

Let's give it a try: Why the new point system will be good for our breed

by Russ Vento

As amateurs or open competitors or breeders or owners, we're all tired of going to horse shows where some of the classes have only one horse. We're tired of going to shows where there is no competition. And as judges, we're tired of judging 100 to 200-horse shows. In my opinion, all of these things can be rectified by the new point system governing qualification for the Nationals.

We will all benefit because we're going to have to get out there and show, and that means there will be more competition. Judges will be happier to judge as shows get bigger. Okay, true, not every show will grow, and some shows may join with others to create larger events, but the bottom line is that larger shows will benefit us all for a variety of reasons.

The thing that's important for our breed is that we show horses in competition. A one horse class is not a competition.

It's good for amateurs

Let's start with the basics of the new point system. According to the rules, "The number of points a horse receives is based on the number of horses shown and judged. Horses will earn one point for every horse in the class. Example: Twelve horses entered – 1st place = 12 points; 2nd place = 11 points; 3rd place = 10 points, etc. One horse entered – 1st place -- 1 point." Points are issued up to sixth place.

Some classes require only a few points to qualify for Nationals—the amateur and junior English Pleasure sections are only four. Others, the more populated ones, require more. Purebred Amateur Country English Pleasure, for instance, asks for 15, while most Amateur Western Pleasure classes require 20. For amateurs, both the purebred and Half-Arabian Hunter Pleasure sections demand the most, at 30 points.

What does it mean for amateurs? Well, on the whole, we all need to ride. We need to practice, and we need to show. I've had an unbelievably positive response to some articles I've written about the need to show—the nerves, the getting ready, etc. Everybody's saying, "Yes, that's true, that's me." So the point system benefits us because the chances are, we'll show more, since there are so many more opportunities to earn points to qualify for Nationals. We will get the experience and learn more about our horse. If we're at the stage where our trainer is still riding our horse, then we'll have more opportunity to watch him or her show the horse.

I have heard the system compared to prize money in a horse race. In a race, if you win, that's great, but other placings matter too. When there is a very good horse around, sometimes those who run against him are pretty sure that they aren't going to come in first, but the payback for second, third and so on make it worth their while to run.

At the bigger shows, it always has been a big deal to be third or fourth. Now it will be a big deal at the regular shows to be third or fourth, too.

At the same time that the system benefits rank-and-file amateurs making their way up, it is also helpful for those top-of-the-line national contenders. If you're really good—if you can hold your own in any company—you are probably going to qualify for Nationals fairly quickly. Regional wins still are worth their weight in gold. If you're a regional champion, reserve or top five, you will qualify. Many of our national competitors go to Regionals, so they still benefit that way. But they still have to qualify for Regionals, which probably will be a little easier because there will be more horses in the qualifying pre-show (the larger the class, the more points earned).

One of the selling points to me is that the new system offers more flexibility in qualifying. I'm fortunate that I'm with my horses every day. But here at the barn, we have many young amateurs who are starting careers in business or starting families, and it is sometimes harder for them to do two shows and two Regionals, as they have done in the past. Now, they might be able to go to a few of the bigger shows and qualify that way. They don't even need to win (which might be harder for them to do, if they have been off having a baby or finishing an important project at work). But with the larger classes, they might get a second or third place ribbon that will get them enough points for the end of the year. Even at the smaller shows, with smaller classes, they will get something. Young women who are pregnant can ride till they are three or four months along. They can go to Scottsdale and get their horse qualified whether they win or not—a class as large as the ones at Scottsdale could mean qualification with a fifth or sixth place ribbon. Then they can go have their baby and come back to ride at Nationals later in the year.

Think of how busy everyone is. Many kids have a full school year and several commitments through the summer. Some have only spring break to get qualified for Nationals. Sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't. This way, particularly for the younger and more inexperienced riders, you can get them more experience and get them qualified by going to smaller weekend horse shows. It is an excellent way to work up to stronger competitions.

Making small shows larger and more important

Speaking of smaller shows: You might not usually go to a horse show two hours from your house because it is too small. But if it serves the purpose of earning points, you might do it, and everyone will get more saddle time or leading time. Amateurs have another reason to try the smaller shows. If we go to a Class A smaller horse show, and there aren't enough numbers in the amateur class, we can show in the open division if we own our horse, and earn points there too.

In addition to what it can do for amateurs and young riders, smaller shows could work well for young trainers too. There are a lot of young trainers out there who might be stars at the Class A level. They might really get noticed, and gain experience and attention that will benefit them later in life. They should go to those small shows; they should get out there and show. Maybe they have one horse who is a national contender and five that are young and not ready, but they could take all five. They will look good, gain experience and could open a new market with those who see them.

And on top of all that, it doesn't cost as much to go just a couple of hours down the road. Before long, that little horse show won't be so small anymore.

Helping the horses

Another benefit is that under the current rules, our older purebred halter horses have to have a performance point. Maybe they'll never have the time devoted to them to be in those top two spots at Regionals. That's because they can go to a trainer for 60 days, get a performance point, and then go back to do their halter. Or maybe they're just not ready to be first or second in a performance class. But a fifth place record in a large class will do the job for them, and they'll have defeated more than just a horse or two.

I'll use English as an example, because unless you are at the larger shows, there aren't the numbers in the classes. At a Class A show, seven to 10 horses in a class is big. You go to the Nationals, and your class has, let's say, 24 in it. Your horse isn't used to competing with that number. If you have someplace else to get them schooled and those numbers will go up, then that will gradually get the horse ready for Regional and National competition.

In this breed, we've gotten to where the only important competitions are Regionals and Nationals, and we get there any way we can. We've forgotten the smaller shows. If Nationals is your goal, by golly, go for it. If Regionals are your goal, go for it. But it's sure a lot more fun to go and make your starting point count. Besides, if you show against others, it gives you a clearer picture of where you are. If you don't win, you ask yourself, "What's the problem? Is my horse not good enough? Am I not good enough?" That means so much more than just saying, "Hey, I was champion at the 'whatever' show," when you know you were the only one or one of two in the ring.

Will it ring the cash register?

For many of us amateurs, there is always the concern that it will hurt us financially to do more horse shows to get qualified. I understand that we might see that sort of fear for a year or so, but after a while, I think we'll see people happier because they are going to be able to do two Class A shows and then go to a Regional, rather than go straight to the Regional when they're not prepared. If you're a smart amateur and you've done your homework, you're going to know—with your trainer—when you're not ready for Regionals. Maybe you're ready for a Class A, but not ready for Nationals this year.

I have to go back to my old mantra: There are certain levels of competition that have been put into place, and if we can look at ourselves realistically, we'll see where we fall. I could be the best amateur in the world, but if my horse isn't ready to compete, I don't need to be up against the rest of them at Nationals. I need to go and get this horse trained and go to the Class A level and ride it and figure it out.

Regarding the cost, I suggest that most amateurs could sit down with their trainer and say, "Hey, I have this amount of money to spend at horses show this year. How would you advise me? What's the smartest way to spend my money?" You may say, "I want to go to Regionals and I want to go to Nationals." And he may say, "I don't think you're ready for that, but if we go to three Class A shows and the Nationals, I think we'll serve both purposes. You'll get more experienced, you'll get qualified, and we'll be competitive at the Nationals."

An option might be to figure out the schedule you need and what it costs, and then work out a system of equal payments with your trainer so that you don't get hit with heavy bills when the show season arrives.

Understanding the rules

Because the qualifying point system is new, it might be harder to use it to its maximum effectiveness if you're not as familiar with it as you were with the old one. We can't let that stop us.

I recall that years ago, when we were kids, we had our riding camps or group lessons on Saturdays, and then we all went to lunch. Well, how about if somebody in each barn gets a copy of the rules, and the whole farm has lunch together? It could maybe be a cook out with hot dogs, or everybody bring something for pot luck. *And then everyone sit down together and go through the rules and the point requirements so that they are understood by all.* What a great way to get together!

In closing

In my belief, this new system truly will benefit people. You know, your first and second place wins will always be special. What this is going to do is make your third, fourth and fifth placings special, because they'll count for something.

There is only one thing that worries me. As a group, we have to give things a try—not say, “Oh, I don't want to do that,” or give up and complain about it before we try it. It is so easy to complain about something before we give it a try or get all the facts. We seem to love to shoot something down rather than give it a try. Sadly, nine times out of 10, we do that, and that's part of the issue. We don't let something last long enough to see how well it works.

The new system doesn't go into effect until 2006 because a lot of our qualifying prizes and championships from 2004 are still valid for 2005. We have plenty of time to get ready for it—if we want to.

Also in closing: Over the past several months that I've been writing this column, I've enjoyed speaking to many readers and hearing their comments and opinions. For anyone who would like to email questions, topics, or comments, I can be reached at info@battagliafarms.com. I'd love to hear from you.

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