

Horse Show Solutions: Improve your Huntseat Equitation

A top judge shares what she looks for in the show arena

By Cindy Hale

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Meg Schulman is one of the USEF's most popular and respected judges in the hunter and equitation divisions. She also finds time to conduct clinics throughout the United States, sharing her expertise with competitors eager to improve their horsemanship skills. At a recent clinic in California, Meg shared four tips on how huntseat equitation riders can impress the judge. Develop a tight, secure lower leg: "When I'm judging an equitation class," Meg said, "the first place I look is the rider's lower leg. The heel should be down. The rider's calf should be in contact with the horse's side, just at or slightly behind the girth. The lower leg must also be tight, because it's the base of the rider's security and support when jumping. A swinging lower leg tells me that the rider has an insecure seat. In fact, the judge's eye is drawn to movement. Judges really notice it if a rider fidgets with their foot in the stirrup or allows their lower leg to continually slip too far back." Practice smooth transitions: Meg emphasized that riders can drop several ribbon placings—or end up out of the ribbons altogether—if they execute sloppy transitions. Instead, Meg offered, riders should keep their horse on their aids so that the horse is always prepared, mentally and physically, for the next gait. "The horse should always remain balanced so that instead of abrupt transitions there is a blending from one gait to the next. For example, riders need to use their lower leg with downward transitions, rather than simply pulling back on the reins. By adding some lower leg, the horse remains round instead of being heavy on its forehead. As a judge, I want the horse's body shape to be consistent: no flipping of its head, no hollowing of its back. Every transition should be seamless." Be an effective rider: "As riders move up into the upper levels of equitation, the judge expects more than just a good position," Meg explained. Once riders graduate from short stirrup and novice huntseat classes, they're expected to do more. "At the upper levels, everyone has a good position. But as a judge, I want to see someone who does more than just sit well or pose on a horse. That means I'll ask you to collect and lengthen your horse's stride. I expect to see your horse consistently on your aids, on the bit. I want to see a rider." Pay attention to your turnout: Meg took a few minutes to address a rider's appearance. Though she isn't impressed by trendy apparel or accoutrements, she does believe that equitation riders should make an effort to look their best. "You don't have to have the most expensive tack, equipment or clothing, but it must be neat and clean. Dust off your boots. Never, ever come into an equitation class with twisted reins or twisted stirrup leathers. Check the keepers and sliders on your horse's bridle so that there isn't a lot of flapping leather straps. Overall," Meg said, "make it look as if you care."

By following Meg Schulman's horse show tips, you can make a positive impression on the judge. After all, she said, "Riders should remember that the judge is rooting for you. We want you to do well."