

Placing in Western Pleasure

Veteran competitor, trainer and coach Cleve Wells fills us in on the secrets of western pleasure success.

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Western pleasure looks ridiculously easy from outside the ring. If it's done right, it can appear as if the rider is sitting comfy on a remote-control horse. But if you've ever had to maneuver your horse through a crowded arena, you know there's more to it than sitting on a living equivalent of the La-Z-Boy recliner. It should look effortless, but to be consistently successful inside the arena requires a lot of work before you ever enter the ring. We've talked to veteran competitor, trainer and coach Cleve Wells of Burleson, Texas, to find out what the judges look for when trying to cull out the winners in a ring of riders — and what'll get you a first-class ticket to the outgate.

Don't Judge by the Cover

Pleasure classes don't require memorizing patterns or learning complicated maneuvers, and there are no obstacles to go around or through. You simply walk, jog and lope with a group of other riders. An announcer will call out gait and direction changes, then you'll all line up in the middle as the judge approaches each of you to inspect your backing skills. And that's it, or so it seems. But to get your horse to go around the ring in a pleasure frame at a pleasure pace and appear willing, happy and in tune almost telepathically to your wishes requires training as well as the right natural attitude and conformation — and therefore good breeding.

And because competition is stiff due to the number of competitors in this popular discipline — details and appearances count even more than in most other western show disciplines. Turnout of both horse and rider must be immaculate if you want a shot at a ribbon, and you and your horse must be partners. There's no muscling a western horse around the ring. Movement counts, but so does attitude. All these details put together can mean the difference between fame and shame at the show.

According to Cleve, the ideal western pleasure horse is built to travel with a level topline. In other words, he should naturally carry his head level with his withers, not held upright or sniffing the ground. His guts are naturally low and sweepy, seeming to float effortlessly over the ground in smooth, rhythmic strides. And, he says, "Cadence is the most important thing, and especially a solid jog." A horse with uneven, choppy gaits who's "soggy behind and quick-walking in front" at the jog may learn to adjust his strides with training as he becomes more athletic, but he'll be working harder than those who come by the desired movement naturally and he'll probably never achieve championship status. While a level topline is most desirable, Cleve says, "Although I may not like a horse's profile, I won't penalize a horse with a higher head carriage if that's his comfort zone and he stays there consistently. I believe the horse has the right to decide for himself where's he's comfortable." The key is consistency. The horse should keep his head at that level the whole ride.

To see if your horse travels consistently, Cleve recommends taking a series of pictures of your horse jogging riderless and under saddle. You should be able to look at one freeze frame and see the same headset and body posture in all the other pictures. This'll show he's comfortable. If his head is up in one shot, then down in another, he's trying to find his comfort zone, but his rider is telling him where to put his head. If he's naturally comfortable with his head stargazing, and his gaits are a bit choppy and quick, he might not be the horse for you if you have your heart set on a pleasure class cruise.

The best horses for pleasure classes also have the right attitude: willing, eager, calm — the epitome of the easygoing "mellow fellow." A horse who tends to be nervous might spook off the rail or travel too fast or with a stiff, uptight frame when he's surrounded by the noisy confusion of a show. And since one-hand power steering on a loose rein is required, you don't want to worry about a horse who's willful or irritable with other horses. The bottom line is that some horses have what it takes to excel at western pleasure and some don't. You can either accept that and move on, or make yourself and your horse miserable trying to make him fit in. If your goal is to make the finals, you'll need a caliber of horse that can take you there.

You can buy a ready-made pleasure champ with flawless, sweepy gaits and star presence — if you have the \$25,000 or more to spend — or you can buy a potential champion on a budget if you have (or can develop) an educated eye for horseflesh. Cleve has bought a few world champions for as little as \$6,500 — because they were 2- and 3-year-olds at the time. But the longer you wait and the more promise the horse shows, the more expensive he'll be. If you don't want to put in the time and money to find and develop an unproven youngster, expect to pay top dollar.

But winning isn't only based on buying the right horse for the job. You'll still need to put in some time getting used to each other, and you still need to know what you're doing. As Cleve points out, "I can train a horse to be a winner, but that doesn't mean you can show him and win. It takes talent and timing and work." According to Cleve, a winning ride is a combination of one-third the rider, one-third the horse, and one-third the trainer. And anything less than 100 percent effort from all three will bring in a less than perfect ride. He says, "The horse isn't there to make you look good — you're there to make the horse look good. He's just there to do his best job, and it's not fair to expect him — or me — to make up for you." So you should be prepared to put in time riding and working on your horsemanship skills before taking in any shows. "I spend more time in a saddle than any other trainer, I'll bet," says Cleve, "because I know I'm not the most talented trainer. But I also know that I either have to beat somebody or get beat, so I want my horses prepared to win."

If you put in your full third in terms of training and attitude and your horse is putting in his share, then even if your trainer's not pulling his weight, you can still carry off a win. If anyone else is slacking too, however, then you'd better hope your class is full of bad riders and/or really substandard horses.

Not only that, Cleve says good salesmanship can make or break a win. For example, he says if he were judging a class, "I may not like the product, but if I like the salesmanship of the rider, that could bring them up." In other words, if you enter the class with the idea that you're marketing your horse, and it's your goal to show the judge just why he should place your horse over every other horse in the class, you can convince the judge you're worthy. Exude confidence in your horse and skill. But come prepared. Don't figure you can fool the judge into thinking bad riding is good just by wearing a confident smile. Your attitude should be like facial makeup: it highlights or disguises features to enhance what's already there naturally.

Personal History

"You should enter this class; that judge pinned you last time, so he likes your horse. You'll probably win today." How many times have you heard that? And 'fess up, you may have even been the one talking. It's a common misconception riders have about how judges come up with their conclusions. And there's often confusion among novices when they don't in fact win under that favored judge, but instead get a quick trip to the gate. They'll say the judge is crazy or fickle.

But what they don't understand is that the official is judging what he sees in front of him in a particular class, against the other competitors of that day. A win doesn't necessarily mean the judge likes your horse. He or she may not even particularly care for your horsemanship. But he or she must judge what's put before them, and if there wasn't anything else in the class better, somebody had to place.

Don't misunderstand. Not every class is a case of picking the best of the worst. But if your win record is inconsistent with the same judge, chances are it's not because he can't decide if he likes your horse. More likely, you're either doing something different (and therefore displaying inconsistency), or the competition you're riding against varies.

If you find yourself in a situation where your awards are haphazard, take a hard look at your showing manner. First impressions are the most powerful. Keep in mind that judges must look at a ring full of riders in just a few minutes. If there are 15 riders in the class, you want to figure the judge will only have about 5 seconds to look at you. When riders first begin, the judge will begin to place each instantly. He or she will spend the rest of that class trying to confirm that opinion. If you make a good start, you'll have a better shot at the blue. However, that doesn't mean you can relax after the first glance, because any mistakes could force the judge to alter that initial impression.

According to Cleve, mistakes that could cost you a win include lifting your hand too high, waiting too long to make direction and gait changes, and taking an extra step or two at the wrong gait during transitions (for example. Jogging a stride when going from a walk to a lope). Transitions should have a lot of definition; the horse shouldn't stumble into them, and you should maintain the same body posture throughout the transition and at all gaits.

In fact, says Cleve, there shouldn't be excessive body language at all and he recommends that new riders avoid clothes that exaggerate or give the appearance of body movement, such as pigtailed, long fringe, puffy sleeves and loose shirts. Direction changes should be smooth reverses without breaking cadence. You can do a 180-degree pivot or walk out a circle, but don't bump your horse and stop. After the change is called, you can reverse immediately, within 10 or 20 feet, but don't wait beyond that.

While you may think your ride was yards better than anyone else in the ring, your ring etiquette or sportsmanship may be hurting your impression on the judge or even offending him. There are certain things you should never do. For example, while theoretically you want to catch the judge's eye — after all, that's why riders dress up so outrageously — Cleve stresses, "You should never look at the judge or ride by him in an attempt to get his attention. You're showing your horse,

so look up and straight down the rail."

Also, don't be discourteous to the other riders. For example, don't cut anyone off. And if the horse in front of you is just too slow for your horse to maintain his comfortable cadence and you decide to pass, don't remain riding alongside the other horse. Speed up to pass, then get back on that rail. "It's rude to box in a horse on the rail. It makes some horses nervous," says Cleve.

Some riders try to slow down their horses because they figure the slowest horse is going to win. But that's not necessarily the case. If the rider ahead is forcing his horse to slow too much and his horse loses rhythm, you don't want to do the same to your horse. And if your horse's natural cadence is smooth and flowing but his legs are longer, he may be covering more ground than the leader. Bumping him to slow him down will only disrupt his natural cadence. In these cases you're better off passing.

On the other hand, if the horse in front is smooth and cadenced, with a perfectly level headset, long legs and he's going slower, he's probably going to win. It generally requires more muscle power to engage the hindquarters at a slower speed, and since it's more difficult, this generally impresses the judges more. However, trying to force your horse to slow below his comfortable rhythm won't change the fact that the other horse will win, but, says Cleve, it could blow your chances for second place. "The point is to show off your horse, not choke him up," he admonishes.

How can you tell what your horse's natural rhythm is? Cleve suggests, "When you're schooling at home and before a class, count the strides to yourself until you get a feel for what your horse does naturally when he's comfortable. Then, when you get in the pen behind a slower horse, check to make sure your horse hasn't sped up pace. If he has, bump him just a little with your reins to get back in rhythm. If he hasn't, though, pass the other horse." Be sure you give a wide enough berth around the horse you're passing and get back to the rail as quickly as you safely can without cutting the other rider off.

When the judge calls out a gait or direction change, it's expected for you to wait until the horse in front of you has begun the transition before you start your change. However, if the rider in front is waiting longer than 5 seconds, you're better off going.

"If you're feeling like you need to get moving, you probably should," says Cleve. Some riders wait until the judge is looking at them, or perhaps until the stars are aligned just right before loping off. But beyond a reasonable pause of about 1 to 5 seconds, judges consider it rude. And you definitely don't want to upset him or her.

Another way to make a judge angry, says Cleve, is to try fixing something behind his back. "I can tell when a rider has pulled on the horse to get him to a certain head level, even without seeing it happen because when I turn back around, the horse will look different," he says. "And doing that behind the judge's back seems sneaky, kind of cheating to me and it doesn't show respect for the judge," he adds.

Fashion Focus

Western pleasure is a chance to show creativity and have some fun with your clothes and tack, since there are few restrictions. You should check with your breed association's requirements, but generally a long-sleeved shirt, cowboy hat, boots, chaps and pants are musts. Anything else is fair game. Fashion is a big deal, however, in pleasure, and keeping up with trends is considered an unspoken rule. Unless of course, you're bold enough and confident enough to set them. But don't get sucked into pleasure's appearances and neglect the training. A great eye-catching outfit won't win for you, but it might call attention to your riding faults.

"People focus on looks and clothes and forget about the horse. Sure, everyone wants to look nice when they're in the spotlight in front of a crowd, but you have to have a presentation. You have to practice and work, too," says Cleve. But some people, he adds, get caught up in the superficial aspects of the sport, choosing pleasure because they think it'll make them look good. He feels if you don't enjoy riding and horses — even cleaning out horses' stalls and grooming can be fun to a horse lover — then you're missing the point. "It's like buying a rare classic car and fixing it so it goes perfect. You wouldn't give the keys to a teenager with no training or respect for it, to race around just because he thinks it'll make him look good to his friends."

While it's important to wear the appropriate attire and tack, Cleve says not to worry too much about putting on the glitz. "One of the most striking riders I've seen wore a plain white tuxedo shirt with black jacket, chaps and hat. Just about everyone else was wearing fancy glitter shirts. But that rider still placed," he says.

To Thine Own Horse Be True

"I think the biggest mistake people make is to try and replicate some other rider and try to force his or her horse to be exactly like another," says Cleve. "Horses have the right to be individuals." You shouldn't try to train your horse to copy the way another moves or carries himself.

Also, you shouldn't expect overnight miracles in training, whether you decide to train your horse yourself or send him to a professional — even a world champion trainer. "It takes about 3 to 5 years to get someone lined out," says Cleve, "if they have the talent and the will to put in the effort it takes." But usually when someone chooses a world champion as their goal, they understand and accept that.

Keep in mind that shows should be for practice and you'll have more fun. Going to shows can be an incredible education. Nobody wins all the time, so don't go in expecting to win each class. Cleve says, "When you're losing, you're frustrated — but motivated to learn and grow. When you win, you're mentally satisfied, but not learning." And when you keep learning and riding, eventually you'll win.