

Prepare for the Worst at the Show

What dressage show management and competitors need to know about disaster preparedness. Second of two parts.

BY JUDY NAUSEEF



DEVASTATED: Massive wind-driven rains from a severe storm flooded arenas and toppled structures at the Great Lakes Equestrian Festival grounds in Traverse City, Michigan, in August 2021, on the eve of that year's FEI North American Youth Championships dressage competition.



LAURA ROBERTS/USEF

Severe weather and natural disasters don't happen only when people are at home. Sometimes Mother Nature unleashes her wrath when people and horses may be especially vulnerable: at a dressage show.

"I have had a tornado or microburst hit Ox Ridge Hunt Club [Connecticut] on Friday evening before a weekend show," says longtime competition manager Debra Reinhardt, a Connecticut native who now resides in Loxahatchee, Florida. "Hurricane Floyd hit in the middle of the USDF Region 8 Championships/NEDA Fall Festival in Massachusetts. I have had six inches of rain drop in an hour, and there was a major thunderstorm during last year's Regional Championships."

At the 2021 FEI North American Youth Championships (NAYC) at the Great Lakes Equestrian Festival (GLEF) grounds in Traverse City, Michigan, a forecast storm the eve of the dressage competition struck with unexpected intensity. Torrential rain turned arenas into lakes. High winds toppled judges' boxes, uprooted trees, hurled the jumbotron into one of the rings, and shredded the VIP tent. The facility lost power and water. Thankfully, no one was hurt, and after a postponement the competition went off as planned.

In the last issue, we gave you tools to help you to be weather-aware and prepared in the event that severe weather or a natural disaster affects your farm or equestrian facility ("Prepare for the Worst," July/August). Now let's turn our attention to what show management and competitors can do when nature's worst bears down on a dressage show.

A Serious Responsibility

Dressage competitors may tend to think of show management as the people who process the entries, hire the officials, oversee the stabling, and hand out the ribbons. But the manager's job carries a great deal more responsibility than that.

During severe-weather events and other situations, it is show management that must prepare, act, and make decisions that could potentially affect the safety of everyone at or traveling to the show grounds. Those events, as we discussed in the last issue, range from hurricanes and floods to tornadoes, wildfires, derechos and straight-line winds, thunderstorms, blizzards, ice storms, and dangerous air quality—such as that resulting from the smoke from Canadian wildfires that had already affected much of the US as this issue was preparing to go to press. ➔



SET SAIL: Winds tore the tent material off the two-story VIP structure at the 2021 NAYC

There can be challenges even under “normal” weather conditions, such as what Reinhardt, who also manages the annual US Dressage Finals in Kentucky, terms the “four seasons in four days” phenomenon, with rapidly changing conditions that have forced show officials to deal with summerlike temperatures one day and, 48 hours or so later, freezing arena footing and slippery conditions from sleet and snow.

ONLINE EXTRA

When a severe storm devastated the grounds at Traverse City, Michigan, in August 2021, the community banded together to ensure that the show would go on for the kids at the 2021 FEI North American Youth Championships. Read the full story at yourdressage.org/2021/09/01/persevering-through-the-storm-the-2021-fei-north-american-youth-championships/.

Experience Matters

The US Equestrian Federation (USEF), our country’s equestrian national governing body, produces an Incident Response Resource Guide (downloadable at usef.org) for those who manage USEF-licensed competitions. The guide makes a passing reference to severe weather but is geared toward equine and human accidents and other such issues, Reinhardt points out.

“USEF does not give us specific instructions to follow in cases of environmental disasters,” she says. USEF rules help to point the way forward, but “It is our experience that tells us what to do.”

When such a situation occurs, show managers rely heavily on team members’ experience in handling all sorts of crises, as well as their knowledge of the show grounds, input from local emergency services, and other factors.

“We are always watching the weather, and we have lightning and weather warnings on our phones,” Reinhardt says. “If bad weather is

coming, usually the show manager and safety coordinator will meet with the facility’s manager and/or footing person. We decide how to handle the footing, possible flooding, et cetera. Our primary concern is the safety of the horses and participants.”

Weather patterns aren’t 100% predictable, but show managers who know an area well are able to make some judgment calls based on their experience.

As a longtime manager of shows at the HITS Saugerties grounds in New York, Reinhardt has learned that “if a storm is coming from one direction, you are going to get hit, but if it’s coming from another it will miss you. This happens at Saugerties all the time. We have mountains around us, and there are patterns of storms which [look] really bad on the weather radar but will not hit us because of the mountains. However,” she continues, “there is one condition that, when I see it coming, I know we are going to get hit.” In such cases, “I prepare the announcer to get people back to the barns, and if I have trail-

IMPORTANT RESOURCES

er-ins, I find stalls. Everyone takes shelter. Once the storm has passed, we give announcements to tell riders the restart information. This is a typical scenario that happens most of the time at shows with bad weather.”

Most show managers are quick to comply with USEF’s recommendation that competition be stopped in the face of severe-weather warnings, lightning or thunder, and so on; and that it not resume until 30 minutes have passed without severe weather.

When conditions are bad enough, the competition schedule may have to be altered substantially. (There is a USEF general rule detailing the process in such cases. If in extreme circumstances USEF rules cannot be followed, show management calls an emergency USEF phone number to request permission to alter the rules as needed to cope with the situation.) Reinhardt has had lots of experience with this, too, including at last year’s Region 8 championships at HITS Saugerties.

Severe thunderstorms with flooding rains fired up the first morning of competition, and “at 7:15 a.m. I called a riders’ meeting, using my announcers and staff to get everyone there,” she recalls. After discussion and consultation with competitors, HITS personnel, and the “HITS footing guru,” Reinhardt suspended all competition until mid-afternoon, running only championship classes “in the rings that HITS knew would be the best.” But after the storms passed, “the rest of the weekend ran smoothly!”

Pulling off such huge changes requires constant communication among show management, staffers, volunteers, officials, and competitors—lots of announcements and e-mail and text messages regarding schedule changes, ring changes, or other necessary rules-bending—such

Here’s a list of disaster-preparedness resources mentioned in this article, plus a few more that show management and dressage competitors can use to stay as safe as possible during the show.

AirNow (airnow.gov): Enter a ZIP code, city, or state in the search box to get air-quality information for that locale. In response to the recent air-quality issues in the US caused by Canadian-wildfire smoke, the US Equestrian Federation (USEF) promoted the use of the AirNow site and “strongly recommends, in situations where the Air Quality Index (AQI) reaches 151 or above, that an organizer consider suspending or cancelling competition.”

Equine heat-stress resources: Horses are susceptible to heat-related illness. This resource from SmartPak includes information on deciding when it’s too hot to ride and tips for treating heat stress and heat stroke in horses: smarpakequine.com/learn-health/horse-heat-stress-stroke.

US Environmental Protection Agency (epa.gov): Covering a wide range of topics including air quality, climate change, and others. The Emergency Response section (under the Environmental Topics drop-down menu) contains a “Citizen’s Guide for Natural Disasters,” with resources, infographics, and tips for hurricane preparedness.

US Equestrian Federation Incident Response Resource Guide: usef.org/forms-pubs/dAplsHf4KcY/sample-incident-response-manual-for-appendix-f-resources Appendix F (Resources) contains a list of weather websites, such as the National Weather Service and the National Severe Storms Laboratory.

Wet Bulb Globe Temperature: The WBGT is considered a more accurate index of heat-related stress than the commonly used heat index. While the heat index measures the combined effects of temperature and humidity, the WBGT also factors wind speed, sun angle, and cloud cover. The *Fédération Equestre Internationale* (FEI) uses the WBGT, which in 2018 was the basis for its calling off the remainder of the endurance competition at the 2018 FEI World Equestrian Games in North Carolina. Find the US National Weather Service’s WBGT maps at digital.mdl.nws.noaa.gov; select Wet Bulb Globe Temperature from the drop-down menu.

as at the 2022 US Dressage Finals, when on a freezing-cold day “we spoke to the judges to get them on board with our decision to allow riders to wear winter jackets in the outside [competition] arenas,” Reinhardt says.

“Communication is important!” Reinhardt stresses. “Getting the riders involved is a huge deal” and helps competitors to “take ownership of the decision,” she says.

When Preparedness Meets the Unexpected

If anyone is the master of the disaster-preparedness pivot, it’s the dressage-show manager.

These intrepid professionals are in charge of large athletic competitions held at all times of the year, all over the country, almost always outdoors and in all sorts of weather, with competitors and officials often traveling great distances by road or air to show grounds that may or may not have decent cell-phone service—what could possibly go wrong?

Show management hopes for the best but prepares for the worst, and even then veterans have learned to expect the occasional curve ball, “like the tornado that was not predicted at all” at the Ox Ridge grounds, says Reinhardt. “In all cases, you have to know your show



THE SHOW MUST GO ON: A ring-crew member tends arena footing after a heavy downpour during the dressage competition at the 2014 FEI World Equestrian Games in France. Many show facilities have such good footing and drainage that arenas are rideable again after a short time.

STAY SAFE: TIPS FOR COMPETITORS

If severe weather or another crisis strikes the show grounds, the number-one rule is to pay attention to announcements and to comply promptly with instructions. If you've been ordered to take cover and you're a trailer-in, put your horse on the trailer and then get inside your vehicle. If the competition is stopped for lightning, stay away from metal or conducting materials.

The disaster-preparedness tips presented in the last issue of *USDF Connection* ("Prepare for the Worst," July/August), such as keeping mobile devices charged and installing weather apps, apply to competitors at show grounds, too. Here are a few additional preparedness measures that competitors may want to consider.

- If the show is not in your hometown, set your weather app to the show's location when you arrive, if the app doesn't update your location automatically. Be sure that weather notifications are enabled.
- Think ahead: In the event of heavy rain, would your truck and trailer be likely to get stuck in the mud? If you can, park on higher ground.
- If you're stabling overnight, refuel your towing vehicle promptly after you arrive.
- Would your hay and bedding be ruined if the stabling area flooded? Tarps and pallets will help keep supplies off the ground and dry.
- Keep horses' water buckets filled in case of a power outage.
- If a storm bears down, stow portable chairs, folding saddle stands, and any other lightweight items that could become projectiles.
- Pack a variety of clothing for humans and horses in case it turns hotter, colder, or wetter than anticipated.
- Fill out stall cards on arrival, preferably in permanent ink.
- If you don't think the footing, air quality, or other conditions are in the best interests of your health or your horse's, you don't *have* to ride your test. (Just please let the secretary know you're scratching.)

grounds, the footing, and the staff and their specialty."

Those who have endured severe weather at a dressage show say that getting through the ordeal truly takes teamwork—not just on the part of show management, but from the volunteers, the grounds crew, the officials, and the competitors. Fortunately, the dressage community is famous for pulling together in times of crisis.

After the devastation at the 2021 NAYC, "The entire staff at GLEF came together to ensure the competition could continue...and had the rings up and running in just under three hours," USEF dressage staffer Laura Roberts told *YourDressage.org* at the time.

For dedicated dressage supporters, coping with whatever Mother Nature dishes out is all in a day's work.



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