



2024 AREA 1 COMPETITOR EXPERIENCE SURVEY RESULTS

August 9, 2024

Summary Report

The purpose of the 2024 USEA Area 1 Competitor Survey was to find out what competitors value when they choose to enter a sanctioned event and to share that information with Area 1 event organizers. We wanted the feedback to provide information that generates actionable ideas that help organizers prepare for and run their events so that they attract competitors and that competitors have a great experience. The results have been well received by the Area 1 Organizers, and some suggestions have already been put into action.

Over 200 people from Area 1 responded. The majority (88%) consisted of two groups – adult amateurs (59%) and professionals (29%). The remaining 12% consisted of young riders (7%), parent/guardian (4%), and others (1%).

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of 30 individual criterion across three categories – Horse Trials overall, One-Day Horse Trials and Multi-Day Horse Trials. They were asked to rate each on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being least important and 5 being most important to them when they are considering an event to enter.

Overall Impressions

It was inspiring to see the support Area 1 and our organizers have from the community. From the number of people that responded to their comments, it was clear that Area 1 recognizes the tremendous effort, dedication, and commitment the organizers make to our sport and to them (see closing remarks below).

Not surprisingly, Area 1 eventers are independent, pragmatic, hardworking and gutsy. They participate in this sport for the love of the partnership they share with their horses. While our community certainly appreciates the “frills,” it is the learning, the overall experience, and the challenge they get (courses, judging, community) that drive their decision to enter an event. For example:

- My coach/trainer recommends and/or is going. (Avg score: 3.16)
- Other people in my barn are going or I have friends that are going. (Avg score: 2.56)
- The awards and prizes are well thought out and really special. (Avg score: 2.22)
- The event has volunteers/staff available to help unload, bring stabling supplies, strip stalls, etc. (Avg score: 1.82)
- I can buy shavings at the event and not have to bring my own. (Avg score: 2.19)
- There are good competitor parties/dinners/hospitality venues during event. (Avg score: 2.02)

Courses! Courses! Courses!

The importance of the jumping courses came as no surprise. Cross country (XC) was by far the most important with these four factors rating the highest:

- The event (courses, atmosphere, place) fits with my plan to develop/prepare me &/or my horse(s). (Avg score: 4.58)
- XC course has the right jumps & terrain for me &/or my horse to gain the experience I'm looking for. (Avg score: 4.57)
- The Show Jumping course works well with the space, terrain, footing. (Avg score: 4.02)
- XC course has enough open space to develop a good galloping rhythm. (Avg score: 3.75)

Impression: Three things stood out in the comments – **Quality, Timing & Levels**. Updated courses with quality jumps are expected and the norm. What was interesting are the two factors of Timing & Levels which appear to play a significant role in competitors' decision to choose an event. It may be

worth considering how Area 1 events "flow" in the season and how a particular course design fits into that flow and the Area 1 calendar.

- "Quality, modern course design!"
- "Courses are appropriate not only for the level, but also for the time of year . . . "
- "Timing! The dates of events need to line up with others to help riders/horses qualify or prepare for their season goals (AECs, FEI events, Waredaca)."
- "I think the other important factor is timing. I don't like to do back to backs so at least 2 weeks between the last event and the next one."
- "Variety of levels to include Starter/intro."
- "We need more events to run modifieds!!"
- "I know this isn't the majority of riders. Looking for events Prelim or higher including CCI events like Area 2 has."

Safety First!

Safety is a priority and particularly in the warmup arenas where the rated results as well as the comments support what is already known – this has been an area of concern. From the results specifically, these safety criteria rated important to competitors:

- SJ & XC warm up space is large enough with safe footing to appropriately prepare. (Avg score: 3.89)
- Dressage warm up space & footing is safe and adequate to prepare. (Avg score: 3.82)

Impression: There were a number of comments that called out **Safety in the Warmup** areas as a high priority. This stood out as an area where organizers could focus (e.g., space, organization & management, number of horses, general layout, etc.) and have a positive impact on safety and the overall competitive experience.

- "Warm up ring is well organized."

- “Show jumping warm-up chaos is becoming more significant in my choices. I appreciate venues that can limit the number of people in warm-up at one time.”

Cost & Travel

These two factors are inextricably linked and important to Area 1 competitors. Both have become more important with the loss of long-time Area 1 events. Many Area 1 competitors (particularly those that live in New England) have traditionally had a significant number of events within a 1 to 2- hour drive or less. This has changed and as travel time has increased, so has cost. The survey did not call out cost specifically because the costs associated with attending events (entry fees, stabling, administration fees, lodging, etc.), regardless of Area, are essentially fixed and we were looking for factors that organizers have control over and can act on.

Driving distance, particularly for a one-day horse trial was the highest rated factor, and 50% of Area 1 events are one-days. Competitors are willing to travel but are looking for consideration in the overall schedule of the event, places to stay and how well the event is managed given the compressed time.

- Driving distance is within reason for a 1-day H-T. (Avg score: 4.27)
- For 1-day HT: There is enough time between phases to walk courses, change tack, get something to eat, etc. (Avg score: 3.74)
- For Multi-day HT: The courses & experience I/my horse get are worth the additional time & expense. (Avg score: 4.43)
- For Multi-day HT: Lodging in the area is available and affordable within a reasonable travel time. (Avg score: 3.85)

Impression: These two factors are not easily addressed; the addition of new events is a long-term, strategic issue and out of scope from this survey. However, some of the **travel and cost issues can be balanced** by looking into ways to improve event management. From the comments:

- “Cost reasonably correlates to the caliber of event, event is organized and well-run (on time, able to hear announcers or find information, results).”
- “I’m at the extreme edge of Area 1 near Canada. My biggest factor when choosing an event is driving distance.”
- “The main reason that I don’t compete in recognized horse trials is that they are all at least a 1 1/2-hour drive from my home in central CT.”
- “AFFORDABILITY is super important and the distance I need to travel.”
- “Cost is going to be one of the number one factors. Most recognized events are safe and well organized, so it often comes down to what I can afford.”

Event Management

This is the area where the comments by respondents revealed what is important to them in thoughtful and constructive ways.

Impression: Comments ranged from the overall experience to key specifics. Below are a few of

the key areas that stood out, and these comments appear to be the most likely areas where organizers, the Area 1 Council and the USEA could make a positive impact.

Overall Experience:

- “I miss the fact that shows used to be destinations. There was a feeling of excitement that has gone missing with the informality these days.”
- “Consideration/ empathy for the competitors & what would give them the best experience at their competition. EASE of entry, not a lot of additional paperwork and requirements that make competitors have to jump through multiple hoops.”
- “Clear indications that organizers have the welfare and treatment of competitors at heart, hospitality and communication that is welcoming.”

Scheduling & Organization

- “Keep ride times as close together as possible. 2-hour max between all 3 rides.”
- “Secretaries that are willing to make accommodations for trainers with multiple students is definitely a plus!”
- “At a multi-day show, divisions held on one day rather than split over two days are great as I can save \$ on lodging/meals.”

On-site Amenities

- “Well-placed and clear signage (e.g., stabling, parking, rings, warm up, etc.)” • “Access to shade for one-days, spectator friendliness (can more than 1 fence be seen for XC, is there somewhere to sit) especially for multi-day events.”
- “Ample space for parking, warm up & competition affect choices we make.” • “Events in areas with bad/no cell service need useable Wi-Fi or cell phone boosters so that trainers can quickly and efficiently communicate with students/staff.”

Closing Remarks

The survey appears to have been a success. While there are no major surprises, it provides greater clarity about what's important to competitors as well as what is appreciated. There are tangible, actionable ideas that the organizers, the Area 1 Council and the USEA can create and act on. While the survey results will not solve the long-term issues that Area 1 is facing, they do put a spotlight on the strategic questions that need to be given significant thought in the near term.

Below is a sampling of the many comments that express the genuine support (and concern) the Area 1 community has for our organizers and our sport.

- “Area 1 is blessed to have the events we do and a huge thank you to the farms and organizers who selflessly give themselves for the love of this sport. Thank you.” • “Just want to express my appreciation for the organizers and facility owners that keep Area 1 trucking along, I see the hard work and sacrifice and effort put in to hosting and running an event and feel very thankful!”
- “Thank you for all that you do. It's a tough job and we don't tell you often enough that you ARE appreciated.”
- “Thank you for hosting events. It is a lot of work and expense, please know that it is

greatly appreciated.”

- “I really do think our Area 1 events are fantastic. Many are limited by terrain so I don’t expect the galloping lanes one finds in other Areas. I very much appreciate quality XC fences and a good show jumping course.”
- “Area I continues to die a slow, protracted death. Even if there were perfect events, it’s not clear this could combat the forces limiting Eventing to the few and far between - especially for upper-level competitors.”
- “Unfortunately, other than GMHA and Millbrook I don’t see myself competing in Area one anymore.”
- “Thank you for a thoughtful survey. I found it to be on-point for many criteria that I might use to select my competitions this year. Nicely done.”

An enormous thank you to all of the respondents and to the Area 1 community. We are truly grateful for the time everyone took to respond to this survey and for your continued support for Area 1 Eventing. The responses will go a long way to helping organizers, officials, the Area 1 Council, the USEA and the eventing community work together to create the best eventing experience possible.