

# Course Designing Plus with Leopoldo Palacios

By Farida El Sherbiny

**A LEGEND IN COURSE DESIGNING WHO NOT ONLY FOCUSES ON CREATING THE MOST INNOVATIVE COURSES, BUT DEDICATES HIS TECHNIQUES TO CREATING AN ENJOYABLE AND FAIR GAME FOR ALL COMPETITORS.**

**How did you come across horses and showjumping?**

I come from a Venezuelan family that loves horses. My brother, who is 7 years older than me, was a fantastic rider. In the 1960's, he won in many places including the US. My father also had horses for cattle on our farms. So, I have been around horses ever since my earliest memories could take me.

**How did your passion for course designing start?**

Before I became a course designer I was a rider. I sometimes rode for the Venezuelan team and was named Venezuela's Rider of the Year 1970. I had stopped riding for a certain period of time, but returned back shortly after. Then, I began course designing for it has always interested me. I started course designing while I was working in a construction company in Venezuela. Doing both of them in parallel helped me a lot in course designing as I was already familiar with spaces and developed construction.

Afterwards, I stopped riding and focused on course designing; even my mentors thought I was a better course designer than rider!

I started off as an amateur, but then travelling around the world and being taught by the best mentors took my course designing skills to a professional level. My first mentor was Pamela Carruthers, and then I worked with Arno Gego who is like a father to me. I also worked a bit with Bert De Nemethy who taught me a lot. Afterwards, I started doing a lot more and traveled with Arno Gego around the world. In the 1983 Pan American Games in Venezuela, Arno Gego was the course designer and I was his main assistant at that show. In the process of working there for four years, we became like family; he gave me a lot of support. And then I started designing in the United States, Canada, Europe and all over the world. Later, I retired from construction and became a professional full-time course designer for nearly 18 years now. Before that, I had been a part-time course designer, only 25 weeks a year in course designing and 25 weeks in construction. Now, I spend around 40 weeks a year course designing.

**Over the past 40 years, trends in course designing have changed, as well as horses developing from being bigger and more robust to being smaller and more agile. How do you see course designing changing in the future as a result of changes in the breeding of show jumpers? Or do you think we have tried it all?**

To me, course designing is changing a lot; like everything in life. There is development, but I am not really sure that course designing is changing in a good way. At the beginning, we used heavier, less careful fences and speed. Today, I think that courses are over-careful and we are jumping smaller fences, which are extremely technical. The fences today also are not very original; they are all the same: poles, gates and planks - that is it. I believe that today we are going a

bit too far. This development is not good for the horses because of the increasing use of laboratories. I do not understand this – workshops? specialized technical training? At the end of the day, our sport is a sport with animals that need to be near nature, not in small closed rings that are being developed in the laboratory. I think the sport needs more variety. We need to come back to the roots and nature of the sport because we have gone very far away from its nature.

**If there is such thing as a finger print or identifying mark in your designs, what would it be? Is it courses which are technical in terms of size, turns, distances and combinations? In other words, what are the elements that you use in your own unique way when designing a course?**

Designing a course is like making soup: wine, water, and meat in balanced quantities. I try to have a balance between different elements. I know what is hard and what is easy. It is not that I believe, I know. I need to make a balance between short distances, long distances, technical elements, spooky fences, non-spooky fences, careful fences, heavy fences, etc. It is not fair to excessively use one element in a course as you would be giving riders who are good at that specific element a greater chance of doing well. At the end, we are all humans and we are all different. Each one of us is good at some things and has problems at other things. That is why we need a bit of everything.

This variety makes the courses more exciting for the crowd, too, and I think we need more exciting competitions. When the ring is too big, the challenge for the rider and the horse is not exclusive to jumping the fences, but also to galloping and concentrating from one fence to another. They have to notice the change of character between fences. Every sport has to test the endurance of the horse and the rider. Small rings, which are being used more nowadays, do not test the endurance of the horse and the rider because

the courses are very short.

**Does the footing and the size of the arena affect your design of the course?**

Yes, as I said earlier, the size of the arena affects the quality of the sport; bigger arena, better sport. It is more difficult, but it is better. However, the one important issue is galloping long distances in a good rhythm.

**Another interesting element is fence design. Being an authority on course designing, how do the shapes such as the dragon fence in Beijing and colours of the fences affect the horse? Which brings about another question, do horses see colours? And why do horses find white fences more difficult?**

I think the variety of the shapes is the most important aspect of fence design. In Beijing, I tried to incorporate a lot of different shapes and put a lot of different elements in the middle of the fences. Unfortunately, today we do not see much variety in the design of fences. I believe horses are very aware of the contrast and brightness of colours, which have an effect on them. Sometimes it influences them to jump better, and sometimes it can make it more difficult for them. I find that when you use a lot of solid colours, which are not very bright, it is more difficult to jump than fences with stripes. However, different types of stripes also affect the horse differently. When you see a short person wearing vertical lines in their clothes, it makes them seem bigger and taller while horizontal lines make them seem smaller. So, vertical stripes give horses the illusion that the fence is higher. If the lines are horizontal, they seem to be more difficult to define the height for the rider and the horse.

**Are there any other elements that affect your design of the course?**

When designing a course, there are a lot of elements you can use and take into consideration such as the outside and surroundings of the ring, the corners, the



contrast of the fence, etc.

Imagine the following: you are in a stadium full of people where everyone is moving and everything comes to life. This environment can affect the horses as they are influenced by light and shadow. In shade, for example, horses do not see a place with a limit; if you are going straight the horses prefer to stay away from that place. There are a lot of other factors, such as the slope of the ring and the size of the horse's stride. The way the horse jumps changes depending on whether the ring is sloping uphill or downhill, so you need to take care of the slopes. To me, designing a course and sending it using the internet is very difficult. You need to be there; the course designer needs to know the ring perfectly. When you are designing a fence, you need to see it being built. For example, if you decided to put three poles and a gate, how high/low do you put the gate? How far apart do you place the poles? These are all optical problems which can make it easier or more difficult. That is why you have to see the fence being built to see what happens with your own eyes.

**So when you are invited to design a course in a foreign country, how do you integrate the level of riders and horses into the level of technicality of your course?**

I just start with an easy course on the first day. It is very important for a course designer to see the class and get to know the riders. When I go to a country where I do not know anybody, I evaluate the situation in my mind. On the first day, I do a normal and easy course. And then I would have the list of riders, so I evaluate them and I see which riders I am after. I normally know people everywhere I go to, I have been working in this field for many years. I know a lot of trainers, their qualities and how they train. You need to be aware of these factors and you need to start to evaluate the different factors and make the courses progressively more difficult.

It is different when you go to the top of the sport like the Olympics.

In this case, you know all of the top riders. If you are a course designer, you need to know all the riders. Having enough experience would help you while designing a course because you know the general level. If I go to a normal show in Venezuela, I need to evaluate different factors. I cannot take a course I did for top riders and assign it to beginners; it must be simpler.

**So in your years of course designing, which show or event have you felt most proud of? And what is your biggest accomplishment in general?**

This is a very difficult question to answer. I am happy at shows for both beginners and big horses. The truth is, I like every show. The reality is that I love course designing and I have been to a lot of big shows in my life. I have been building for Spruce Meadows for 22 years. I also built in two Olympic games, Pan American Games, World Cup finals and in many different shows.

I love all the places I worked in, yet my input in every place is different. I contributed a lot to the Olympic Games; I was part of designing the fences among many other things. I have also been contributing a lot in Calgary for the past 22 years. The problem with course designing and designing fences is that the end result only lasts for one day or just an hour. And then, it is all destroyed and all that is left is pictures and people's memories; this is why I like to have an input in the venue too.

I am currently working for the World Equestrian Games 2018. I am part of the organizing committee of the game. It is nice because when I arrive at the venue, my work would be there and it will stay forever as I am designing the concepts of the construction. I love it when people copy a fence of my design in different shows, just like the Dragon of Beijing. I love that people copy my fences because my design ends up in many places. Eventually, this is what humans like; we pass on designs and we want to have something that will be left for my grandchild and my

great-grandchild, so they can say my great-grandfather did this.

**Tell us a bit about yourself, simply as a human being. Are you married, do you have kids, what are your likes?**

I have been divorced twice. I will tell you the truth; our family life is very complicated. I have two children and a grandchild. I love my daughter and my grandchild; I love seeing them and being with my family, but I never get time to spend with them. This is why I find it very difficult to construct a family. I think this applies to all the people that are really professional, like actors or professional athletes; it is just difficult. I really admire my friends who have a stable family and do what I do. I do not know how they do it; I want to be like them.

It is very difficult when you have passion like I do; the input course designing has on my life is huge. I always think and dream about it. This is not exclusive to course designing, but the whole sport; I love this sport. I live with a tangled passion that affects my family life. Even though I like to be with my family, my passion is stronger. This is the big sacrifice I make for my passion.

I love art and I try to incorporate it into show jumping. For example, the dragon sculpture of Beijing was my trial to incorporate art into my design. Then, I try to commercialize it as a piece of art. The artistic character I add to my courses is very rewarding. When I am older, I cannot just sit in my house and look at courses I designed. I need to see that art behind it.

I want to do this till I die; this is another truth. People keep asking me when I am going to retire. When this time comes, I might not do so much course designing because I will be very old. I will be involved trying to do something for the sport, it could even be a contribution on the organizational level. It could be anything, but never nothing. To me, retiring does not exist. I just do not see my life sitting in a chair and looking at the TV. 🐾



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