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The Steeplechase

by Phillip Molesworth



Note the cameras. The water jump is a favourite with photographers.

There has been some interest in the steeplechase at Athletics South West and we are about to have our own steeple chase jump. So I thought I would do a paper on the event.

To get things started let's start with the questions.

- **What is the steeplechase?**
- **How do you negotiate the jumps?**
- **And finally. Why would I want to do that?**

This event was developed as an event on the track for the cross country runner. In my running days cross country always included fences and creek crossings that made it very different to the road racing. The cross country runner had to develop a number of skills not needed for the road and track. This led to the development of the track event that emulated the old cross country events with its 5 barriers and the creek crossing (water jump) in each lap. The creeks always had deep water that shallowed as it reached the far bank and that is copied in the water jump although it was not common to have a fence adjacent to the creek, but if there was a fence it was often a farm fence with barbed wire that had hessian bags over it in the crossing location. You didn't usually jump that fence but rather crawled over it and jumped as far as you could over the creek and crawled out the other side. In the track event they placed the fence adjacent to the creek and made it solid so you could jump

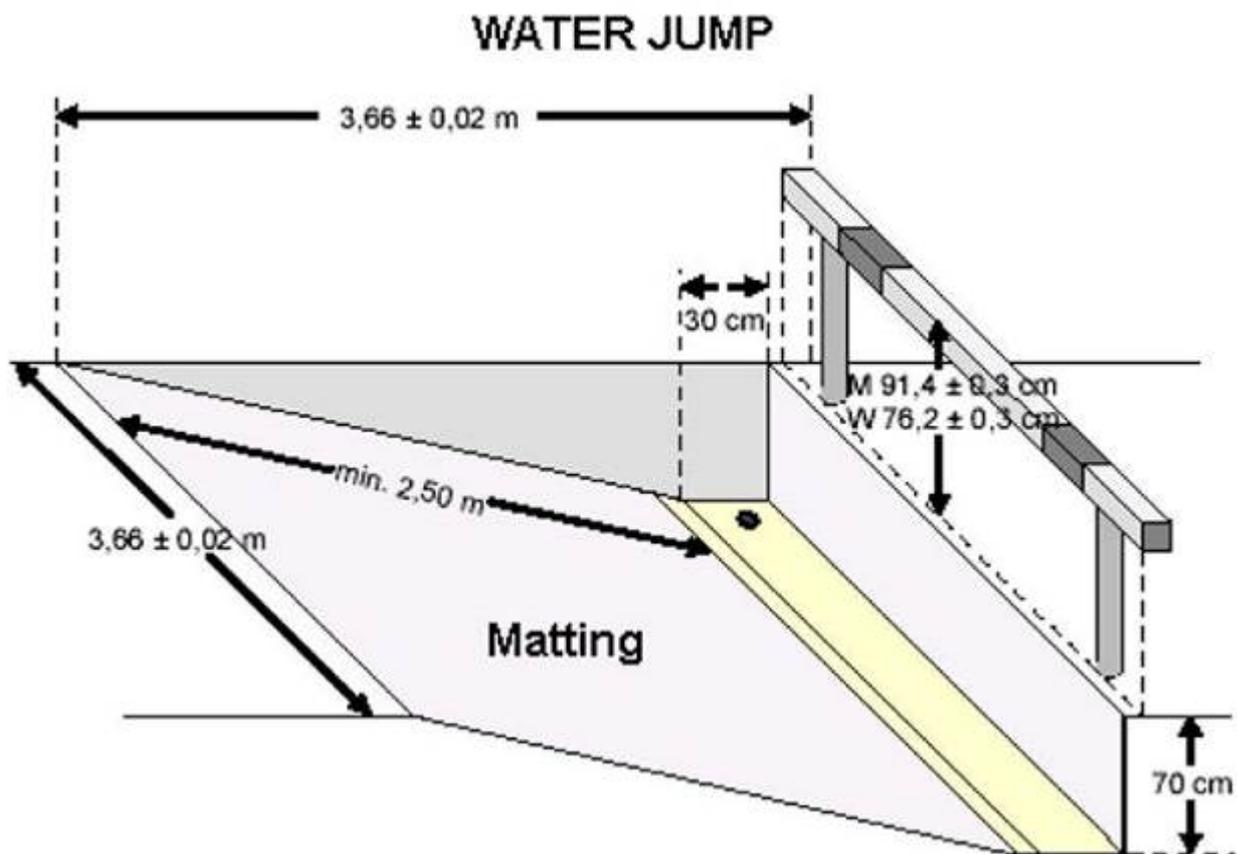
onto it and use it as a launching pad to cover the water. The barbed wire fences were replaced with solid barriers making it a lot safer to negotiate.

It was only a men's event, so there were no modifications for junior men or women. These adaptations have only recently been made to the event. Originally the barriers were all 3 feet (91.4 cm) it was an imperial event and the jumps remain imperial today. The lower barriers were developed for women with 2 foot 6 inch jumps (76.2 cm) and an intermediate height of 2 foot 9 inches (83.8 cm) for juniors.

Why the steeplechase?

If you are looking for something different, more challenging than the flat races that adds another dimension to running the flat races, you might want to give the steeplechase a go. This event takes the distance runner and adds the skills of hurdling and jumping. I have covered the distance training in another paper so will concentrate on the technical side in this paper.

First up I am going to look at the water jump.



The water jump has a barrier the same size as the other barriers except this one has the posts fixed into the ground as it is subjected to a bit more punishment than the other barriers that are removable. The pit on the other side of this jump is 12 feet long. (3.66 meters) It is 70 cm deep adjacent to the barrier with 30 cm flat area that acts as a drain when emptying the water and a slop back to the track level. The base of the jump is covered with matting or the same surface as the track so you are not landing on the concrete floor.

So here is the jump without the water.



This is filled with water so that the surface is at track height. Now it looks like this and this is what you see when you are negotiating the jump.



The slope under the water is hidden and does have an effect on the landing

The idea is not to clear the water but to land in the shallow end with one foot and taking a running stride out of the water. If executed correctly you will not get too wet as the water doesn't have time to close around the foot as you run out of it. That is the difficult part to learn and takes a lot of practice. Get it wrong and you get wet. Jump too high and you land like a long jumper and stop in the water (get wet) and have to start again. Try to clear it and it takes too much out of your legs. This makes the water jump a slow and energy draining obstacle that requires skill to negotiate efficiently.

So how do you get over this barrier with its water and sloping track on the other side?

The first step is to attack the jump by increasing your pace as you approach. To achieve the correct position for the take-off it is good to have a mark twenty meters or more from the jump so you can adjust the run-up as you approach, this needs to be in your head as you are not permitted to put markers on the track. You are not going to hurdle the jump but rather lift onto the top landing on the rail low with the landing leg in a squat. As you pass over the rail your toe rolls to the front face of the rail and you push off flat over the water. At this moment your arms need to be in a running action so that you land running and don't stop. If you jump high by lifting off the top of the rail instead of the face you will find yourself landing with both feet in the water and stationary, forcing you to restart the running action, taking a lot of energy to get started again. If you try to clear the water you will have the same problems as a long jumper with the body wanting to rotate in the air. You don't have the benefit of using your arms to stop the rotation as they need to stay in the running position to help you stride through the jump. You will see many runners with arms flapping to correct rotation and losing the running stride out of the jump. The secret is to stay low and hit the water with a running stride. If you clear this correctly you will hit the track running and lose very little momentum. Get it wrong and there is a lot that can go wrong. Miss the top of the jump and you are in for a swim with other runners jumping over you. I can tell you this is embarrassing. I had an opponent kick my foot from behind when I was leading, it went over the barrier so I came down straddling the rail and fell head first into the water, I lay in the deep end of the water until it was safe to get up.

But don't let me put you off. This is a fun event with lots of challenges.

Check out the next picture and you will get an idea of how it is done.



Note the squat position at the top of the jump and the foot rolling onto the face so the push off is in a horizontal direction. The arms are under control enabling a drive from the shoulders to help bring the leg through. This maintains a smooth rhythm through the water. Get it wrong and you may be in the following picture.



Oops that is not what you want.

Now let's have a look at a young steeplechaser that was still learning how to do this.



This is the approach. The runner has attacked the jump and is in a good position for the take-off.



The body is kept low as the foot lands and rolls over the rail. It's good so far and the foot can roll over the edge to the face for push off. (this was a good water jump clearance)



In this photo the runner has failed to stay low and the toe isn't rolling over the front of the rail so the take-off is going to be high eliminating the ability to hit the water running.

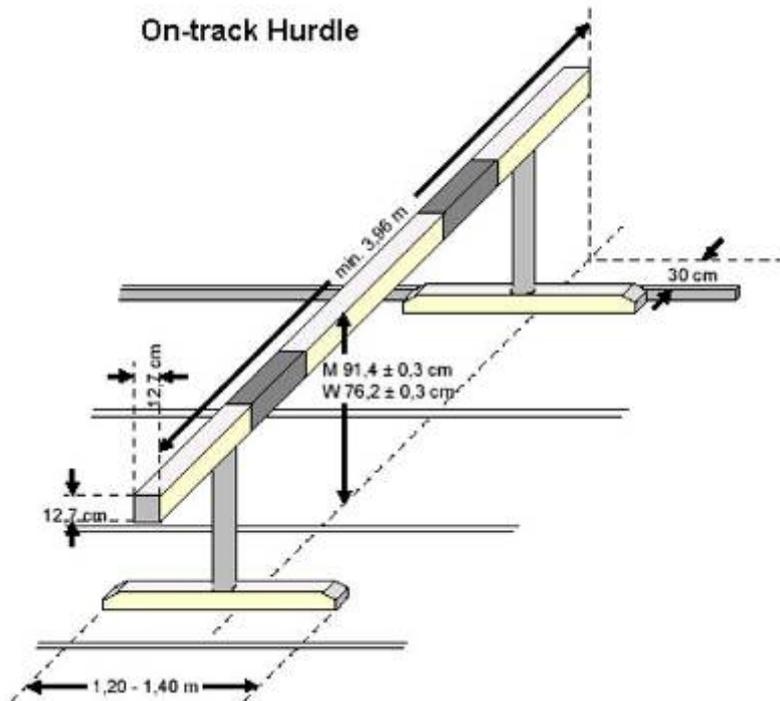


As a result of the failure to stay low the lift off is now too high and will result in a poor landing. The arms are out of control looking more like a long jumper trying to prevent rotation. So the rhythm out of the water will be poor or will result in a stop.



Now due to the bad take off it is necessary to try to correct the running action as a heavy landing is coming up. Notice that the arms are no longer in the running position ready to drive the right foot into the next stride resulting in a stop and poor running action leaving the water

The other barriers.



The other barriers are the same size as the water barrier but in this case you want to get over it as quickly as possible. Most hurdle these barriers using a similar technique to a hurdler but giving the barrier more clearance than the hurdler. In the steeplechase the barriers don't fall if you hit them. **You do**. And it hurts when you find your trail leg crashing into the barrier as you plummet head first to the track with others trying to jump over you. (Yes just like the water jump)

This form of hurdling requires similar technique training to the 400 meter hurdler and is a very efficient way of getting over the barriers. Unlike the 400 hurdler you don't have the benefit of a constant stride pattern between the barriers so you have to develop the skill of hurdling them both left and right lead foot and be able to judge the approach as in the water jump.

For this reason a lot of club steeplechasers use a similar technique to that used for the water jump except you are not pushing off the face of the jump. You approach the jump the same as for the water jump attacking the jump on approach and landing on the top in a crouch position keeping your body low and in you simply roll over the top stepping down and take the next stride away and back into your normal running action.



In this picture the hurdle technique is OK the trail leg is still coming up to the horizontal position and the jump is a little high but safe. The runner should also be reaching for his right toe with the left hand with the right hand back preparing to drive through for the next stride.



This is an early barrier in the race possibly the first one and the field is bunched making this jump dangerous with so many trying to negotiate it.

Once again. Don't let me scare you off it can be a lot of fun.

I consider this event among the best for the runner wanting to add some fun to the trip.

Why not give it a try?

It's tough. It's different. It's challenging

You may ask where and when these photos were taken and who is the runner?



The location of these photos was Olympic park. At that time the track was made of cinders, the runner in these photos was me. I was wearing leather shoes with 1 inch spikes so there was the added danger of nailing yourself to the top of the jump but the spikes were needed to get a good grip on the cinders track. A bit like running on packed sand. The Olympic velodrome in the background was demolished in 1972. These photos were taken in 1962 as part of my training to gain an understanding of where I needed to improve. Before the championships.

Still a junior (17) this photo was taken in the last lap of the state senior championship. I am running fourth but as I am negotiating the last water jump the positions one to three are battling out the last 20 metres to

the finish line.

The three Trevor Vincent, Ron Blackney and Ian Blackwood went on to represent Australia in the commonwealth games in Perth that year 1962. With Trevor coming first and Ron third.

My uniform is the Preston Harriers.