

The Challenges of Judging a Horse Show

By Cindy Hale

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I know I was crowing about the fact that I was finished judging horse shows for this year. But I received a call from a show manager who was bereft one judge, and she needed a last minute substitute. Who was I to pass up a decent day's wage in this economy? So last Sunday, there I was once again, sitting in the judge's booth all day.

To my benefit, the show was held at a lovely facility outside L.A., just inland from the coast. The weather was mild and breezy. The exhibitors were turned out well and their horses and ponies were properly schooled. And I sat across the booth with USEF judge Liz Adler, who was overseeing the other show arena. She's sharp-witted and a veritable encyclopedia of USEF rules. All in all, it turned out to be a fun day.

But while I was taking a short break, I began to think about the challenging aspects of being a horse show judge. It certainly isn't all fun and games when I'm given the responsibility of determining who gets the blue ribbon and who gets no ribbon. With that in mind here are my personal Top 5 Challenges That Confront a Horse Show Judge: A large flat class full of bay geldings. Trust me: after a while all bay horses begin to look alike. Scanning the class, furiously looking for numbers tied to each rider's back, gets tiresome. Luckily I've adopted a system used by many other judges. I jot down descriptive notes next to the numbers of noteworthy (bay) horses. My scorecard might include quick references like, "fuzzy girth" or "big blaze." Often times it's the only way to expediently pin a large class where so many brown horses are ridden by so many riders in navy blue huntcoats. I'm all for tasteful conformity in the huntseat world, but sometimes it goes a little too far. How wonderful it would be if huntseat competitors could embrace the colorful, distinctive fashions of the western world! At least then the riders of the bay horses would be distinctive.

Hard luck kids. I've shared before how both my sister and I grew up struggling to compete on the show circuit. Our parents didn't have a great deal of disposable income. When we were young it was tough to afford a decent horse, acceptable apparel and appropriate tack. Then we had to scrape together the actual entry fees. So I sympathize with junior riders who love to ride and yearn to compete, but who don't have the money for fancy duds or a spectacular horse. Regardless of that sentiment, I can only judge what I see before me. If a poorly attired rider steps into the arena on a horse that can barely negotiate the course of jumps, chances are they're going to be beaten by a polished performer who cruises around the same course on a horse that's a breathtaking athlete. Though my soul identifies with the cash-strapped young competitor, my job is to award the ribbon to the most deserving performer, regardless of my emotions.

Dust in the wind. Sometimes I wonder why I bother to get all gussied up for my judging jobs. I do create a professional impression when I check in at the show office, but it's downhill after that. By noon my face has been sandblasted by blowing grit and my hair—if it's not smooched under a ball cap or straw hat—looks as if a cup of flour has been dumped atop my head. Is there ever a horse show water truck or sprinkler system that works efficiently and properly?

Elusive lunch breaks. I'm no fan of horse show food. If you've followed my blog or my previous column in Horse Illustrated then you know that for many years I've considered consuming horse show food a literal Dance with Death. Even when shows offer decent food—which is always free for judges—there's rarely an opportunity to actually pause and eat. That's understandable. Most show managers want to keep things rolling so all the classes get completed at a decent time. Yet that means that I'm usually forced to nibble bites of food between rounds of hunters. As you can imagine, that typically means that I'm not eating much. It's just too much trouble. Besides, it's a little embarrassing to turn in a scorecard that's stained with taco sauce.

Rabid horse show parents. Thankfully, well run horse shows prevent judges from being waylaid by misguided family members who simply cannot comprehend why Janie didn't win a ribbon in her equitation class. Often times I can overhear their conversations. I may be losing my hearing in one ear, but I'm not stone deaf. At the last show I judged, for example, an entire entourage was cheering for one young girl aboard a Paint horse. Honestly, I would've loved to have pinned the girl and her spotted horse. But they kept making errors that bumped them out of contention in tough classes. Finally, in desperation, the girl's parents exclaimed, "I don't know why the judge doesn't like her!" It took every ounce of restraint for me to keep myself from leaning out the booth and yelling, "Hey! She keeps taking the wrong lead!" On the one hand, I'd love to educate the adults as to why little Janie wasn't earning an armful of blue ribbons. But you know what? That's not my job. That's their trainer's job. Can you imagine what my day would be like if I had to explain my placings to every interested competitor and their family? That wouldn't be a judging job. Instead I'd be conducting a clinic. And that's a whole 'nuther pay scale.

See? Judging a horse show isn't such an easy gig. Yes, I do enjoy judging. Since I no longer compete, it gives me a way to still feel involved in equestrian sports. Plus I'm getting paid to look at beautiful horses and ponies. That's pretty cool for

a horse lover like me. But judging definitely has its challenges. So the next time you're at a show, have a little sympathy for the person with the clipboard in her hand.

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