

An Amateur Point of View

Horse Show Judges—A Closer Look

by Russ Vento

If there is one thing you can be sure of at an Arabian horse show, it is that someone will complain about the judging. We put so much effort into our performances that of course we get upset when we don't get the ribbons we think we deserve. But as a judge myself, I know that the view from center ring is often different from the one over the rail, or what one sees from the saddle or cart or the end of a lead line. So I started thinking about the people in center ring, the idea of judging horse shows and how our system came about. I even did a little research. Here's what I learned, and a few thoughts from both sides of the rail.

Background: The Early Days

I don't know how far back the tradition of horse show judging goes—probably a lot further than we would guess, because people have always been competitive. Races for endurance and speed go back as far as the desert tribes, but shows for conformation or the performance of different gaits? That's a different story. Look at old artwork, though, and you can see the forerunner of the horse show. Especially in England, there are old paintings of horse sales, scenes depicting crowds of people watching horses going around, competing to attract a buyer. When the horse was a means of transportation, many people were knowledgeable horsemen. They knew what attributes made a sound horse, a good driving horse, a race horse, jumping horse, children's or ladies' mount. So in a sense, these sales were simple competitions, with the buyers as the judges.

In the United States, horse shows as we know them found widespread popularity when the automobile came along, as horses that had once performed jobs could now be bred for sport. How were judges chosen? It had to start with knowledge, and with knowledge comes respect—enough respect that exhibitors would accept the chosen judges' opinions. There were still plenty of people with deep roots as breeders and horsemen, and forming a pool of judges was not that difficult 100 years ago. But as the years went on and people moved away from living with horses, the situation changed.

In 1917, the American Horse Shows Association (now the U.S. Equestrian Federation) was founded. Mary Smith, Director of Licensed Officials/Continuing Education at the USEF, says that the earliest information about officials that USEF has in its records is a 1932 publication called "Judges Who Have Officiated at Shows Given by the AHSA." It includes no details, but at least it confirms that there was a recognized judging corps by that time. More information was included in AHSA's 1937 Constitution and Rules, which also listed acceptable fees.

Arabians were not in the United States in any real numbers until the early 20th century (the Arabian Horse Club of America was founded in 1908). In the beginning, there weren't Arabian shows; everyone had to join in the all-breed events. For more background, I got out Gladys Brown Edwards' *The Arabian: War Horse to Show Horse*. Gladys, who could be found on the rail at Scottsdale well into the 1980s, not only recorded the history of the Arabian in this country, but lived most of it. She writes that the turning point for our competitions came in 1945, when the Arabian Horse Breeders Society of Southern California held the country's first real all-Arabian event. She explained the selection of judges for the first three years: William Meyers Jones ('45) was "one of the dog game's most respected judges" who knew horses equally well; Professor C.E. Howell ('46) was a specialist in animal husbandry from the University of California at Davis, and former manager of the prestigious Kellogg Ranch; Dr. Ameen Zahir

(’47), an eminent authority on Egyptian Arabians, would rise through ranks of the Ministry of Agriculture in Cairo. Although none of these men had been rigorously drilled as to their qualifications, the respect they commanded as horsemen gave their decisions credibility, and each year, the show grew substantially.

In 1950, the International Arabian Horse Association (now AHA) was formed, and it joined AHSA (now USEF). Since then, ASHA/USEF has licensed judges for the Arabian show ring. In 1990, AHA added the extra “regionals” and “nationals” designations to the basic categories of Level 1, Small r and Large R, new identifications that have not so much to do with knowledge as experience. Judges listed as “regional” or “national” have a record that assures their ability to perform their duties under the extra hours and stress of those shows.

Through the years, then, the basis for selection of horse show judges has been knowledge, but the achievement of that knowledge has evolved over time. At first, you could count on a thorough understanding of horses because people worked with them every day, but as we moved from the country to the city and fewer people worked full-time with horses, an educational brush-up had to be provided for everyone. This was not only to sharpen the judges’ minds, but also to help them deal with a public which increasingly questioned decisions.

Arabian Horse Judges: Then And Now

The first thing that comes to mind for me is that just as the process of selecting judges has changed in my lifetime, so have our horse shows. When I was a kid, the big events in my area were all-breed shows. We showed with Saddlebreds, Morgans, jumpers, you name it. In the Arabian classes, we had English and western pleasure, halter, driving, and native costume, but no country pleasure, dressage, or hunters. Many of the classes so popular today were virtually nonexistent back then.

When I first tried to get a judge’s license years ago, applicants went before a committee for panel discussions. That group was very knowledgeable; I don’t recall everyone, but Bob served on it, and Vickie Bowman, Stan Morey, Stanley White Sr., Carole Stohlman, Tom McNair—really fine horsemen and judges. You went from room to room and sat in front of two or three of them at a time, and they asked you questions about conformation, breeding, performance, everything, to establish your level of knowledge and decide if you were ready to be a judge. That was the evaluation procedure, and it was stringent. If they had 30 applicants, they picked maybe two or four. I didn’t make it the first time; I was 19 or 20 years old, and I was thinking, ‘I grew up in this business, I’ve bred horses and ridden horses, and been a trainer and an amateur.’ Well, I didn’t know half as much as I thought I did.

In that Q and A period, you were also evaluated on how you would represent the Arabian breed with your demeanor and your stature. That a big part of the process. It was very important that you not only knew your job, but also represented the breed well.

Then in the early 1990s, the system became more about education. Much of this was due to the public perception of officials at that time. Too many people thought judges were all “political” (and many were; there was a reason the commissioner’s office was established). There was a point where judges were not allowed to talk to each other or compare notes at the Nationals. They were sequestered individually, and always had someone with them (apparently they were assumed guilty until they could be proven innocent). The 30-60-90 day rules were established to limit contact between judges and the people who would be competing under them. Some of these techniques have worked and some haven’t, but to me, the most important thing that came out of

that time is that more education was introduced. It was unbelievable. We had, and still have, some of the most educated judges in the horse industry.

How does it work? The oral evaluation with a committee, which was pretty comprehensive itself, became a two-part program that included a judges' school *and* an evaluation process. The school is open to anyone who wants to learn about horses and procedures, and is often held in conjunction with a horse show so that it was convenient for everyone. Many exhibitors take advantage of it to learn more about the breed and what judging is all about. It is a required preliminary for those who go on to the evaluation, after which they are or are not licensed as judges.

The emphasis on education remains the focus even after the judges are licensed. Those aspiring to officiate at the regional and national level, or to be relicensed, have to be further evaluated. Here, it is an open book test. You might think, 'oh, well, you can look up the answers, what's so hard about that?' But it really is great. Most questions have several answers; it's a matter of picking the best answer. You're in a group with about 40 people, and in the process of looking up those questions, everyone talks and exchanges information and opinions. People weigh every possibility, and the education becomes a combination of verbal knowledge and book learning. Months later, when you're judging a class and somebody asks if you can use a Pelham bit in an equitation class, the answer is right on the tip of your tongue: No, they can't. You've heard every aspect and thought on that issue!

In light of the changes I've seen in the years I've been in Arabian horses, it's natural to wonder where this is all heading. It appears to me now that we are working toward the standard that judges will be able to explain every decision clearly. People are holding them accountable, and they need not only to do a good job, but also to be able, if necessary, to explain it to exhibitors easily.

Becoming a judge isn't easy, as I said. In addition to getting through the school and the evaluation, you have to serve as a learner judge. I can't speak for others, but I took my learner-judging very seriously. If I was going to stand out there in center ring, I was definitely going to know I could do the job. As I recall, we had to have three learner judging experiences, but Tom McNair told me that five was better. You get to pick who you want to learner judge under, and if they agree, you're on your way. My choices agreed, and was it ever another learning experience!

I picked Peter Cameron because he was and still is probably the most respected judge in our industry. I remember walking in with my paper and pens, and he told me to leave them in the judges' box. We weren't going to use them. I didn't stand on the other side of the ring from him; I stood there right with him, and for every single horse, he would say, 'this is why I did this, this why I did that.' His knowledge and memory of everything—even classes years ago—was amazing. He not only talked to me, but also to the exhibitors: "You need to work on this canter before the next class." And as that exhibitor rode away, he'd say to me, "When he comes back for that championship, he's going to have that fixed." And they always did.

I chose Cecile Hetzel-Dunn because although I was a nobody, she'd always made me feel like a somebody when I worked with her in judging school and went to talk to her afterwards. It wasn't like I was a little peon with big hair; she always made that extra time to explain things to me, and tell me 'you need to work on this, you need to work on that.' When I was a learner judge under her, she was incredible, especially in halter. She said, "You need to look at what that horse is going to do; it's more than just the conformation. Is that horse going to go on and be a working horse? It's a bigger picture of the whole situation."

Patty Felker was on my list because she was off the charts on rules. She could recite them forwards, backwards and sideways—no looking up—off the tip of her tongue. She was sharp as a tack. Before she would even let me learner judge with her, she interviewed me on the phone. If she was going to put her stamp on me, she had to make sure I was qualified.

Buck Grass I chose because I had been raised with Egyptian horses, and at the time, he was one of the few trainers who could take Egyptian horses and make them do other things—performance, driving, anything. He was a breeder, and highly respected in multiple divisions.

Liz Sanchez—well, everybody loves Liz, and I figured she could teach me endurance. She was the master of marathon training as a judge. We worked the show, went out to dinner, had drinks, got up early the next morning and judged. And let me emphasize, we judged well. If you could survive learner judging with Liz, you could maintain your focus no matter what was demanded of you at any show.

I got something different from every one of them that I still use today in all facets of my Arabian horse career. To this day, they'll talk about those three days we spent together. Probably most amazing was that four out of the five told me to take the paper and the notes away. "Take the time," they said. "Watch, judge, learn, and use that paper to write your final numbers down. Then compare them." It wasn't judging on a negative. It was, "Watch everything going around, and all those horses will fall into place."

That is just my story, but I'm sure many, many other judges will say something similar. It is not easy to become a judge, and it is understood that you will never be the most popular person at a horse show. Most judges don't do it for a pat on the back. They do it because they have a passion for the horse and for judging. For some, it is their way of giving back. So my message is: Let's recognize the amount of work and knowledge that goes into becoming a horse show judge, and step back for a moment before we rush to criticize a decision we don't agree with. Yes, there are bad decisions and even bad judges, but there are many more good ones out there. Let's try to appreciate the job that they do.

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.

Russell Vento Jr. has been involved in the Arabian industry for 30 years, and since 1989 has been a partner in Battaglia Farms. He was honored twice with APAHA Amateur Horseman Awards. To date, he has owned or shown more than 30 U.S., Canadian and National Show Horse national champions, and he now enjoys watching his daughter Skyler win on many of the horses with whom he was successful. He has been a Large R USAE/AHA judge since 1996.