

A Brief Guide to Equine Events

There is a wide variety of classes at every horse show, or equine event, but they all are judged in one of three ways; either by the subjective evaluation and opinion of the judge(s), or by means of an objective measure like speed, or in jumping classes, height of jump, or sometimes, a combination of skill and form over the course.

Judged Events: In these classes, the judge picks the winners by observing all contestants in the class and deciding which horse, in his/her opinion, performed best in the class. Another judge might see it differently, and if you attend a multi-judge show, you could be amazed at the disparity of opinions rendered regarding competitors in the same class. It is not that one judge or the other is *wrong*, but no one can see the entire field of competitors at the same instant, so a horse could make a significant error, and still win, if it happens when the judge is looking in another direction.

Timed Events: In a timed event, each rider competes alone in the ring, against a clock. The objective is to complete the course in the minimum time, without error. Familiar timed events are barrel races and pole bending. Horse and rider speed around the barrels or poles, executing precise turns with the goal of coming as close as possible to the barrel or pole, without touching it. Tighter turns, of course, mean shorter distance, hence the possibility of faster time. Time penalties are assessed for knocking down the markers. The winning horse will have the fastest time.

Halter Classes: Think of the halter horse as a beauty contest entrant. It is the objective of the handler in this class to present a horse which is the epitome of conformation (shapeliness) for the type of horse that it is. Typically you might see a halter class for 'stock i.e. quarter horse' type horses, and another for 'model' horses, which are of the English and gaited variety. Normally each horse is presented individually, being led at a walk into the arena toward the judge and trotting away, so that the judge can evaluate the 'tracking' of the horse's feet. Then the horse and handler retire to the rail and the horse is 'stood up', all four feet ideally squarely underneath, while the rest of the class enters. After each horse has had its preliminary evaluation, the judge approaches each horse, individually, walking around and examining the specimen from every angle, making a mental checklist of good and bad points in the horse's conformation, musculature, fitness, etc. After viewing each horse, the judge renders rankings of the top scores and passes his/her card to the announcer.

Riding Classes:

Western Pleasure features horses, in western tack (saddles and bridles), whose purpose is, not surprisingly, to provide a pleasurable ride. To this end, they are to perform all three gaits, walk, trot, and lope (canter), in both directions, in a relaxed manner and on a loose rein. The judge observes the horses, requests gait changes, and may ask contestants to stop and back up. Horses are judged on their manner of going, responsiveness to the rider's direction and the smoothness of their transitions between gaits. Typically head and neck carriage is level, with points deducted for excessive height or lowering. This class is judged subjectively.

English Pleasure is similar to Western Pleasure in the requests made of the riders in performing all three gaits in both directions and stopping and backing. The tack (saddles/bridles) on the horses is different, however, as is the dress of the riders. The gaits are performed in a more extended manner than in Western Pleasure. This class is also judged subjectively.

Gaited Classes involve horses which are bred to perform 'specialized' gaits. Some examples are Foxtrotters, Tennessee Walkers, English five gaited horses. Like English and Western Pleasure competitors, these horses are judged subjectively, on the basis of their performance. Look for unique 'treatments' which enhance the image these horses display. English gaited horses have 'set' tails, with an arc at the top which creates a flowing line as the high stepping horse prances. Frequently manes are braided with ribbons to match accents on the tack or the rider's outfit. Tennessee Walkers are shod in a special way to accentuate their fancy gait. Fox Trotters and Tennessee Walkers bob their heads rhythmically in time to their trot.

Games: There are many exciting games played on horseback and it is breathtaking and heart pounding to watch these competitions. Typically, as in barrel racing and pole bending, rider and horse navigate a pattern around objects with the greatest possible speed. The team with the shortest time wins. Failure to complete the prescribed pattern is cause for disqualification, while lesser penalties, in the form of added seconds, are assessed for knocking over a barrel or pole. There are many other speed games such as the flag race, plug race, keyhole race, etc. Each show decides what events to include in its program. There are also 'fun' games which don't involve speed, but do involve steadiness and skill. A good example of this competition is the Egg and Spoon, where riders are given an egg and a plastic spoon as they enter the ring. The objective is to balance the egg, on the spoon, while following the directives of the judge which will include trotting, loping, stopping.... Contestants are eliminated if they drop their egg, and retire to the center of the ring as the game continues until the last person retaining the egg is declared the winner.

Show Decorum: There are a few things which would seem to be obvious, but in case they are not, here are some rules. Spectators should confine themselves to the public area immediately surrounding the ring where observers are seated, either on a grandstand, or on chairs and the refreshment or restroom facilities. Though it is possible to visit the area where the horse trailers are parked and riders are preparing to show, spectators are not welcome there unless specifically invited by a participant. Horses are large; some are easily spooked, and it is unsafe for people unfamiliar with equine handling to venture into these areas. It is especially important that young children not be unsupervised.

During the show, watch the behavior of the 'regulars'. There is a good deal of whooping and hollering and cheering during the last mad dash of the speed events, and frequently, when horses line in a halter class for the judges evaluation, folks in the crowd will cheer and clap their appreciation of their favorite. Such exuberant behavior would not be welcome, at say, a dressage exhibition. Follow the old "When in Rome....." advice, and learn from the experienced audience.