

It's Cheese Only at Horse Shows

By Cindy Hale

Wednesday, April 22, 2009

It's Wednesday and I think I've finally rehydrated myself from last Sunday's judging assignment. I officiated at a county-rated hunter show at a nearby equestrian park. The heat was sweltering! To appreciate the irony, let me point out that I specifically handpicked this year's judging jobs so that I wouldn't be working during the ungodly heat of the summer. I slyly signed contracts for springtime shows, when the mornings are typically overcast and the temp never soars above 80. So what happens? Southern California got slammed with a record-breaking heat wave. It was over 100 degrees on Sunday. I knew it was hot when my blouse began to stick to my skin. Because the sun was beating down into the booth, I kept my sunglasses and ball cap on for the entire day. I must've looked like I was trying to remain incognito.

"Who's our judge today?"

"I don't know. It's hard to tell. No one has seen her face."

I made numerous trips to the bathroom enclosure, whereupon I soaked a dwindling supply of paper towels in cool water and swiped them across my dust-encrusted face and neck. Ah, the glamour of being a horse show judge!

But between dealing with the heat and dust I had a few free moments to make some observations. Here are 3 of them:

1. Even though the park's restroom facilities included a sink and running water, the actual "bathrooms" were four industrial sized port-o-potties cloistered inside a permanent structure made of cinder blocks. They stood stoically in the shade like a quartet of soldiers at attention. Just in case you're wondering, they still looked—and smelled—like standard issue port-o-potties. The stifling heat didn't help matters. Is that a horse show mainstay? Is there some unwritten requirement that horse shows must feature primitive restrooms? And what does that say about horse show competitors as a group that we become nonchalant about entering the confines of these modern day outhouses?

2. Has anyone ever determined the ingredients in that greasy orange glop that is marketed as "nachos" at horse shows across the country? I strolled past the concession stand several times on Sunday, hoping in vain to discover something faintly nutritious to munch on. Instead I came face to face with an open can of cheese goop. Oh, they can hide it behind the picnic table. They can even try to dress it up with sliced jalapenos or diced tomatoes. But I know from whence it came: a cylindrical metallic container with a gilded lining. Go ahead. Toss it in the slow cooker or zap it in the portable microwave and then ladle it over a mountain of tortilla chips. But don't try to fool me into thinking that it ever enjoyed an earlier life as a milk product.

3. Some riders just don't get it that turnout is important in the show ring. How else can you explain the appearance of an otherwise nice young boy who rode gallantly in a half-dozen classes? Though he continually made errors that kept him out of the top ribbons, I admired his soft hands and the way he maintained a consistent pace around every course. Yet his boots looked as if they'd never felt the caress of a rag saturated with polish. They were not only dusty, they bore water spots and splashes of dried mud. When I took the time to approach him at the end of the day, in order to give him some words of encouragement, I figured I'd also share how he needed to pay more attention to his boots. But as I got closer I noticed that his reins were twisted. His horse's bridle was also caked with dried sweat. The bit was layered with gunk. As I began to recite all of his grooming shortfalls, I then realized that the collar of his show shirt was unbuttoned and that his long, shaggy hair stuck out from beneath his helmet like a mop. I couldn't contain myself. What started out as a well-intentioned pep talk ended up with me finally exclaiming, "Look at you! You're a mess!" I was smiling when I said it, and I meant it in good humor, but the words just leapt from my lips. Hopefully, he got the message. All I could think as I slinked away was that perhaps I've been exposed to the biting wit and cutting commentary of hunt seat guru George Morris for far too long. In my advanced years I'm beginning to sound just like him. Oh well. If that young man finally cracks open a jar of black boot polish, it's worth it.

I judge again this Sunday. And then I'm contracted for shows on May 9th, 10th, and the 17th. In June I judge near Los Angeles. Then I'm done for the year. After all, it'll be summer time, and my goal is to refrain from judging when the overheated air is as still and thick as nacho cheese goop.

<< Previous Entry



Back to Life With Horses.