

Western Perception

After 25 years of criticism, western pleasure is ready for a brand new image.

By Jennifer Nice

We've all heard the jokes and the ridicule. We've heard western pleasure horses called peanut rollers, zombies and creepers. It's been claimed that time-elapsed photography is the best way to determine if they are actually moving around the arena, and that watching paint dry is more exciting than watching a western pleasure class. Because much of the criticism is justified, western pleasure has endured one of the longest running negative public images of any showing discipline.

What, exactly, is the problem with western pleasure? Those within the discipline's inner circle—trainers, exhibitors, breeders and the stock horse breed associations—know that how the class is judged has been a problem. The general horse-loving public, however, just sees horses moving painfully slow with their too-low heads flopping languidly about their knees.

The solution to the problem is obvious. Change the way the class is judged, and you change the class. And this is just what associations like the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA), the American Paint Horse Association (APHA) and the National Snaffle Bit Association (NSBA) have done.

The Beginning of the Bad Rap

Former AQHA President Bill Englund, of Cashion, Ariz., has been judging American Paints and Quarter Horses for 35 years. He can date the origins of western pleasure's problems back more than two decades.

"Back in the 1970s, the horses had a lot of natural movement," Bill recalls. "Their gaits were true, they moved out faster, their heads were elevated about an inch or two above level, and they seemed brighter."

According to Bill, the trouble began when trainers and exhibitors started slowing their horses down in order to win.

"By the 1980s we began to see the trend in which slower horses were winning, so everybody tried to get their horses to go slower," Bill says. "And when they went slower, their heads started dropping, and their gaits became manufactured. The horses started going so slow that they couldn't move properly."

The trend didn't happen suddenly. Rather, it became the fashion because of who was winning. If the best horse in the class just happened to be going slow, then everyone saw that and started slowing their horses down. They got slower and slower gradually. It's similar to someone coming into the show-ring wearing a giant bow in her hair and winning the class because even though the judges hated the bow they thought she had the best horse. The other exhibitors see this and the next thing you know, everyone is wearing giant bows in their hair. Every time a judge pins a horse that is moving improperly, that judge is reinforcing the trend.

Prior to this period, judges considered conformation and condition for 20 percent of the horse's overall score. This part of the class was eliminated for about 10 years, and western pleasure hit rock bottom when the horses began coming into the ring looking underweight and intimidated.

"[Trainers] were holding back horses' feed so that they didn't have the energy to go fast," Bill says. They also left horses in their stalls with their heads tied up for extended periods of time, until they were too tired to hold them up on their own.

The AQHA made some initial efforts to counteract the trend, including reinstating the rule that condition and conformation be considered as part of a horse's total score toward the end of the 1980s. The association also began hosting judging seminars to better educate judges about the western pleasure standards and to encourage more consistent judging. But by the early 1990s, the problem was still so bad that the association passed a rule that called for the disqualification of horses whose heads were too low.

"This didn't really work," Bill says. "Some judges disqualified horses; others didn't, so it was inconsistent."

Bill has been judging AQHA shows since 1971 and APHA shows since 1974. He also holds judging cards with the NSBA, the National Reining Horse Association and the Appaloosa Horse Club. He judges an average of 20 shows each year,

has judged the AQHA World Championship Show five times, APHA's World Championship Show 11 times and has judged western pleasure classes all over the world. He admits he sometimes finds it difficult to disqualify a horse.

"People have traveled a long way, they've paid their entry fees and they want to be judged," he says. "So instead of disqualifying them, I wouldn't place them, or I would knock them down to the bottom of the class."

Just when it seemed like the class couldn't have any more problems, it did. Despite the efforts of the associations, judging remained inconsistent with the standards of the class and the rules. Then, another new trend started catching on.

"Horses started traveling canted toward the rail," Bill says. "In other words, with their heads toward the rail and their hips toward the center of the arena, so they weren't moving down the rail straight. [Trainers] started doing this so that they could slow the horses down even more. This gives the appearance that the horse is reaching underneath itself further with its hind legs, so he looks like he moves better than he actually does."

The Turning Point

In 1993, the AQHA initiated a new judge monitoring program. The program places field representatives at shows to watch how judges place the classes. The role of the field representative is to also help out at the show any way he or she can, including assisting the show manager, conducting registration inspections and answering questions exhibitors have regarding rules and the association. In 2005, the APHA started a similar program.

Three years ago, AQHA Executive Director of Judges Alex Ross, along with Dale Livingston, who teaches many of AQHA's judging seminars, produced a video that exemplified in detail the ideal western pleasure horse. The AQHA's five-member executive committee sent the video and a letter to every one of its judges.

"The purpose of the tape and the letter was to address how the executive committee wanted to see the class change for the better," Alex says. "In it, the executive committee addressed a couple of points, particularly horses not displaying self-carriage and the lack of forward motion at both the jog and the lope."

The letter stated, "Effective immediately, the lope described as slightly increasing forward motion would become the only gait recognized as a lope in AQHA-approved competition." The letter also stated that it was mandatory, effective immediately, that the jog be extended in at least one direction, and described the extended jog as a definite two-beat lengthening of stride with an increase in pace. The letter and video drove the point home.

The Educated Judge

AQHA, APHA and NSBA currently hold regular judging seminars and academies for their judges. Trainers and exhibitors can also attend these seminars to get insight into the standards of the classes and how the associations want the horses to be judged.

"At the [AQHA] World Shows, the judges meet before every class," Alex says. "We review tapes and discuss each class's rules. The intention is to get the judges on track as far as following the rules and judging positively." APHA judges follow a similar protocol.

The rules governing western pleasure classes for all three associations have evolved to the degree that they now state specifically how the class should be judged and what faults are to be penalized. In 2005, the APHA's Show and Contest Committee appointed a task force to submit a revised rule that will give an even more specific description. If approved, the new rule will go into effect in 2007.

APHA Director of Shows Tina Anderson says that exhibitors will show their horses however the judges want them to. Alex Ross says the exhibitor attitude is, "Tell me how I'll be judged, and I'll tell you how I'll perform."

Western Pleasure Popularity

In terms of number of entries, western pleasure is the most popular class at both American Paint and Quarter Horse shows. The Quarter Horse Congress, held annually in Columbus, Ohio, is the world's largest single-breed horse show. A total of 22 western pleasure classes are offered in Youth, Amateur, Novice, Open, Team Tournament, Futurity and Maturity divisions.

"Traditionally, the western pleasure classes have been the largest classes at the Congress for many years, with entries from more than 100 to 300 for nearly each division," says Connie Lechleitner of the Ohio Quarter Horse Association, which puts on the show.

“Twenty-nine percent of all our show entries are in western pleasure and hunter under saddle,” Tina Anderson adds, noting that the APHA combines entry statistics of these two rail classes. “In the novice and open divisions, it is even higher.”

While serving as chairman of the judges committee for the AQHA in 2003, Alex Ross tracked the total number of entries in western pleasure classes at AQHA shows in five-year increments from 1985 to 2000. “The numbers were declining,” he says. “Then, last year, the numbers were up. I think that because of the rule changes and the way the horses are now being exhibited, the class is appealing to a greater number of people again. Judges have done an excellent job of changing the standards, and as a result the exhibitors are doing an excellent job of changing the way they show their horses.”

One of the reasons for the popularity of the western pleasure class is that it is a platform for all other western classes, such as western riding, horsemanship and trail. And, because of its popularity, it is considered very prestigious to win a world championship in the class.

“What happens at the World Shows sets the standards for the rest of the year,” Bill Englund says. “People see who wins the World Championship and then they try to emulate that horse. For this reason, it’s very important that the judges do a good job at the World Shows.”

New Standard Realized

In the 2-year-old western pleasure finals at the 2005 APHA World Championship Show, a horse came into the ring that Bill describes as the best western pleasure horse he’s ever judged. The horse was Docs Jet Settin Gal, a bay overo mare owned by Leonard Farms of Gibson City, Ill., and shown by her trainer, Wade Spell of St. Louis, Mo.

“She was a great horse,” Bill says. “She moved on the rail well, her gaits were good, and her ears were pricked. She looked like a pleasure to ride. I placed her first.” All five judges placed Docs Jet Settin Gal on their cards, and she easily won the World Championship.

Wade Spell, who has been showing and training Paints and Quarter Horses for about 20 years, says western pleasure is headed in the right direction. “For a while, the horses were really bobbing their heads, moving slowly and were [canted] to the inside,” Wade says. “Now, judges are looking for a lot of self-carriage—more of a natural show horse than a manufactured one.”

Wade says that this change in judging has changed the way he trains and shows his horses. “They want a natural-balanced horse, so it suits me better,” he says. “I was never into having them [canted] to the inside and moving real slow. This is helping me out a lot.”

For Wade and other trainers like him, the decisions the judges make in the show pen dictate how successful he will be in his profession. The same is true for breeders like Ann Myers of Ashland, Ohio, who owns AQHA world champion western pleasure horse Zips Chocolate Chip and specializes in breeding champion pleasure horses.

“Asking for the horses to move forward has allowed them to exhibit their natural movement better than they have in recent years,” Ann says. “The slowest horse is not always the best horse.”

This change enables the get of Zips Chocolate Chip, who has sired 30 world champions to date, to better showcase the movement they were bred for.

“A real western pleasure horse is good minded and wants to go slow on his own,” Ann says. “The great ones have both of these attributes combined with graceful, beautiful and effortless movements that everyone can recognize whether they know what they are looking at or not.”

Alex Ross says that anyone coming to watch the western pleasure class at one of the AQHA’s World Shows will see a really good group of horses. “The horses are fat and slick, and their expressions are good. There has been a dramatic difference in how horses are being presented by their trainers and exhibitors. How they are being shown now is much more positive. They have a lot of forward motion and self-carriage, and their toplines and expressions are better.”

“The industry has finally dictated that we want them moving forward and straight, looking bright and alert with their heads at least level,” Tina Anderson says. “I believe we are seeing horses moving in this manner today and winning.”

Award-winning editor and journalist Jennifer Nice of Weatherford, Texas, has been covering the horse industry for more



than 15 years.