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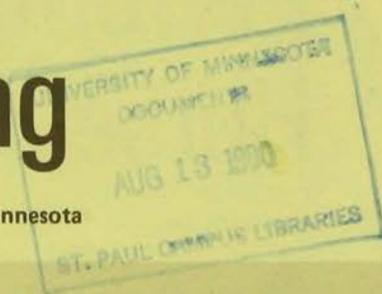
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4-H Performance Horse Judging

Agricultural Extension Service

University of Minnesota



A promising show prospect, Carriage, presence, and action that is "bred in" makes it that much easier to develop a winning performance horse.

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4-H Performance Horse Judging

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Judging Western and English Pleasure classes or Western Horsemanship and English Equitation classes is becoming a part of most youth judging contests. If you can master the skills of judging performance classes and can give a convincing set of reasons, you will become more conscious of your own riding abilities or shortcomings.

Western Pleasure

A pleasure horse should be a pleasure to ride. When judging a pleasure class, major emphasis is placed on the horse's manners and how well he moves at all gaits. A horse that fights the bit, throws his head, wrings his tail, charges, prances sideways, lacks easy control or is disobedient, is not a pleasure to ride. Such a horse wouldn't place high in a pleasure class.

These points are easily seen but aren't the only basis upon which to make a decision. A most important point is evaluating the manner in which the horse travels. The horse must move in all gaits at a consistent speed and in form.

At the walk, the horse should move on a reasonably loose rein covering ground in an aggressive way. The stride should be long and flat-footed.

The jog should be reasonably slow with an even two-beat gait and a reasonable amount of flexion at the knee and hock. The horse is not ridden "on the bit" and the reins should have some slack. However, some degree of alertness and collection is desirable and his head should be carried above a line with his withers. While an over-flexed neck or running behind the bit is frowned on, some flexing of the poll and tucking of the chin is desired.



Too low a head carriage and thus making the horse heavy on the forehead, over flexion so the horse is behind the bit, and the seemingly tenseness of the rider are points that would detract from either a pleasure or equitation class.

The lope should be soft, easy, a pleasure to ride and in the correct lead with the inside leg always leading. Excessive speed at the lope requiring excessive reining is a serious fault. Watch the rider at all gaits. If there is excessive bouncing and jarring, this suggests the horse has an uneasy way of traveling and that he is not a top pleasure horse.

Consistency of performance at all gaits is important along with a willingness to respond to cues (aids) for a change in gaits or leads.

Miscues in performance eliminate the most horses from contention. A missed lead, mixed gaits, slow and improper stops, improper backing, excessive speed, hard mouth and disobedience are easily noticed and these points should be mentioned in your reasons.

While the correct type of horse is a plus and contributes to the overall impression of the entry, the type of horse shouldn't take precedence over manners, performance and way of going.

Important points to consider and include in your reasons are:

1. Manners and response to cues.
2. Ease of going. Smooth ride.
3. Correct gaits.
4. Speed and control.
5. Consistency of performance.
6. Willingness to stop, stand and back.

English Pleasure

This class may consist of entries shown with flat seat as Saddlebreds, Arabians, Morgans or Tennessee Walkers and forward or hunt seat as Thoroughbreds, Arabians, Quarter Horses and the color breeds. The manner in which these horses are ridden and the points of emphasis are quite different. Otherwise, the same basic points required of a Western Pleasure horse are required in an English Pleasure class. The points are merely exhibited in a different manner. The emphasis is still on a pleasure ride, manners, consistency, correct speed, easy gaits, responsiveness to cues and correct head set.

What an English Pleasure class accepts as the correct speed or head set is quite different from what is acceptable in a Western Pleasure class.

Both a pleasure Saddlebred and a hunter are ridden on the bit. Both classes move aggressively with moderate speed and are alert.

While an “over the hill” 3-gaited Saddlebred show horse doesn’t necessarily make a good English Pleasure horse, it should have some of the necessary attributes such as correct head set, responsiveness to leg cues (aids), ability to back, move collectedly with clean gaits and show spritely and attractively. The head carriage on a Saddlebred entry normally is higher than a Walking Horse or Arabian and certainly higher than most Quarter Horses. These horses should flex well at the poll and carry their heads so the profile is slightly ahead of the vertical.

English Pleasure horses shown with hunt seat tack should present an entirely different picture. They should move with their head above the wither and at about a 45° angle so they can see and be alert to where they are going. The walk should be flat-footed and ground covering. While flexion at the knee and hock are desired, English Pleasure hunt seat horses should not move as trappy and have far more extension to their gait than horses ridden with saddle seat tack.

The trot should be square, clean and extended. At the canter, the hunt horse is not nearly as light on the forehand and collected as a horse ridden with a flat seat. But the canter should be easy to ride. You should not see the rider bouncing on a good hunt pleasure horse. While a hunter-type pleasure horse ridden at the speed of a Western Pleasure horse would not place well, the horse should take the rail readily, be

steady at the gait, tender of mouth and not race. A pleasure class is never judged on speed.

Most importantly, the horse must show evidence of being a pleasure to ride at all times.

While there is a tendency for one to think that judging is based on specific factors as lead or head set, most judges are influenced by the combined overall impression of horse and rider. An English Pleasure class is thus ridden with more elegance and form.

Reasons

Most judging contests require contestants to present an oral set of reasons. "Preparing a 4-H Judging Team—4-H M250" provides some basic aids that apply to reasons pertaining to both halter and performance classes. When judging performance classes, include these important factors: emphasize the fact that the horse moved well at all gaits; provided a **pleasurable ride**; was **consistent** and **well-mannered**; **responded readily to cues** such as easily controlled, changed speed, gaits, leads promptly and correctly; had correct style and type; and moved at the correct speed.

To these major points add head carriage, willingness to back, and attitude of the horse as carriage of ears, wringing of tail or head tossing. All of these points indicate whether the horse is really a pleasure horse. Don't dwell on trivia.

Sample Reasons—Western Pleasure

"I placed 1 over 2 because 1 showed the best combination of pleasure horse traits. One moved with more balance and collection, was more natural, relaxed and freer moving, had a more desired head set, was more consistent and provided a more pleasurable ride than 2. In addition, he walked out with a longer, truer stride, moved easier and at a more correct speed at the jog, don't say trot, and had an easier and more definite stride at the canter.

I must grant that 2 was a more stylish gelding that backed more readily, but he lacked sufficient consistency, appeared harder mouthed, and carried his head too high and behind the bit, to place any higher."

Be careful that you aren't too critical of your second place horse, as this example may be, or you'll create a problem in explaining why you placed him over 3 and 4.

—English Pleasure

"I placed 2 over 4 in this pleasure hunt seat class in an easy placing because 2 moved at all gaits in a more working style, was more respon-



Good posture, balance, and hand position not only enhance the picture of horse and rider, but contribute to the horse's ability to perform.

sive to cues, moved more effortlessly and lightly, and had the best trot and canter of any horse in the class. I was particularly impressed with 2's knee and hock flexion. Number 4 tended to drag his hocks and scuff the ground. I also liked 2's responsive ear, the obvious soft mouth and the nice steady head set and carriage. Horse 2 also changed gaits and took the correct lead promptly."

—English Pleasure - Flat Seat

"I placed this pleasure class 1, 2, 3 and 4. I placed 2 over 3 due to number 2's distinct advantage in manners, responsiveness to cues, and her style and consistent performance at all gaits. In addition, she was an easier and freer moving horse that carried her head higher, flexed more at the poll yet had a very soft responsive mouth. Two also showed more desirable knee and hock flexion, moved squarer and straighter at the trot, and had a very easy moving collected canter.

I criticized 3 for inconsistent speed at the canter being either too slow and sluggish or at a gait approaching a gallop with little lightness in the forehand. Furthermore, 3 was plain and coarse about the head and lacked the quality, style and carriage expected in a Saddlebred, Arabian or Morgan pleasure horse."

Equitation Classes

Unlike the performance class, equitation or horsemanship classes place the emphasis on the rider rather than the horse. However, a good rider can enhance the performance of a horse and a good horse certainly contributes to the apparent skills of a rider. As a judge, you may find it



So-called formal riding doesn't preclude the use of Arabians, Morgans, or even Quarter Horses as mounts. The habit, brown derby, brown coat, and jodhpurs, a flat cutaway saddle, a bridle with two sets of reins (pelham bit or combination of snaffle and curb), and a browband and cavesson (noseband) are the usual appointment requisites for English pleasure equitation classes.

difficult not to have one influence your evaluation of the other. But in your reasons of an equitation class, 100 percent of your comments should refer to the rider.

Important considerations in judging an equitation class should include the impression the rider makes upon you. Is the impression an attractive one? Does the rider have good form, balance, seat, plus correct and comfortable appearing leg, heel and hand position? Does the rider appear confident and have good riding posture, being erect but not stiff, shoulders back and head up, and looking ahead rather than down? If the rider has these major traits and his or her horse is under control, the horse and rider are likely to attract your attention and deserve a more careful observation.

Is the rider contributing to the horse's ability to perform and looking good while doing so? That is the sign of a good equestrian. Many professional riders get a horse to perform well but often their form and posture are a far cry from what is required in a top equestrian.

The rider should apply the cues in a subtle manner and the horse should respond promptly exhibiting a sign of training and a mark of the rider's ability. A wrong lead or cross cantering are usually grounds for elimination, especially if the rider makes no attempt to promptly correct the lead. Improper speed (usually too fast), over reining, too tight a rein in a western horsemanship class, or too loose or uneven reins in an English class, are faults to note. Failure to ride the rail or permitting your horse to become "buried" so the judge can't see you are not the signs of a good rider. Uneven speed, riding too close to the horse ahead of you, or cutting in ahead of other riders are faults.

Specifics about the rider's seat position would include: correct leg position, a steady leg, heels down, foot parallel to the horse, deep quiet



seat with no daylight visible between the rider's knee and calf and the horse, sitting erect and not on one's tailbone or too far back on the cantel, and lack of leg pressure.

Detractions include two hands on the reins in western classes, either hand touching the horse, incorrect manner of holding the reins, bight of the reins on the wrong side which always occurs on the reining hands side, and reining hand held either too high or too low.

In hunt seat equitation classes, the same observations can be made. The horse should be on the bit, two hands are on the reins, and the position of the hands should be held at about a 60° angle, such that a straight line exists from the rider's elbow to the horse's mouth. The rider should give the impression of workmanlike-riding showing agility and readiness yet supple and in position to act correctly to any situation. Body posture, deep seat, straight but supple back, shoulders erect, leg contact from knee to calf and heels down are most important and more obvious when riding a forward seat.

The body position of a forward seat differs considerably from a western or flat seat rider. It must change with the speed of the horse so as to keep the rider directly over the horse's center of gravity. At a halt the rider's upper body should be vertical while at the walk the upper body is a tad ahead of the vertical. A slow sitting trot requires a rider's body to be a bit further ahead than at the walk and at a posting trot the rider should lean forward a bit more so as to stay with the horse's motion and center of gravity. At the canter the rider should sit deep in the saddle and the upper body should return to the same position he or she had at the sitting trot. During the hand gallop the rider needs to come out of the seat, maintain his or her weight in the stirrups with heels down and the rider should lean forward to about the position used at the posting trot.

English equitation calls for a posting trot on the correct diagonal. To be on the correct diagonal, the rider "rises and falls with the horse's leg on the wall" or outside leg. The rider is sitting when the outside leg is on the ground and rises out of the saddle when the outside leg leaves the ground.

Use the same general format for reasons in an equitation class as you used for the pleasure classes.

If you ride correctly yourself, and understand the principles of good horsemanship, you will have taken the first step towards becoming a good judge. Next all you need to do is learn to recognize these good riding qualities when someone else is doing the riding.