

# The Judge's Viewpoint

BY MARK LLEWELLYN

stood wearily on the pitcher's mound, sweat beading on my brow. My hand clutched the cork...that is, the cork of a clipboard. I looked into right field and a rotund black pony was grazing happily, oblivious to the blows being bestowed upon it by its rider's heels. *Mental note: This one may have to go to the bottom, folks.* As I turn my head, a chestnut blur rounds third base and heads for the plate. *Mental note: Although this child believes beyond a shadow of a doubt her horse is completely out of control, the chestnut has a lovely trot.* I look for the other entry in the class. Oh yes, there he is - a handsome bay Thoroughbred trotting quietly in center field, showing great extension from the shoulder and drive from the hocks as well as a bobbing head every time the left

*Giving instruction and encouragement to young equestrians.*

front hits the ground. *Mental note: I cannot believe this horse is lame!* Welcome to my world - another day of judging horses of all different types from all different backgrounds.

Far removed from the sequined gowns and tuxedos worn by the judges of the World Championship Show for American Saddlebreds in Louisville, Kentucky or the starched, coordinated clothes worn by judges at the AQHA World Championship Show in Oklahoma City, there are judges who agree to officiate at smaller galas such as the Paw Paw Pony Festival or the Fuzzy Fun Show held in the spring

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each year. These shows attract the casual riders, the weekend warriors who know little or nothing of cut-throat equestrian competition. These shows are perfect venues for 4-H children to get their feet wet and learn the intricacies of showing. Nothing compares to the sight of a youngster clutching a well-deserved ribbon and hugging the horse which helped the child win it. This very vision is one reason I agree to judge 4-H and small open shows. In a sport in which children can quickly become obsessed with winning or burned out from the constant point chasing, it is wonderful to see children who are happy to be riding and showing, regardless of whether they win or not.

Small shows are perfect opportunities for children to learn the basics of showing, particularly what and what not to do as well as when and when not to do it. Novice mistakes crop up often in the performances of these unseasoned competitors. In an effort to educate these beginners on the principles of showing, I will speak with each one of them and offer positive comments as well as suggestions which can improve future performances. A child will usually react in one of two ways when I approach - shy or fearful. In either case, I try to smile and will only mention a point or two so they can remember what I have told them. Sometimes children unintentionally twist my comments, usually due to



Photo by Catherine Bishop



*Mark Llewellyn,  
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shyness, fearfulness, embarrassment, nervousness or a combination of these. Inadvertently, they tell their parents something completely opposite of what I actually said. In my experience, children, especially younger ones, often have short attention spans. However, the comment, now in its revised state, may not be taken kindly by parents. And I learned this the hard way.

### **Hell Hath No Fury Like A Horse Show Mother**

I am often asked to judge walk-trot equitation classes in which riders may show any type of horse. The number of entries often does not warrant having a class for each style of riding, so on many occasions I have judged stock seat, hunter seat and saddle seat riders in the same class. At a county fair, I was having a difficult time choosing a winner between two young girls, one riding an American Saddlebred in saddle seat attire and the other riding a Quarter Horse in western attire. Both girls were immaculately dressed and fitted to the nines. Each possessed ideal position in the saddle at both gaits and each was strong and confident. As I watched

the two riders perform the downward transition to the walk, I noticed the young girl in western attire use her free hand on the reins to help slow her horse. When riding a horse in a curb bit, using two hands on the reins at any time is not proper and cause for disqualification. I made a slash through her number on my judge's card and tied the class, leaving her out of the ribbons. Before the announcer called the results, I went up to the young girl and explained to her that using two hands on the reins was improper and for this reason she would not be receiving a ribbon in this class. She shook her head and smiled demurely, seeming to understand what I had told her. The ribbons were distributed and I thought nothing more of the incident for all of about two minutes. Before I knew it, the mother of the young rider approached me and proceeded to teach me the intricacies of western horsemanship. She informed me that she had the entire class on video and would be more than glad to show it to me. In no uncertain terms, she indicated the video would make it all too evident that I had made a mistake, a mistake which had wrecked her child's confidence. Despite my repeated efforts to explain why I did not place her daughter, she huffed and she puffed until she finally realized I viewed her complaint with almost complete indifference. Later in the day, the mother reappeared. This time, however, she was not scowling. She asked to speak to me and I agreed. She said she had the opportunity to look at the video and wanted to offer her apology to me. Apology accepted.

Of course, I have had the opportunity to participate in physical altercations, although I have always declined such invitations. One gentleman invited me to such a parking lot soiree when I did not place his daughter in any class she showed in at a small horse show. He told me how she was a consistent winner in American Saddlebred shows across the country. I knew better and from the expression on my face he knew I knew better, but he continued until finally I interrupted him by saying, "I'm sorry you feel that way." I turned and walked away. I selected a sizable, burly member of the horse show committee to escort me to my car after this exchange just in case the gentleman was lurking in the shadows. Since this instance, I have taken up weight lifting and have just started Tae Bo; it's all the craze and it may help me defend myself against the crazies! More than his threats, however, I worried about what values he was teaching his timid daughter who stood beside him as he berated me, extolling my lack of knowledge.

## White Lies of Horse Show Managers

I am confident in my ability to judge several breeds and a variety of events. By no means, however, am I competent to judge every breed and every event. On occasion, I have agreed to judge shows in which I feel completely confident about judging the majority of classes offered but less than certain about a few of the classes. When I voice my concerns over the classes in question, show managers will typically tell me there is no need to worry and only a few horses will be entered. Such was the case with a large county fair in northern Kentucky. I was moving right through the classes until I was hit with an entire ring full of fine harness Hackney ponies. Pony after pony trotted proudly into the arena until I had fifteen of them circling me. I cocked an eyebrow to my ringmaster and chuckled to myself. Better to laugh than to cry, right? For the first thirty seconds, all of the ponies seemed to look the same. Then, I got down to the business of judging and slowly the ponies which com-

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bined animation and extension with style and presence rose to the top of my card. As the announcer called the placings in his monotonous voice, I anticipated a windfall of criticism from the crowd. Was I ever surprised when nary a slur was heard from the crowd! Of course, judging a class which has established rules is always easier than judging a class in which no rules are offered.

### I Am the Judge

At many small shows, pleasure classes are offered which have no hard and fast rules. These classes are open to riders of any age and to horses of any breed or type. I have had the pleasure of judging the Jessamine County Hoof-A-Nanny on numerous occasions. One of the most popular classes has always been the Jessamine County Pleasure Class in which horses are asked to perform a walk and a favorite gait both directions of the arena. While this may seem uncomplicated at first, the picture becomes cloudier, as does the ring, when the entries start pouring into the arena. Finally, the gate is closed and a final headcount reveals thirty entries. Before I entered the arena to judge this class for the first time, I quickly asked one of the show managers the judging criteria for the class. She smiled and said, "You're the judge." With that vote of confidence, I marched into the center of the ring and systematically began eliminating entries for bla-

tant problems such as lameness and illegal tack. This narrowed the field considerably as many of the entries were backyard horse owners who did not know the finer points of showing, the finer points which, when handled improperly, caused them to be eliminated. From the remaining entries, the selection of a winner - a well-mannered, consistent mount - was easy.

Earlier this year I had the honor of judging the Fuzzy Fun Show in Lexington, Kentucky. This is a small schooling show which allows horses and riders alike to prepare for the upcoming show season. I was asked to judge the Bay Halter Class, the Chestnut Halter Class, the Gray Halter Class, and several other similar classes. I politely asked one of the show organizers what I should evaluate in this class - color, conformation or a combination of both. The man shrugged his shoulders and said, "You're the judge." Because a bay is a bay and a chestnut is a chestnut to me, I judged strictly on conformation.

Let's talk food for a moment. No two horse show snack

stands are ever the same. Some shows are simple affairs with few entries and a hometown atmosphere. They offer me beans and cornbread for lunch and keep me content with Diet Coke throughout the day. Other shows are a bit lackadaisical about feeding me well. They are not so concerned with what I eat as long as I eat, just so I don't pass out mid-afternoon. Other shows (and the ones I particularly enjoy) offer me a smorgasbord of food, everything from fruit and vegetables to fried chicken and homemade apple pie. I have been asked back to judge horse shows in which I am much more eager to find out what's for dinner than actually evaluating the horses.

In addition to many small horse shows, I have had the opportunity to judge larger shows with hundreds of entries. Judging is more challenging as the shows become larger as a more extensive pool of quality horses is available from which to choose winners. Nothing is more gratifying to me than to watch a horse, no matter its breed or discipline, perform flawlessly for a confident rider or handler at a large, highly regarded horse show. Just as rewarding to me is judging small shows where I can dispense tidbits of advice to novice riders who may not have deep enough pockets to afford a nationally recognized trainer. Most of these riders are eager to receive feedback and encouragement from me and it is this acceptance and thirst for knowledge that keeps me judging even the smallest shows. ∞