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Ian Stark Puts His Stamp On Galway Downs Cross-Country Course

Temecula, Calif., Oct. 18 – Ian Stark, the new cross-country course designer for the Galway Downs International Three-Day Event, has been a busy man getting the two-star and one-star cross-country courses ready for the event, on Nov. 1-4 at the Southern California Equestrian Center.

He's already increased the size of the jumps at the first water complex and added an island there. He's also built a new Normandy bank complex, and he's altered or rebuilt many other jumps.

"I want to stamp my own feel on the course without overdoing it this first time, and we'll grow from here," says Stark, a three-time Olympic silver medalist from Ashkirk, Scotland.

Says Galway Downs Organizer Robert Kellerhouse, "The course needed a facelift in some aspects, and Ian brings some fresh ideas."

Stark, 53, has succeeded Olympic course designer Michael Etherington-Smith, who'd designed the Galway Downs course ever since the event began in 1999. But Etherington-Smith has reduced his worldwide course-designing obligations since becoming the director of sport for British Eventing, the organization that oversees eventing in Great Britain. For the future, he's only creating the tracks for the Rolex Kentucky CCI****, the Chatsworth World Cup-qualifying CIC*** in England, and the 2008 Olympics in Hong Kong.

Galway Downs is the first CCI (international three-day event) course Stark has designed on his own, since retiring from competition this spring and earning his international course designer's license from the Federation Equestre Internationale. But he's designed many advanced horse trials in England and has ridden in more than 100 CCIs at the two-star level and above. "I have a feel for what I think will ride well," he says modestly.

Stark predicts his course "is going to, I hope, take bold and positive riding. An attacking mentality should do well on it."

He adds, "I think the sport has gone a bit too much toward the technical and even trappy. I want to get back to the good, old-fashioned cross-country riding, where people have a good feeling and a good feel for their jumps."

Stark has accomplished more changes than he and Kellerhouse had expected they'd be able to make for this event, partly because Kellerhouse has hired six highly experienced course builders to implement Stark's plans. "I kept saying, 'This is what I want to do here,' and Robert hasn't stopped me yet," says Stark.

The two-star course will have approximately 34 jumping efforts over 4,800 meters (2.6 miles). The one-star course will have approximately 30 jumping efforts over 3,900 meters (2.1 miles).

Stark says that the biggest challenge he faces in his inaugural effort at Galway Downs is "getting a feel for the level of riding and the level of competition. You want to test the best but get the rest around." But Stark has been coming to the Southern California Equestrian Center for the last nine years to teach clinics, so he's relatively familiar with the level of riding in California and with the way the fences built by Etherington-Smith ride.

More than 100 horses will compete in these two divisions at Galway Downs, with more than 200 more competing in the national-level horse trials that will be held concurrently.

Kellerhouse predicts, “The riders at the Galway Downs events are going to get to ride around a track built by a man who’ll be one of the future superstars of cross-country course design.”

He adds, “It’s always been my goal to give our California riders chances to see what they’d see across the continent or across the Atlantic Ocean. The riders will be the beneficiaries of our having Ian Stark here to design this course, this year and in the future.”

Among the many prizes for which the riders who negotiate Stark’s two-star course will be vying is a new memorial trophy. The Mia Eriksson Memorial Trophy is being given in honor of the young rider who died after a fall on the Galway Downs course in 2006. A trophy will be awarded to the top-placing young rider in the CCI**.

Galway Downs will also be hosting, for the first time, the Western North American Young Riders Team Championships, contested by teams from any USEA area. Young riders are between the ages of 14 and 21.

General admission to the Galway Downs International Three-Day Event is \$8 per day in advance, \$10 per day at the door. Patron tickets – which include parking, a program and a catered lunch with beer, wine or soft drinks – are also available.

To order patron or general admission tickets, or for more information on the Galway Downs Three-Day Event, visit their website (www.galwaydowns.com) or call 951-303-0405. To learn more about eventing, visit the U.S. Eventing Association’s website (www.useventing.com).