morgan Performance Class in Northampton with Lippitt Sandy. Over the intervening years I'd gone through the ingates of hundreds of little horse shows and had ridden in dozens of horse trials. But did any of that mean that I was ready? I was about to find out.

Anything can go wrong when there are so many moving parts, so many places for pilot error, such a seemingly overwhelming array of challenges. Somehow, though, on that day, of all days if I had to choose just one, the stars aligned. Victor Dakin and I had one of 15 clear rounds out of 60 of the best event pairs in the world, and after show jumping the following day I found myself lined up with my three USET teammates, Bruce Davidson, Mike Plumb, and Don Sachey, the four of us being handed gold medals by Prince Philip.

Let's admit that sitting at the ingate, or at the beginning of a course, or waiting to execute a pattern can be "Butterfly City" for so many riders and drivers. How does one move past that?

What conclusions can be drawn? First, understand that you will have fears and will absolutely feel discouraged and overwhelmed some of the time, but—

sometimes a big "but," I grant you—if you can press through, so many wonders can wait on the other side. Don't be afraid to dream big. Practice as though success is inevitable.

I'm not the only one to make these suggestions. You may have heard the wonderful saying "The euphoria and joy you feel *after* the experience is in direct proportion to the anxiety you felt *before*." Here's another, "Everything you've ever wanted is on the other side of fear." Goethe puts the same sentiment rather more majestically, "Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it."

I would emphatically add one other thing: If somehow it all works, be grateful to the horse that made it happen. ■



Pure joy often follows the rigors of competition as Laura Laney's big smile aboard SCMF Gov Arnold CH attests.

(photo © Charlene Kolodziej)