

Book Excerpt: Riding for the Blue

What ignites the competitive spark? Does it happen the first time a lead liner finally masters the up/down of the posting trot? The moment a western rider discovers just the right pace for a lope?

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What ignites the competitive spark? Does it happen the first time a lead liner finally masters the up/down of the posting trot? The moment a western rider discovers just the right pace for a lope? And what continues to lure the seasoned exhibitor? Surely she has better things to do on a weekend than rise before dawn and shimmy into uncomfortable body-hugging, restrictive attire and spend the day hiking back and forth from horse trailer to show arena. If this ceaseless activity, usually occurring in the extremes of either dust-choking air or sloppy mud, doesn't discourage her, the food offered at the concession stands will. This unrelenting schedule, which likely includes second-guessing the whimsies of judges, would grate against the soul of most anyone. Yet riders still continue to line up at entry booths in that unending quest for blue ribbons and moments of notoriety. Undoubtedly, the motivating factor is a passionate love for horses. Each dedicated equestrian has taken an unspoken vow of allegiance to her horse, a commitment to honor the bond that exists between horse and rider. This is as it should be, for in no other sport is a human required to communicate with an animal to such a degree. A mere pair of reins, the touch of a boot's heel, and the chirp of a "cluck" are virtually the only tools allowed as human and equine compete as a team.

A horse, being an animal with a feral ancestry, often gives in to instinctual urges even when domesticated. The most highly trained show horse can resort to fractious behavior in unfamiliar settings. The show ring is a scary place for a horse until he accepts his rider as his leader: jumps look suspicious, the water truck monstrous, and the voice of the announcer threatening. When a 1,200-pound horse entrusts his safety to a human and performs reliably in the show ring, it's a heady accomplishment. The blue ribbon is merely the tangible reward. Of course, it's also an added bonus when that same champion horse is the rider's best friend. The jumper who digs his heels into the turf to clear that final oxer, the pony who is the only steed who doesn't spook when the dust devil blows through the arena, and the dressage horse who adds a touch of panache to his tempi changes, all endear themselves further to their riders. When these same horses slurp a cola, ham it up for their win photos, or snack on the show ring's decorative flora, it makes them even more priceless.

Yet a strong bond between a rider and her horse isn't enough. To be successful, a rider must possess a thick skin because rejection comes swift and hard. Despite hours of preparation, one missed lead or a chip at one jump can send her back to the trailer with no hope of a ribbon. She must also be armed with a take-no-prisoners approach to competing. She has to look her fellow riders in the eye and think to herself, My horse and I are the best today, and now I'll show you why. Junior riders are the experts at this tactic, particularly those in medal and horsemanship events. You can see them in the horse show office, studying the posted class list, weighing their competitors' merits with the calculating eyes of a military strategist. These are the same teens who earlier had cavorted in the host motel's pool with their rivals or shared a helping of nachos with their nemesis at the food booth. But now, twenty minutes before the class is called to order, it's war.

The adult amateur riders, mostly women, take a different approach to showing. Two lady friends, still in their show clothes, can chat like teenagers at the back gate for hours. The topics? Dishing horse show gossip is the usual but so is anything remotely horsey. At home, they're limited to how much they can ramble on about chaps, velveteen helmets, and the benefits of aluminum horseshoes. But here, they can talk unrestrained about such topics. Though the sun may make them squint, forming little crow's feet at the edges of their eyes, they don't care. After all, it's a horse show, and they're among friends. Who's going to chide them if there's boot polish underneath their fingernails?

Amidst the competition, the kaleidoscope of color among horses and riders shines: the preppy fashion coda of khaki and navy in the hunt-seat world versus the jewel-toned chaps and spandex body suits of the western classes. Silver ponies with charcoal muzzles stand rump-to-rump with chestnuts that shine like copper coins and shiny satin ribbons contrast with the matte finish of buffed leather. And everywhere there is noise, from the crackling of the public announcement system (do any of them ever work properly?) to the slosh of arena sand against the backside of a jump. The sights and sounds only add to the emotional tension as riders and horses wait to compete against their peers and aim for the perfect performance.

"Horse shows can take you from the depths of despair to the heights of ecstasy—and that's just on warm-up day," says

Emily Caldon, an adult amateur hunt-seat rider. "I've had some of my worst rounds in front of huge crowds and felt like slinking away. But I've also had horses suddenly rise to the occasion and put in a great trip when they've been awful at home, and it's like a miraculous victory." The emotional roller coaster, however, doesn't deter her. "To me, riding is a sport, not a hobby. I welcome the challenges of competing. What's the point of practicing so hard if you're not even going to the game?"

"It's like no other feeling in the world," says Tom Sworm, an American saddlebred trainer and horse show judge. "When you're showing a saddlebred that's really firing off all four legs, that loves competing and knows its job, you just put it in gear and stay out of its way. It's like driving a well-tuned Ferrari."

Dressage rider Debbie McDonald is a United States champion and Pan Am Games gold medal winner. Her motivation to show is built upon an undeniable bond with her mounts. "Horses are my friends. They're the reason I get up every morning," says McDonald. Despite the pressures of international competition, she thrives in the sport because "it's an adrenaline rush you can't find in any other atmosphere."

Fifty-nine-year-old Marty Shaughnessy still competes with his Appaloosa in reining and heritage-costume events. He sees a sense of pride and accomplishment in his blue ribbons. "I can say to myself, when I win at the Appaloosa world show, that at that moment in time, I'm the best in the world in that event."

Sarah Wilson, a young rider who competes in a variety of events, mostly at 4-H shows, sums up the appeal of horse shows as perhaps only an eleven-year-old could. "I like showing. I get to see my friends, and even though we're riding against each other, we cheer each other on. Yeah, we're competing. But it's all in fun."

Unfortunately, such fun comes at a price. While there are shows that serve the skill level of every rider, from backyard offerings at a local riding school to weeklong extravaganzas with national media coverage, they all stretch the pocketbook. Nearly everyone has to find creative ways to indulge their passion for competing. Before venturing into the realm of competition, there are two rules of showing that every exhibitor needs to memorize:

Rule Number One: Showing is an expensive endeavor. In the hypothetical pie chart of expenses, the cost of the horse accounts for just a medium-sized slice of pie. It's out-sliced by entry fees, motel fees, overnight stabling fees, fees to join the local riding association that sanctions the show, coaching fees, grooming fees, and trailering fees. And then there's another slice of the pie chart for all the "stuff." Yes, a rider must have stuff to compete. There are show trunks, show tack, show clothes, and horsey accessories just for shows. And just when the rider is sick of eating pie, guess what? Fashion trends change, fads disappear, and it becomes imperative to dispense of all the old stuff and buy all new stuff—all of which ties into...

Rule Number Two: The amount of money spent is inversely proportional to the amount of fun enjoyed. This is also known as The Equestrian's Law of Painful Irony. A rider's plans for a dream show, the event she budgeted for six months in advance forcing her to eat macaroni and cheese three nights a week, will be the very same show in which her horse spies a ghost in the far corner of the arena or breaks out in hives from the bedding in the show stall.

By keeping these two simple rules in mind, a rider will prevent herself from ever contemplating the validity of her relatives' notion that she has become certifiably insane ever since she entered her first horse show. Now she realizes what she's gotten herself into: A most glorious way in which to spend oodles of money while enjoying the companionship of good friends, the loyalty of a spirited horse, and the challenge of competition. So, let's show!

This excerpt is the first chapter of the exciting new book from BowTie Press: "RIDING FOR THE BLUE." Celebrating the thrill of competition that drives all participants, "RIDING FOR THE BLUE" is not another 'how-to' book offering tips about competing at horse shows. It is a compilation of the often poignant, frequently humorous moments that riders experience while competing for the prize of all prizes—the blue ribbon. This book is for anyone and everyone who has been a part of the horse show world.

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