

A Perspective

During the 2019 World Championship Horse Show, I wrote down some thoughts and decided to send them to Saddle Horse Report ("SHR") and see if they would be of interest to anyone. These thoughts and opinions are only mine and to the extent they are controversial, please don't attribute them to SHR:

The judging was fair and consistent. Most judges usually judge only the area of the ring in front of them and, in so doing, there are always a few instances where one or two judges doesn't/don't see what the other one or two see. This can lead to odd cards. However, our judging system usually smooths out the cards and the results aren't greatly affected. This year, not only did our system smooth out the cards but also the high number of unanimous decisions and the consistency of the cards created confidence in the results.

There always are honest differences among judges as to what is desirable or undesirable. As the week went on, a knowledgeable observer could almost predict which judges would like which horses and therefore how the cards would read. This gave me confidence that even when I didn't like a particular result, that dishonesty and, for the most part, political pressure, weren't part of the judges' decision making.

However, there were instances where there at best had to be a lack of understanding of the specifications for that particular class. For instance, and to state a basic fact, harness horses must trot. A trot is a two beat gait wherein diagonal legs strike the ground (and the opposing legs rise) at exactly the same time and, in one stride, theoretically would touch the corners of a square, thus a "square trot." Harness horses have to trot. They shouldn't rack. They shouldn't pace. They shouldn't amble. They shouldn't do some indiscernible gait I call a "jiggle." It shouldn't matter how "topey" a horse is, how much front motion it has or how much the crowd loves the horse. If the horse doesn't trot, it should be severely penalized and placed way down in the ribbons. Similarly, road horses must trot and only trot, trot the turns as if they are on a train track without rubbernecking and without changing their stride or cadence in the turns, should not scramble coming out of turns or when changing speeds/gaits and should never, ever break. If they break, maybe they shouldn't be last but should be close to it. I believe that these specifications weren't applied in a few classes and horses that made some or all of these mistakes won or otherwise were tied too high.

And finally regarding judging, in my humble opinion, there were two instances wherein the combination of trainer, exhibitor and amount paid for the horses or the celebrity of the exhibitors were just too much for the judges to tie the horse down in the ribbons. It should be axiomatic that the best horse in any class on that particular night should win no matter what the combination of trainer, exhibitor, amount paid for the horse or celebrity of the exhibitor. To do otherwise is detrimental to our industry.

Hello road horse nation!!! The "standardbred type" standard is a failure. Nobody knows what it means. Not to have a more clearly delineated standard is undesirable and leaves buyers, trainers and judges with too little direction. The standardbreds are very fast and traditional and are a foundation breed of the Saddlebreds but usually can't set their heads as well or have as long or as elegant necks as the

Dutch and hackney mixed breeds. The mixed breeds are higher headed, longer necked and can set their heads better but too often are too slow. The standardbreds are holding their own in the bike classes but overall, it seems that the mixed breeds are taking over the under saddle division. I'd love to buy a road horse for the under saddle division. So what should I do? Until I can find one that is the clear stand-out under the nebulous "standardbred type" standard, I'll have to sit on the sidelines. Do I buy a Cadillac or a Mercedes? They both are cars but the similarities stop there. The road horse hierarchy needs to decide whether it should create separate divisions or just create standards that are clearer and more precise and understandable. Status quo leaves everyone floundering.

There were a lot of truly great horses this year and the quality and the numbers were outstanding. Of the young horses, in my opinion there were three superstars. Matt Shiflet has done a fabulous job with Tua. Red roses could easily be in his future. I wish I hadn't sold his dam (HS A Faithful Lady, who is full sister to HS Daydream's Celebrity, HS Dignitary and HS Daydream's Dream Girl) as a weanling. The influence of uber broodmare A Daydream Believer (BHF) lives on. Another superstar was HS Brilliant Heiress, a granddaughter of A Daydream Believer (BHF). I don't mean to promote my own horse but I doubt many people would disagree with me that she is fabulous. Yellow roses may be in her future. Finally, With Luck, the black junior gaited filly shown by Austin Hazlewood and bred by and started by Debbie Foley, is special. She is a real crowd pleaser.

The retirements and awards have got to be tamed. This year and previous years, there is no other action we take at WCHS that is more of a buzz kill. Their duration throws cold water on the crowd and makes it impossible for trainers and exhibitors to appropriately prepare for the next class. The only retirement this year was 24 minutes (double the duration of a class). I suggest that retirements be limited to seven minutes (with a substantial financial penalty for every minute they go over seven minutes) or be handled as per Sandy Backer Cherry's suggestion. During the interminably long retirement this year, Sandy and I were talking and she made what I thought was a wonderful suggestion which was, since we must abide by the Kentucky State Fair Board's requirement that we add two nights to the show, why don't we do all retirements, Hall of Fame presentations and the parties on the same night? Maybe hold the weanling and yearling futurities that night and then hold the retirements, Hall of Fame presentations and the various parties? This would be much more memorable to all who want to attend, would allow the horse show to run more efficiently and, if a night during the week is selected, say Thursday, there could be a day during which there would be no day or night performance classes, thus giving trainers, exhibitors and horses a day somewhat to refresh themselves. I know that I would have been very interested to hear and watch Hoppy's and RH's Hall of Fame presentations but couldn't because I was in the following class.

Do you like the spotlights? Some do (photographers love them) and some don't but if I can quote my friend Hoppy Bennett, "It is a good idea until it isn't a good idea." It won't be a good idea as soon as a horse or an exhibitor is hurt badly. It isn't if, it's when.

The information in the official program needs to be significantly enhanced or we need to bring back the "dailies." The essential information that must be in the program should contain: number, horse name, year born, sex of horse (S, M, G), sire, dam and sire of dam, owner, trainer and exhibitor. It would also be nice to have information about where every trainer and farm is stabled and where each reserved seat holder is located.

This week, we had two great road horse judges yet in some road horse classes neither were judging. Just because judges have "large Rs" in all main divisions doesn't mean there aren't other judges in the middle with more expertise in certain areas. Doesn't it seem logical to expend the effort to rotate judges to take the most advantage of their expertise?

We are in the entertainment business. Let me say this again, "WE ARE IN THE ENTERTAINMENT BUSINESS!!!" However, we do not exploit one of the best opportunities to entertain our industry and prospective newcomers. How many of you are old enough to remember the workouts of My My and The Contender, My My and Star Of The Show, Skywatch and Imperator, Bellissima and Lover's Sensation, Saturday Night and Right As Rain and many more? Those were workouts that energized the crowds, caused lively conversations and created memories for decades. Workouts allow us to see great horses and great riders go at it with everything on the line. Breeders get to see how much depth the horses have. Yet what do we do? We, the crowd, the breeders, the owners and the exhibitors can only count on a workout in the five gaited championship. It should not matter if "judges are tired," "judges and the crowd have already seen the horses," "the horses are tired," "management doesn't want the show to go on too long," etc. I can think of at least six classes Friday and Saturday nights other than the five gaited championship that we deserved to see worked out. And let's not make the number of ribbons plus one or two the number of horses put back on the rail. Put the horses who really are vying for the top few ribbons back to work and watch them fight it out. If judges "lose their first place ribbon" that they had during regulation, then so be it. We breeders deserve to be able to evaluate the horses in these situations and determine which bloodlines have the requisite gameness and stamina and as an industry, we need to create excitement and entertainment not only for ourselves but for prospective newcomers to the industry.

These are just my thoughts. The five gaited championship showed that the future of our breed is bright. The depth, quality and numbers of horses all week bode well for our breed. Let's all do our parts to make the best, most self-disinterested and long-term decisions possible as a tribute to honor and sustain our most wonderful breed of horses.

Sincerely,


J. Scott Hagan
12911 Reamers Road
Louisville, Kentucky 40245
(502) 523-5000