



John French and Rumba over Fence 4.

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# HUNTERDERBY DYNAMO

John French talks about his winning strategies at the inaugural Hunter Derby Finals.

**By Jeannie Blancq Putney**

John French wasn't entirely sure he would make the long trip from California to Kentucky for the inaugural ASG Software Solutions/US Hunter Jumper Association International Hunter Derby Finals in mid-August. No doubt, though, he is happy he did.

He and Mountain Home Stables' Rumba won the finals after they took the lead in the first round and garnered the highest overall points in the next two rounds. "There's just a three- or four-week period before Indoors start on the East Coast, so we really weren't sure we'd be making the trip," he explained. But "my client said they believed in me and this horse and thought we could do it."

*"This is bringing back the sport to hunters. There were a lot of people watching and they will remember this inaugural event. ... This is something that is about the hunter sport—not just the rider or the horse." —John French*

John purchased Rumba for the Siebel family just before Christmas, and daughter Taylor Siebel has been showing him in the Junior Hunters. John and the 9-year-old, 16.2-hand Danish Warmblood gelding made four Derby starts this season with two wins. "The first Derby I did on him was on the grand-prix field at night," John said. "He was just so good with the natural jumps. We don't get to go in a grand-prix field very often and gallop long lines to single jumps. It really shows off his stride."

John thinks this type of effort is one reason the Derby has been brought back to the hunter realm. "It's all about how it originated ... natural jumps and galloping between," he said. "We've gotten so set on smaller rings where you can't gallop, and everything is set on an exact amount of strides. Here, there were options regarding how much you wanted to gallop and which jumps you wanted to jump. This has put a newfound interest back in hunters for me."

John felt fairly confident after receiving the high score of 367 in Round 1 Friday and then a perfect 400 in Round 2—a classic hunter course—Saturday, but he did sense a potential problem before Round 3 Saturday evening. "When we went into



**1** John and Rumba rode the inside 4-foot option at Fence 2 (shown). He jumped it at a left-to-right angle to give Rumba more time to make the tight turn back to Fence 3.

**2** Fence 5 was a brush-box oxer. After jumping it, riders circled back, rode a transition to walk and walked between the two brush boxes, which served as Fence 6.

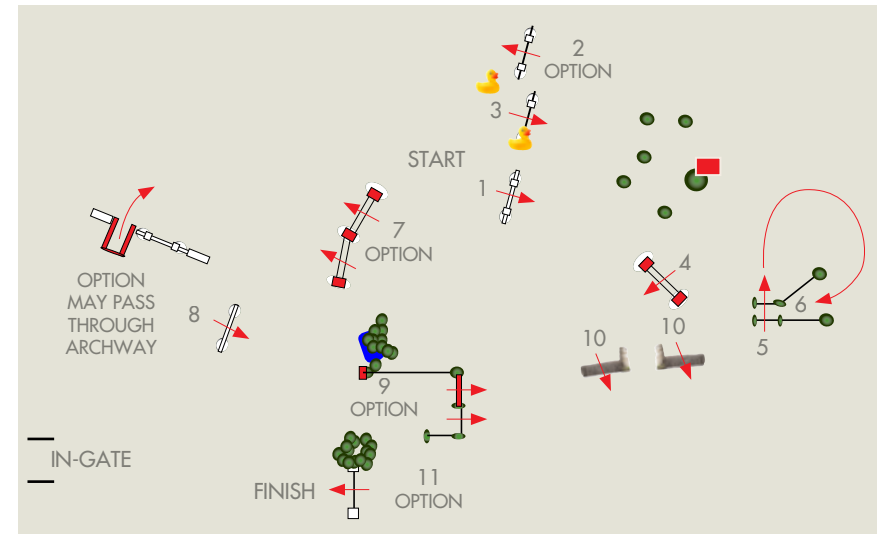
**3** John and Rumba jumped the higher option at Fence 9, the 4-foot post-and-rail vertical. John purposely slowed Rumba to leave a little room the last stride because the last fence could easily come down.



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Round 3 was the Derby's final round and the handy-hunter round. "The courses had different jumps, but there wasn't anything to trap the horse," John French said.

was an option to pass through a tall, skinny archway that had been part of a fence in the previous round.

**JF** From the beginning, the judges wanted you to come into the ring, pick up a good pace and gallop to the first fence with no hesitation. I went through the archway to show Rumba's handiness. Fence 1 was a wide oxer so I wanted to make sure he cleared the back rail before the left turn. We jumped it angled right to left to make the turn to Fence 2. I was sure not to interfere with his mouth over the jump.

### FENCE 2

**DESCRIPTION:** A 20-foot-long hedge fence, parallel to Fence 2. The inside height was 4 feet, and the outside was 3-foot-6.

**JF** We had a good gallop to Fence 2, but Rumba was very relaxed and slow. The fence required a forward pace, which we had. Sometimes horses realize a jump won't hurt them or knock down, so they get too close to it. That was the case with this jump, so I had Rumba stand off a bit far and he made a big jump of it. Because the turn to Fence 3 was so tight, you had to jump Fence 2 almost toward the rail and give the horses some time to turn back.

### FENCE 3

**DESCRIPTION:** A 7-foot-long brick wall flanked by large wooden ducks on both sides; parallel to Fences 1 and 2.

**JF** We came off Fence 2 nice and forward. Our turn was a bit wide back to Fence 3 because I was trying to get Rumba to slow down and not jump too forward. Over Fence 3 I wanted him to land on his right lead so I used my eyes to look right and a little bit of opening rein. He played with his head down a little bit here as if to say, "Why are you turning me in the air?" I didn't overreact, and he quickly settled.

### FENCE 4

**DESCRIPTION:** The 3-foot-6 USHJA oxer, 16 feet long, with 9-foot pillars. It was somewhat blocked by a forest of trees made out of large logs and a planter with several vine-wrapped trellises.

**JF** I wanted to turn inside the big logs and ride eight strides to Fence 4. That was one place I knew I could be handy ... going inside that little forest. Making the inside turn, Rumba had to jump at quite an angle, and he did that well. Because it was already a wide oxer and I was jumping it at an angle, I wanted to make sure the eight strides were forward, so we had the scope to clear

the awards ceremony after the second round, I was a little worried when [Rumba] saw the big screen," he said. "He was distracted by the screen. I was a little worried about going back in, because I thought he'd want to watch himself, but he didn't look back once we galloped through the in-gate."

Here John discusses his winning strategies in Round 3.

**PH** What were your initial thoughts when you walked the course designed by Bobby Murphy and Patrick Rodes. (See course diagram, opposite page.)

**JF** They flowed with a lot of strides between jumps. Rumba has a big stride, so I knew at many of the options I might be able to leave out a stride. The courses had different jumps, but there wasn't anything to trap the horse—jumps set up to see if you failed or not. There were a lot of tight turn-backs and no walk or trot jumps. Sometimes those jumps require more luck, but I didn't think there were jumps that were so much luck as good riding.

**PH** What type of plan did you have for your warm-up?

**JF** In the warm-up area, I just like to practice going down to the jumps confidently and having no doubt in my mind, knowing it's going to be a perfect jump. That's the only thing I work on—not letting anything come into my mind. If it does, I acknowledge it, let it go and keep going down to the jump with no doubt and total confidence. Rumba's canter helps with that a lot (see "A Crowd Favorite" page 49).

### FENCE 1

**DESCRIPTION:** A simple, white 3-foot-6 gate at the opposite end of the ring from the in-gate. On the way to Fence 1, there

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John rode Fence 10 with slight left-to-right angle so Rumba would land on the right lead. That set them up to ride smoothly to Fence 11 without having to change leads.

the back rail. I kept a little feel of his mouth, so he wouldn't feel lost there or surprised.

### FENCES 5 AND 6

**DESCRIPTION:** Fence 5 was a brush-box oxer with a spread of 3-feet-6 inches, and each brush box was 6 feet long. After jumping over the oxer, riders circled back, transitioned to walk, and walked between the two brush boxes. The walk-through served as Fence 6.

**JF** The wide double brushes caused a couple horses to spook and refuse, and I wasn't sure what Rumba was going to do. I dropped back in my pace just enough to make sure he had his eye on it and could study it. He locked in on it and jumped it like nothing. I had to ask for a lead change from left to right and didn't want to turn him too hard so he'd get playful again. I could have been a little bit tighter there, but that was my way of being cautious and keeping him contained. Going into Fence 6, we came back to a walk—and he maybe raised his head for one stride—then walked through there fine. The walking calmed him down, and he came back to the canter relaxed just like we were starting up again.

### FENCE 7

**DESCRIPTION:** A straightforward oxer option of white rails with sod-covered boxes in front, 4 feet on the right and 3-foot-6 on the left.

**JF** We jumped the high side of Fence 7 with no problem, which set us up perfectly to turn left through the arch-

way again to show our handiness. Then we turned left, back to Fence 8.

### FENCES 8 AND 9

**DESCRIPTION:** Fence 8 was a 3-foot-6 oxer of stone pillars and white rails with a stone box in front of it. Fence 9 was an option: The left side was an old-fashioned coop with cedar rails set at 3-foot-6, and the right side was a 4-foot post-and-rail vertical made of dark natural rails.

**JF** Going in to Fence 8, I had Rumba bent to the left. After jumping it, I held him out with my outside rein and stayed out until I saw the distance to the big post-and-rail option. I didn't want to turn too early. It was an easy eight strides (102 feet). It was more of a seven-and-a-half, but seven would have been long and flat, and you'd risk knocking down a rail. I wanted to have room at my last stride, so I slowed him down a little. That fence could easily come down—it was so airy and there wasn't really a ground line to hold the horses off.

Some riders rode the coop on the right side and turned left to approach the squirrel option at Fence 10. I thought I needed to do the higher option at Fence 9 to get more bonus points for taking the risk. He jumped it really well. I even got a little bit loose in the saddle over the jump,

## From the Judges' Corner

Eight judges paired off into four teams during the ASG Software Solutions/USHJA International Hunter Derby Finals, changing partners for Saturday's rounds so they weren't judging both days with the same person. Each pair is theoretically allowed to award up to 100 points plus 10 bonus points.

"Each pair discussed the round as it was going on and came up with a score," said judge Julie Winkel. On Saturday, the "first-round bonus points were given for the classic type and movement. In the second round—the handy—points were given for how handily they rode the course with credit given for making inside turns, jumping the jumps at an angle, and making small, tidy, efficient turns. The best judging comes from two experienced judges talking back and forth and having a conversation about what they're seeing or feeling."

John and Rumba were not only crowd favorites after their first ride. They seemed to be exactly what the judges were looking for in the ideal hunter-derby horse.

"Rumba came in with this beautiful, to-die-for trot," said judge Danny Robertshaw. "He moved so beautifully. He had a serene expression on his face. His ears never flicked back. They were always forward, and he was interested in where he was going. He picked up the canter and changed his pace but never changed his expression. His movement and carriage were beautiful and to watch him jump—I almost felt as if I could take a perfect picture of it. There was a glow about him, a gleam that it was his night and his time. John is a very talented rider, and he clearly knew his horse well. It was nice to see such a oneness between horse and rider."

John and Rumba will no doubt have their work cut out for them next year defending their title, as this inaugural event seemed to be the shot in the arm that the hunters needed with more than 30,000 viewing the winning ride live online. "This is the greatest venue there's ever been for hunters," Danny said. "I have never seen them showcased like that before. The Internet has never been that full watching hunters. To me the beauty of this whole thing is this class proved without a shadow of a doubt that there is a world out there that still loves hunters and loves the sport and wants to support it. It was a great moment and great to realize the love of hunters was still there going strong."

and because of that he shook his head a little, kind of playfully enjoying himself. It might have been quicker to approach the squirrels taking the coop and going to the left, but it wouldn't have looked as smooth.

### FENCE 10

**DESCRIPTION:** An option fence consisting of two large squirrel-tail jumps, one squirrel facing the grandstand and one facing the pavilion. Both were 3-foot-6 and made of brush and sticks. There were multiple options to take.

**JF** I stayed on the left lead to go through a gap between the two squirrels and made a tight left turn back to the jump. I liked that turn instead of going to the left after Fence 9 like others did. I didn't want to hurry. I wanted Rumba relaxed and not rushed. He made a smooth turn back to Fence 10, and we jumped it with a slight left-to-right angle so he knew I wanted the right lead, which he gave me. I wanted to land right and keep coming to the last jump without having to change my lead.

Rumba came in with a beautiful, to-die-for trot. ... He had a serene expression on his face. His ears never flicked back. They were always forward, and he was interested in where he was going." — Danny Robertshaw, judge

## A Crowd Favorite

Rumba was not the favorite coming into the ASG Software Solutions/USHJA International Hunter Derby Finals, but that changed quickly. "After the first round when people saw him go, he became one of the favorites," said rider John French. "A lot of people from the East Coast don't see horses from California that much. He is such a beautiful hunter type of horse. He's a beautiful mover with a slow, rhythmical way of going. He is never hurried or rushed. That is probably his best quality. He is so pretty to begin with, being a gray and all, and after the first round people just kept saying 'I love that horse.' People would start cheering, and when we left the ring it didn't stop. I think he liked it. He sort of puffed up. He knew this show was something special, and he needed to be in top form."

### FENCE 11

**DESCRIPTION:** An option fence made up of cords of wood. The woodpile was 4 feet on the right and 3-foot-6 on the left. The 20-foot-long fence was flanked on the right by a large fallen tree.

**JF** This is when I had to say "relax," because the crowd started cheering as I jumped Fence 10. People were whistling and screaming, and I didn't want to get caught up in it. I had to block that out. This is where the mental training comes in to just keep your mind quiet. It was a count of nine strides to the last jump, and I had to just relax and trust that I'd get there in nine and not listen to the crowd. In the end I saw that we were right on. I just wanted to get over the last jump without anything bad happening. It was pretty straight up and down, and it would be easy to knock one log off. I wanted Rumba to have plenty of time to get his front end out of the way. Some people pulled up after that last jump and left the ring. I gave him two good pats. He really pulled through and did the best job he could. I made a circle and thought he was either going to end up first or second. I was re-

ally happy with the round and couldn't have asked for anything more.

**PH** In the end, what kept you in the lead?

**JF** A few of our turns were wider than they should have been in the handy. I had to wait for him to relax after certain fences before asking for a lead change. I knew I had a pretty good lead coming in, so I didn't want to risk too much. I did all the big options and just made my turns a little wider than others. The qualifying round on Friday was probably his best. Just thinking about that round, I almost get choked up. I couldn't have asked him to be any better.

**PH** How is this win different from any other for you?

**JF** This is bringing back the spark to hunters. There were a lot of people watching, and they will remember this inaugural event. I think they'll remember this horse for a long time. This is something that is about the hunter sport—not just the rider or the horse. I don't know if there'll ever be anything as memorable for me again. 🐾



To watch a video of John French and Rumba's winning round and to read a spectator's perspective on the ASG Software Solutions/USHJA International Hunter Derby Finals, go to [www.PracticalHorsemanMag.com](http://www.PracticalHorsemanMag.com).