

AQHA and NSBA Host Western Pleasure Forum

The groups are working toward a standardized judging system.

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Head carriage, cadence, gaits, transitions and overall expression in western pleasure classes have been interpreted differently depending on who is judging and what association is sanctioning the event. So on December 19, the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) and the National Snaffle Bit Association (NSBA) met in Texas to discuss ways to develop a standardized system by which all western pleasure exhibitors are judged.

Nearly 70 professionals came from as far away as Virginia, Kansas, Ohio and Florida attended the meeting, and top riders and judges who specialize in western pleasure were also invited to attend.

Some of the points made during the meeting will be included in an educational video that aims to illustrate industry standards for western pleasure. The video will be developed jointly by the AQHA and the NSBA and will include:

- Placing more emphasis on judging the walk and using the video to educate exhibitors on improving the walk.
- Finding a balance for the amount of time spent judging the jog and the moderate extension of the jog.
- Addressing the head-bob at the lope, why it occurs and ways to avoid or correct it. This included educating exhibitors on lengthening their horse's stride versus shorter, manmade strides; addressing the importance of conformation and what movements certain horses are physically capable of; and reassuring exhibitors that it is OK to show off the rail and that passing another horse can give exhibitors an opportunity to demonstrate their horsemanship, and show their horse's ability to guide while maintaining an even cadence and consistent performance.
- Educating rank-in-file members and beginning western pleasure competitors on the positive and negative characteristics of western pleasure horses, and on how the discipline continues to improve.
- Additional education for judges and continuing to push for and establish industry standards.

The meeting's participants appointed a subcommittee to further discuss the video, review it and approve the final version of the video. Cleve Wells, Karen Hornick, Jay Starnes, Brett Parish, Dave Dellin, J.R. Reichert, Shane Dowdy, Tom Chown, Troy Oakley, Brad Kearns, Charlie Cole and Tina Kaven will serve on the subcommittee. The video, which is expected to be completed late summer or early fall 2008, will use the latest technology, including split screens, graphics and computer animation to underscore many of the nuances of western pleasure.

"Western pleasure is the foundation class for nearly every other event," AQHA Executive Director of Judges Alex Ross says. "There are some who feel the written rule is the benchmark. While that might be the intent, until we are all able to agree on what our standards are and be consistent, there will be confusion. I think we made a lot of progress during this meeting to get people to understand how western pleasure horses are to be exhibited."