Lucas Porter

Nonfiction Essay Assignment

A Winning Jump-off

A cool, winter evening in Wellington, Florida is highlighted by a Saturday Night Lights competition of show jumping. A weekly tradition during the winter months of January through March, tonight’s event is the Suncast sponsored 1.50m Final. Diamonte Darco, a 14 year old English Sport Horse mare, and I compete over the difficult initial competition followed by a jump-off round against the clock. Bridget, as she is known in the stable, and I are up against 45 of the best horse and rider combinations in the world.

After we successfully complete the initial round of competition, we qualify for the jump-off portion of the event. A jump-off is a shortened version of the initial course of obstacles. The horse and rider combination that clear the course of obstacles in the quickest time win the competition.

The massive floodlights above emit their rays of energy down upon the arena. Bouncing off the multi-colored obstacles, the rays then enter both Bridget’s and my eyes. These particles of energy are what allow us to see and compete at the highest level. As we gallop across the arena preparing to face the first obstacle we travel at a speed greater than 4 m/s, thus establishing a rhythm and gallop that we will maintain throughout the jump-off course.

My brain sends a signal to the muscles in my left arm as well as to my lower right leg to begin the process of turning Bridget to the first obstacle. As we approach the obstacle, I notice from around seven strides away that Bridget’s stride is covering a significant portion of ground, such that I will arrive too close in order to clear it. The *perfect distance*, as it is known in the sport of show jumping, is the distance away from the obstacle that equals the height of it from which a horse and rider should leave the ground. The first obstacle of the jump-off is 1.45m, so the ideal distance from which Bridget and I should take off is approximately 1.45m away from the obstacle. In this case, however, I want to ensure Bridget lands in a more forward pace, so I pull on her mouth, slowing her down and shortening her stride, allowing us to take off at a 40° angle upwards from 1.60m away from the obstacle. The clock is running, so time is of the essence.

We clear the first obstacle and gallop away towards the second obstacle which is 9 horse strides away. A horse’s stride is around 12 feet long, as each leg moves around 3 feet when at a gallop of 4 m/s. In order to minimize the time between jumps two and three, Bridget and I approach the second obstacle at a 20° angle to the right of the middle point. We clear the second obstacle and immediately change our focus to the third obstacle, a vertical standing 1.55m. As we have to make a sharp reverse turn to the right to reach the fourth obstacle, I ensure we jump the obstacle on a more severe 45° angle to the right. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line – while I cannot make a straight line, this increased angle of approach minimizes the strides needed between the obstacles. This allows us to minimize strides needed to reach the next obstacle. The fourth and fifth obstacles are set 9 strides apart. As the sixth obstacle is a sharp, 240° turn to the left, it is important to not jump the fifth obstacle with too much horizontal velocity as it would cause the turn to be too wide – similar to Formula 1 cars that slow down before entering sharp turns. We decrease our velocity as we reach the fifth obstacle, clear the 1.50m obstacle, turn to the left, and soar over the sixth obstacle on a 35° angle to the right. The seventh obstacle is at a 180° turn to the right of the sixth obstacle. So, we give our best effort and slice the seventh obstacle on hard right to left angle, clearing it and galloping towards the eighth, the penultimate obstacle in the course.

The final two obstacles are in a line of 8 strides, or 96 feet apart. Bridget and I jump the penultimate obstacle clear and increase our velocity to the last obstacle to around 4.3 m/s, but making sure to maintain a wide track so as not to reach the fence too close to its base. We race to the finish. Clearing the last obstacle, our time stops at 47.9 seconds. We have won the competition.