

Show Solutions: Dealing with Disaster

What should you do when things go wrong at a show?

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Talk about humiliation and frustration! When your best laid plans begin to unravel in the show arena, it feels like the entire world is watching. Should you try to salvage your performance or simply admit defeat and slink out the gate? Here's a quartet of calamities and suggestions on how to make the best of them.

* "Can I Get There From Here?" Despite staring at a course or pattern all morning, you get about halfway through and suffer a mental lapse. Truly, you have only three options, and none of them will earn you a high score. One is to seek help from your coach, who can guide you from the rail. Another is to halt, acknowledge the judge, and exit gracefully. Or, if you're the creative type, you can design your own impromptu path to the end for everyone's entertainment. If you have these frequent trips to the Twilight Zone, you need to figure out the best way to memorize courses and patterns, whether it's drawing it on paper and tracing it with your fingers, reciting it aloud to your coach, or closing your eyes and envisioning yourself riding it correctly. Until horses come equipped with GPS devices, you'll have to stretch your mental muscles.

* "Thar She Blows!" Trying to ride a frisky horse through a large class is like sitting atop a powder keg with a lit fuse. You know that with any provocation your horse is going to explode. Again, you have options. One is to ride defensively and avoid traffic jams, because they'll send your high horse into overdrive. Another is to make a few circles to keep your rambunctious horse focused on you and your aids. But perhaps the best option is the most courteous one. Ride your horse at the walk to the center of the arena and then politely ask the judge if you may be excused from the class. In most instances, your horse's tense, excessive animation had already been noted by the judge, so you weren't going to place, anyway. Rather than disrupting the entire class with your horse's antics, play the role of hero and retire. Then head for the warm-up ring or snap on the longe line and give your horse a chance to exorcise his inner demons. Once he's settled down, enter another class and try again.

* "No, the Other Left Lead!" Though judges are notorious for seeing everything, they often miss a lot that happens in the show pen or arena. They have to juggle taking notes, reconfiguring the class placings and giving commands to the announcer along with watching the class. That's why even if your horse blows a lead or breaks gait, try not to fall apart. Depending on the type of class and level of competition, a few misbegotten strides won't necessarily eliminate you from the ribbons. If your horse's performance and your horsemanship are truly superior to the rest of the exhibitors, you might only be dropped down a few pegs. So rather than being a drama queen when disaster strikes, play it cool, regain your composure and act as if nothing happened. Get back on track and carry on as if nothing happened.

* "Do I Even Know This Horse?" Greenies are notorious for getting to a show and suddenly forgetting half of what they seemed to know at home. In a showmanship class they forget how to square up. On a hunter course, they're transfixed by the decorative shrubbery. Instead of becoming frustrated, however, you must remain calm. After all, you were the one who decided to take on the task of showing a baby. Consider the first year (or two) of showing to be your young horse's education. Aim for successful, positive experiences. The judge will understand if you trot a few jumps rather than cantering them. And if you jog rather than lope the second direction in your western pleasure class, your horse will be better schooled to remain relaxed in his next class. And never be afraid of scratching a class if the jumps seem too high or the pattern too challenging. Even show time disasters can be beneficial if you're patient and have a sense of humor.