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Embattled at The Event

By GREG SCHINDLER✉

The Daily Inter Lake

Rebecca Farm's breathtaking cross country course appears friendly enough. Its inviting ponds and whimsical wood carvings — including dinosaurs and rainbow trout — lend to the aura of a sprawling equestrian playground.

But that playful pasture proved troublesome for some of the world's best eventers Saturday as 13 CIC three-star riders completed the course without a single one clocking in below the optimal time of six minutes, 25 seconds.

"I just think it's a tough course and time is hard to make," said Hawley Bennett, who placed third at The Event at Rebecca Farm last year. "It's always hard to make at a three-star (event). I was on time before my little bobble."

Bennett is quite familiar with challenging courses. The Langley, British Columbia, native competed for Canada at the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Greece, and won silver at the 2003 Pan American Games in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

A disappointing cross country ride, including 15.6 time penalties and 20 jump penalties — due to a stop that occurred when Livingstone, her 17-year-old thoroughbred gelding, stumbled on a bank — dropped Bennett from second to ninth place heading into today's show jumping.



Saturday's top ride went to Andrea Baxter of Paso Robles, Calif., who incurred no jump penalties and just 6.4 time penalties atop Estrella, an 8-year-old Westphalen-thoroughbred mare. Baxter's strong run boosted her from ninth to seventh place overall, helping her recover from Friday's 73.1 dressage penalties.



Susan Fredericks, riding Douglas, clears a jump over a custom-carved wooden trout at the Event at Rebecca Farm Saturday. Fredericks was competing in the Open Intermediate level along with 17 other riders. Kristine Paulsen/Daily Inter Lake

Baxter wasn't surprised that none of her fellow three-star riders breezed through the course without incident.

"I kind of assumed that everyone was going to have time faults," she said. "I thought I had a really good dressage test (Friday), but apparently the judges didn't.

"I wasn't too worried about the time, but I did want to go out and have a good ride because I sort of lost some points (Friday). My mare's pretty quick and a great jumper. She's just this year come into her own and really understands the game and sees the flags and goes for them."

Baxter and Estrella have competed at The Event twice before, but this is their first year doing so at the three-star level.

According to Baxter, the course's most notorious feature is its steep mound, or "booby trap," which can challenge even the fittest eventing horses.

"I was worried about that mostly because the other riders were concerned about it," she said. "I was mostly worried about the sunken road for my horse, and it was the fence right before the mound."

But the fast-rising Estrella, who was a one-star horse just a year ago, handled the trying terrain well enough to put Baxter in striking distance of a respectable placement if she can finish strongly today.

"She's typically been a really clean show jumper," Baxter said of Estrella. "She's had very few rails in her career, but she is new at the advanced level.

"We're just new at the level, but, generally, she's a very clean show jumper."

Bennett said she and Livingstone are too far back to rally and place, but not because this year's cross country course — designed by Captain Mark Phillips — was unreasonably difficult.

"It's a tough course, but you get perfect footing," she said. "You get organizers that have gone above and beyond, and it's absolutely gorgeous. This is one of my favorite events in the country to run."

Bennett fared better on her two two-star rides earlier in the day. She rides eight or nine horses per day while training, rendering three cross country rides a relative reprieve, even on a stifling, hot day.

"It was actually a nice break because I'm usually riding six at a horse show, so just to have the (three) is nice," she said. "You get to enjoy them a little bit more."

Kelly Prather and Ballinakill Glory lead the three-star standings with 60.2 points, followed by David Koss and Candy (65.8), Dawn White and Vapor Trail (70.6), Sara Mittleider and El Primero (71.3), and Erin Spohr and Corner Street (76).

The Event is one of four American qualifiers for the International Equestrian Federation Eventing World Cup Finals.

Today's show jumping starts at 8 a.m., with three-star riders scheduled to begin at 2:25 p.m.