

And now, a word from your judge...

June 1, 2011

RE: May 21 Oldham county Saddle Club show

First of all, let me say how impressed I was by the turnout at the Oldham County Saddle Clubs first show of the year! I know the club has put a lot of thought and effort into these shows and it was great to see so many people supporting this endeavor.

As the judge for this event, I feel compelled to pass along a few things I noticed that may help you, the exhibitors, enjoy future success in horse showing. Our attempt to beat the pending severe weather prevented me from spending as much time speaking with some of you as I would have liked. Perhaps some questions as to why you were placed the way you were will be answered here.

The halter classes at this show are open to any breed and any discipline, which is fine. However, I noticed a few 'cross dressers'. These were horses shown to me fully braided by handlers in hunt attire, but sporting western type show halters. Something to keep in mind, especially in mixed classes, is to "show to your intent." How you present your horse to me (or any judge) tells me how you want me to judge that horse. The attire and braiding told me these horses were to be judged as hunters. The halters told me these horses were to be judged as stock types. This presents a bit of a dilemma for a judge. When presented with multiple types of horses, I of course compare them to each other as far as balance and correctness, but I also see which ones come the closest to their respective breed or intent standard. In evaluating a stock type horse, I'm going to look for substance (muscling) and bone since the idea behind a stock type horse is, well, handling stock (think roping). With a horse presented to me as a hunter, I'm going to look for a bit more size, longer muscle, and a horse that looks like he could maintain a relatively fast pace for a length of time. I'm only hitting on major points and could go on with other breeds, but you get the idea. So you can see where a problem arises if, according to his head gear, I'm supposed to be judging a TB cross as a stock type. That TB cross isn't going to come out too well in the comparison. Thus, "show to your intent." Give your judge enough credit to know what he or she is looking at. I'm taking a guess here that my appearance in a western hat may have influenced the tack decision. Don't do that! You are showing your horse to YOUR intent, not mine. Hunters are to be shown in the bridle if of riding age, or a well fitted plain leather halter. Braiding is optional, but does show a certain respect for the judge and the show in general. We know it takes a lot of time and effort, and believe me, we appreciate it! Western horses can be shown in western type halters with silver but a well fitted plain leather halter (even dark colored nylon for these types of shows) is perfectly acceptable. If you are unsure of how your breed of horse is to be presented, Google is your friend! Google the breed and I assure you, you will find plenty of farms featuring show photos on their websites. Boots or protective leg gear is not acceptable in any halter type classes (ie classes where the horse is shown in hand.)

Another thing about showing your horse at halter – SHOW him! You're proud of him or you wouldn't be at a horse show, right? So when you present your horse to me, show him to me like you're proud of him. As a matter of safety, you should always be facing the judge as he walks around your horse. We'll cover that a little more when I get to showmanship. You should also face your horse when standing in line, especially head to tail, so you know what is going on around the both of you. But from a judging standpoint, if you don't want to look at your horse, ala leaning on his shoulder staring at the concession stand dreaming of a corn dog, what makes you think I want to look at him? If you're proudly presenting him to me with a "My horse is the best horse in the world, why just look at him, will you?" attitude, then I'm going to be much more inclined to check him out rather than dream of my own corn dog.

Moving on to pattern classes: Showmanship, Equitation, and Horsemanship. The purpose of these classes is to show the handler or riders ability to control the horse. Perhaps you have always thought patterns were meant to trick you or give the judge an easy process of elimination type job. Not true! Think of patterns as tests that are meant to see if you've done your homework AND a chance to show off. As far as the homework part of Showmanship, your horse should be taught to 'set up' according to his breed or purpose. Showmanship originally was designed to judge people on how they show their horses at halter. (See, told you we'd get back to this.) Over the years, it has become a little more complicated than that, but the basic premise is the same. You want to show me how you will best show your horse off and some of what you do will depend on what your horse's purpose is. Stock type horses are to be set up square, that is with all four feet forming the corners of a rectangle. Hunter types are to be shown in an 'open' pose, that is with the four feet forming a trapezoid. (Bet you never thought geometry would come in handy at a horse show, huh?) English, or saddleseat types are set up in a stretch or "park". Arabians are set up with the front feet even and the hind feet open. The different stances were developed to show off each breeds attributes or unique conformational characteristics. Conformation of course, brings us back to the halter class. Teach your horse to set up in halter and Showmanship as you want me to judge him. Also, be sure he willingly and freely walks and trots next to you. In halter, I want to see how your horse tracks – does he travel correctly and is he sound. If you have to drag him along, I'm not going to get a good idea of how he moves. As this applies to Showmanship, if you're dragging him, I see that you did not do your homework and you are not showing me you know how to show a halter horse. Now the biggie; in both cases, if you are to track directly to or away from me, you want to line your horse up with me, not yourself. I'm not watching how you travel, I want to see how your horse travels.

Now the pattern is where Showmanship departs from actually showing a halter horse. The pattern is to show you have control of your horse at all times and are communicating with him. You can be asked to do a number of things to show this. All of them are easily taught to your horse, it just takes time and patience. He should of course walk and trot with you, halt as soon as you do, set up and stand quietly, back in a straight line, and perform at least a 360 turn on the haunches to the right. The cues you use for these things should be very subtle. As the judge, I am looking for quiet communication, as if your horse is reading your mind. All these things can be taught and practiced at home.

This brings us to the inspection part. Several things are in play here. I want to see how you are going to show me your horse, so you do not want to be blocking my view of any part of him. And then there is

the safety aspect. Have you ever held your horse for the vet or farrier and had him ask you to be on the same side he is? There's a reason for this, two actually. Your safety and the vet or farrier's safety. Imagine you are on the left side and the vet is on the right side and your horse decides he doesn't like what the vet is doing, he's probably going to try to move away from him. Right on top of you. Or your horse takes a notion to show the vet what he really thinks and kicks at him. Even if you know he's going to do it and react by pulling his head, what are you really doing? You're swinging the horse's hind quarters TOWARD the vet. Now, if you're both on the same side, you are in a much better position to protect both yourself and your vet or farrier from harm.

How does this apply to Showmanship and halter? Well, I want you to protect me from harm too! And I need to be able to clearly see your horse's conformation. So, imagine a birdseye view of your horse. Draw an imaginary line between his ears, all the way down his back and straight off from his tail. Draw another line straight across his withers, so you have four boxes. Number those boxes starting with the left side front as 1, left side rear as 2, right rear 3, and right front 4. As the judge walks around your horse, you need to move as well. When I'm in 1, you need to be in 4, so I have a clear view of the head, neck, chest and front legs. As I move into 2, you need to move to 1. This puts us both on the same side. If your horse decides to take a pop at me, you can quickly pull his head to you, thus his hind end away from me. When I cross into 3, you move back to 4. When I move to 4, you go back to 1. Using this, you are always in a position of control. Okay, big point coming up! You should never have your back to the judge or your horse! There is only ONE occasion to turn your back on the judge – that's if you are asked to show your number. And a little tip; we judges can be a little sneaky. When we look back up the line even after your pattern and inspection, we want to see you still showing your horse. You need to face me the WHOLE time you are in the arena standing still. Lounging against your horse's neck when you are finished with your pattern is very taboo.

In Equitation and Horsemanship a judge is also looking at your form as you ride. All that stuff your instructor has been telling you – head up, heels down, elbows slightly bent, back straight, etc. These things have all come to be considered "proper" because they help us effectively communicate with our horses. The things that are now considered the correct way to sit a horse date back to a wide variety of trial and error experiments. Each point of proper equitation, regardless of riding style, has a reason behind it. All the way back to the first time a human sat on horse, that human found out pretty quick that facing the tail was not very effective, thus was born the standard of facing the horse's ears. When you are effectively communicating, you are in control. When you are in control, you are able to put your horse where you want him.

In ALL pattern classes, pay attention to where the markers are and where you are supposed to be in relation to them. In one of the classes I judged in May, every one of the riders ended up on the wrong side of the markers by the end of the pattern. Point 1: Learn your own pattern. Don't just count on the person before you to get it right. Point 2: The purpose of a pattern is to show the judge you have complete control over where your horse goes. You are telling him exactly where to put every foot in accordance with the pattern. When you end up on the wrong side of the markers, you are telling me one of two things; either you didn't study your pattern, or you do not have full control of your horse. In some of the more advanced pattern classes such as Reining, Western Riding, Dressage, fence classes,

going 'off pattern' is an automatic disqualification. The key to pattern classes is PRECISION. Show me you can put your horse precisely where he needs to be within the pattern. The markers are not mere suggestions. They are there to show you exactly where you need to be.

You have an advantage at these shows since the patterns are posted on line well in advance of the show. Every pattern to be used is available as well. Print them all out and practice them! Also, for those who are showing in Hunter in Hand, be sure to read the class description so you know what the judge is looking for. If you still have questions at the show, ask the ringmaster. If he or she doesn't know the answer, your question can be relayed to the judge. They both want to give you every opportunity to do your best.

One last thing I noticed that bothered me quite a bit. It seemed the announcer (who was doing a great job, by the way) had to call exhibitors into the arena far too often. At one point he had called a class several times and had resorted to calling out the numbers of the exhibitors. As I waited, I saw at least three of those numbers clearly because they were standing just outside the gate *with their backs to the arena*. It was really a very disrespectful thing, to the judge who was waiting, to the announcer who had given plenty of warning as to what was next and who should be ready, to the exhibitors who were preparing for later classes, and to the show management who was trying to keep the show moving in light of the approaching storms. There were also several instances of the ringmaster giving instructions designed to keep the traffic flow going, such as the class awaiting results lining up at one end while the next was brought in to line up at the other end. The ringmaster was also telling each halter horse how to approach me due to a footing problem at the gate area. Very often these instructions were ignored. Please be aware of what you are being asked to do by members of show management. Management is only trying to make show experience pleasant and allow you and your fellow competitors the best opportunity to show the judge what you've got. As any judge will tell you, we truly want to see you at your best!

Please note I am not trying to be critical – I am only offering these tips in the spirit of helpfulness. I hope I have been able to help you, even if it was just one minor tip. Good luck with your future showing and I look forward to seeing you all again.

Sincerely,

Tony Huffman