

Greenwich: The reality of compromise

Those who attended the fabulous World Equestrian Games in Stockholm will warmly anticipate an equestrian Olympics in the heart of another great city. But London 2012 will be unlike anything overseas visitors have experienced in the UK. Greenwich Park, hemmed in by the mighty river Thames and intensive residential development, is about as far away from a verdant archipelago as you can imagine.

Three-star CICs are successfully staged in Europe on smaller sites than Greenwich, but considerably more space is needed for a multi-discipline venue that will be overwhelmed by anti-terrorist measures, not to mention the enhanced requirements of FEI clean sport. While conceding that Greenwich was mistakenly over-measured for the Bid, the London Organising Committee (LOCOG) and British Equestrian Federation (BEF) always insisted there was ample space. This bullishness has evaporated somewhat after detail finally entered the public domain on November 30, via the 3,000-page planning application to Greenwich Council.

Greenwich sceptics such as myself genuinely empathise with the principle of bringing equestrianism to the heart of London, but an inexcusable lack of homework about the ramifications of hijacking a UNESCO World Heritage Site has resulted in unprecedented sporting compromise to deliver the vision. LOCOG won't discuss budget – laughably estimated at £6m in the BEF's 2003 feasibility study – though hasn't countered media reports of £43m. Much will be directed at protecting the historic buildings, Roman remains and "bio-diversity."

So what will participants and spectators find?

The cross-country will be uncommonly hilly and twisty, ratcheted into an even smaller land parcel than first mooted when sensitive areas were belatedly withdrawn. The FEI's January 2008 rule change, enabling a four-star to run as short as 10 minutes, may have offered timely reprieve. To date, elite riders have kept their views to themselves but news of multiple portable fences (to placate environmental concerns) worry five-times Olympian Andrew Nicholson; he says horses over-jump portables and will be needlessly tired.

The tree canopy is dense and 72 trees – some planted in the reign of King Charles II – will be pruned for overhead clearance. The track could be just two metres wide in places. The good news is that considerably more cross-country spectators – 75,000 – will be admitted than sceptics predicted. This assumes that public transport can cope on top of its usual cargo of city workers – cross-country, ludicrously, is on a Monday. We await confirmation of how many will "walk the course." Big screen-viewing only seems inevitable for some.

The 23,000-seater stadium will serve dressage and show jumping well but costs have gone through the floor – literally – with the sophisticated engineering exercise needed to bring the arena up to a level plane. In many ways, Greenwich better suits the Olympic mountain-biking. Greenwich was partially "sold" to the IOC on architectural backdrop yet LOCOG drawings suggest the 17th century Queen's House will be obscured by the high rake of seating – that is the reality of compromise.

Back of house, organisers have openly discarded the FEI specification for Olympic training and exercise arenas. Arguably, four-star CCIs and five-star CSIs manage with minimal warm-up but if the FEI has been prepared to turn a blind eye at Greenwich, why were Athens and Hong Kong not discouraged from over-supplying acres of surface when it is known the IOC is always unhappy

about equestrian expense?

A recent decision to use part of the adjoining Blackheath – a flat expanse severed by the main highway out of the capital into south-east England - for catering trucks and overspill stabling laudably takes “pressure off the park” but means equine carers have a 1km walk between the two complexes- payback, perhaps, for the regal grooms’ accommodation anticipated on site.

The British are unsurpassed in getting it “right on the night,” though am I alone in feeling uncomfortable that £43m is to be squandered on this throw-away venue? LOCOG justify the absence of physical legacy by claiming that Britain won’t sustain a permanent, nationalised horse park, though this can only be guesswork, for no similar commercial venture has existed since the British Equestrian Centre at Stoneleigh was demolished in 1999. Elite sport has relied on UK Sport (state) hand-outs since 1997, and has forgotten how to generate revenue streams of its own. The BEF considered tendering for WEG 2018 but a UK Sport-funded study said existing venues weren’t up to it. The BEF recently pledged £750,000 towards riding facilities in London to contrive an Olympic “legacy” - yes, subsidised by UK Sport.

Right now, LOCOG anxiously waits for Greenwich Council’s decision, expected in March. Hundreds of thousands must have been spent on environmental impact statements to soften up dozens of statutory consultees, but it hasn’t started well: the influential Garden History Society got its objection in a month ahead of deadline; others are rumoured to follow. LOCOG left the planning application spectacularly late, with the test event just 18 months away and no hint of alternative venues if Greenwich Council follows the law, not its heart. The delay probably results from the overwhelming weight of protectionist measures that had to be agreed in advance, though community protest group NO-GOE (No to Greenwich for Olympic Equestrian Events) say its a ploy to pressurise the council when its too late to re-locate. Unfortunately, though, English planning law doesn’t work like that.

Those charged with delivering Greenwich have been on a rollercoaster for years already. The white-knuckle ride may be yet to begin.