

## “Excuse Me, but Your Horse’s Tail Just Fell Off”

By Cindy Hale

Monday, October 12, 2009

My judging experience this past weekend provided me with a memorable experience. In the first showmanship class of the day, a Paint gelding stepped on his fake tail and ripped the darn thing right off.

I freely admit that I’m not the world’s most experienced showmanship judge. While I showed my family’s young warmbloods in-hand at sport horse shows, and presented them for their inspections and brandings, I never really “did” the showmanship thing. It’s not typically offered at hunter and jumper competitions. But once I decided to expand my judging skills beyond strictly English disciplines, I picked the brains of some veteran AQHA and APHA judges. Then I worked up through the ranks of shows, beginning with little backyard events where showmanship classes were populated with freckle faced kids leading scruffy ponies in nylon halters. Eventually I ended up where I was last Sunday, at a show that’s part of a local high point circuit. That’s when I encountered the Paint gelding with the wee bit too long tail.

I could see what was coming. I stood there with my clipboard, silently calculating how close the horse came to tromping on its tail with each step. Mere fractions of inches were between hoof and hair. But then came the portion of the pattern where the handler had to back the horse up and pivot it around to face me. That did it.

Fortunately, the imposter tail was the type that plugged into a plastic holder buried deep in the forest of the real life tail. So rather than ripping out extensions or yanking out laces it merely made a loud clicking sound as it came unplugged. And then it fell into the arena dirt like it had been lopped off with a butcher knife.

Oh dear.

Those were the words that came to me. I’m not all that familiar with fake tails. They are used rarely and discreetly on hunters. So when I saw the lifeless bundle of glossy black hair—and it was at least an armful—lying on the ground, I was both embarrassed for the girl who was the horse’s handler and embarrassed by my first impulse, which was to burst out laughing. But being the judge, I contained my giggles and stood there like the professional horsewoman that I am (most of the time).

When the handler noticed that her horse had shed his tail, she lost her stoic demeanor.

“Oh no,” she said, adequately horrified.

“Yes,” I finally quipped, “it appears that your horse has suffered a wardrobe malfunction.”

Making matters worse, the dispatched tail was half buried in the dirt, beneath the Paint’s hind legs. Every time he took a step, he thrashed it further. I balanced the monetary cost of the fake tail with the humiliation of the handler. Then I added the fact that she hadn’t performed the showmanship pattern correctly. It wasn’t like she was in contention for a ribbon, anyway. My decision was to allow her to lead her horse forward a few steps so the ring steward could pluck the tail from the arena floor and hand it to her. I swear, the procedure looked like a witchdoctor handing over a shrunken head.

Maybe I deserved this hairy experience for breaking my promise to myself not to judge any more horse shows this year. But when the show manager called and offered me the job, I figured I could use the money for Christmas gifts. However, I also have an appointment coming up at the hair salon, and I can use some of the money for that. It seems oddly appropriate.

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