

Has anyone seen the horse at the horse Show???????

By A.E. Lowe

A friend of mine that is a well respected member of the horse industry in several disciplines decided to accept her friend's invitation to go to the All American Quarter Horse Show last year. The purpose of the trip was to satisfy her own curiosity about the show as well as show support for her friend's daughter who was showing in several classes. As a respected judge, trainer, and winner of several national championships, as well as serving as an official for several international competitions, "Abby" as I will call her thought she has seen everything as far as equine competition. Seeing her a few weeks after her visit to Columbus, I asked Abby what she thought of the Congress. Usually quick to respond, I could tell that Abby was giving a great deal of thought to her response. A former Junior Miss and beauty pageant competitor as well as accomplished equestrian, Abby replied: "Columbus had even more sequins and sparkles than the pageants in Atlantic City. I guess it keeps the officials from having to evaluate the horses and riders." I laughed as I replied "they do put the show in horse show". Abby quickly replied, "Maybe they need to get the horse back into it." I didn't even try to respond: she was right and there was no rebuttal.

At one of the youth world shows a few years ago there was a great deal of talk about the western pleasure class. It wasn't about any of the horses that made the finals, but about the fact that one of the exhibitors had spent more than \$5,000 on their outfit. The crowd seemed focused solely on the outfit, and the comments ran the gamut from "beautiful" to "why would you spend that much". Either way, it worked as they won. While they had one of the top horses in the pen, many of the men in the crowd seemed to think they did not have the winning horse that day. The trend the last ten years at many of the major breed shows appears to be that it is more important to focus on the "show and showy" than the performance and ability of the competitors either horse or human. It seems that "glamour and glitz" supersedes "ability and excellence". Maybe we should consider the necessity of having the horses there at all. Why can't the competitors just go in the ring with their best attire, and have someone roll their saddles in behind them. While this is not true in some equine disciplines, i.e. contest, and most cattle events, it seems in all other western events if you can't dress like you are going to a pageant you don't need to go in at all. Excess seems to have replaced excellence, both in judging the horse and rider. This seems ironic since the heritage of the western breeds is anything but glamorous.

To consider how the Quarter Horse, Paint Horse, and Appaloosa originated in the early days of this country, it was far from being glitzy. Harsh terrain and sometimes even harsher conditions led to breeding horses that were athletic and intelligent. Over centuries this has been refined through selective breeding with aesthetic qualities such as beauty and size becoming equally important. As horses became

less of a necessity for living, they became more of an option for recreation and competition. And like everything else in society, horse shows have evolved. But it seems somewhere in the last twenty years this evolution may have taken a wrong turn, or at least wandered off the path of what horse shows were intended for. It seems that there is almost no interest in the horse's ability, though most classes have clearly defined guidelines for this in their rule book, and most of the competitors and spectators interest lies in the attire of the exhibitors. While this has certainly provided a lucrative market for all the tack and clothing companies, what has this done to the industry as a whole?

It seems that the message that is being sent to most competitors is "if you can't afford to dress like Paris Hilton don't come play in our ring." With many parents feeling the pressure to find the money to spend \$1,000 or more for a showmanship or horsemanship outfit, what does this do for the parents who have a great horse, a child with exceptional talent and ability, and pockets that are only as deep as a five foot well? Not too long ago, a child with a great horse and exceptional ability would at least have a fair chance with attire that erred on the side of well fitting and freshly pressed. To put a child (or amateur for that matter) in this type of situation today, they would stand as good a chance of winning as a Clydesdale would running a match race against Curlin. Embellishment is showing up everywhere; even in the English events the trend is going towards silver overlay stirrups often with stones. What is next laying rhinestones in the browband or reins? I remember less than a decade ago when a judge walked up to me in an equitation class at a Quarter Horse show and scolded me for wearing hoop earrings. As he said, "those would not be appropriate in the hunt field so why are you wearing them here?" While this may have been a little extreme, his point was justified and well taken.

Maybe the direction we need to be taking at horse shows is getting back to what horse shows are supposed to be about: Showing a horse. Obviously this is a trend that will not be popular with most exhibitors, especially for those with bigger bank accounts. However, maybe the breed associations need to set down some guidelines to give all exhibitors a more "even" playing field and get the emphasis back on judging ability rather than apparel. Rather than taking this to the extreme, since we are already there, let's consider just taking three classes; equitation, horsemanship, and showmanship. Would it really kill any exhibitor to enter the ring with no "embellishments" on their clothing at all? Take it one step further and demand plain leather halters and headstalls. Keep the saddles as they are as some parents and spouses had to get a home equity loan just to pay for them and don't need the burden of having to go buy another one. At least a plain shirt, halter and/or headstall should run under \$250. This is much less expensive than spending \$1,200 on a showmanship outfit for a twelve year old. Just like putting uniforms in the schools, maybe establishing such guidelines would steer us back to what we need to be focusing on. And maybe it will save us from some of the fashion 'faux pas' we have seen in the past.

(Remember how low cut that one dress was in a particular pleasure driving class a few years ago?) I am not recommending that we take all of the "human show" out of the horse show, but like anything in excess; it eventually ends up causing more harm than good.

Watching reruns of the Westminster Dog Show, I wonder how all the exhibitors and handlers managed to get in the ring without \$10,000 in sequins and someone's logo not emblazoned on their back or better yet tattooed on the dog's hip. The handler for the overall winner didn't even wear a tux-just a well tailored suit with a nice dog that won as much on presence and heart, as he did on conformation and movement. While I still have a hard time accepting that one of my favorite breeds did not win, I love what the "best dog in the world" epitomized. Uno was nothing exotic, fashionable, or "in style". He is just a great dog that walked in and owned the ring better than his fellow competitors. As several of my friends have left the horse show industry over the last couple of years and still wanting to compete have gotten into the dog show world I better understand why. There are still politics, hours of preparation, and lots of travel. But the dog show world and its official seem to have managed to keep their competition focused on what it should be; the dog. Having attended a dog show recently with one of my friends who showed Walking Horses for years and left it for the dog show world, I ran into several friends that used to show horses. One trains and shows two of the top Weimereiners in the world. Another has the number one dog of their breed in the nation. And another still splits their time showing dogs and horses. And I didn't see a single sequin or custom made outfit-I wonder how they got to that level of success without it?

I would have to say that I have to agree with Abby's assessment of the western breed shows. I have watched her show and judge at several national and international dressage shows over the years, and I don't ever remember seeing a designer logo, rhinestone, or sequin at anytime. I remember as a child seeing some of the beautiful tuxedo coats that the riders wore showing Saddlebreds, but when I showed in saddle seat equitation we were only allowed to wear plain black, blue, or brown, and the only adornment either our horses or ourselves could have was a patent leather browband. Though it has been a decade since I have been to the World Championships in Louisville, a friend of mine whose niece won the UPHA medal a few years ago said it has not changed. I wonder how those equitation riders feel about not being able to wear all the fancy clothes and bright colors. Maybe these exhibitors have to still focus on their riding ability since decision about their attire is limited and does not require spending hours on design and hand sewing. This is not to say that these riders take their appearance any less seriously, they do, and their turnout is impeccable. But is sure doesn't look like they are going to a costume party or getting ready to walk down the red carpet at the Kodak theatre. They look like they are there to do what they are suppose to.

I hope the horse shows start to get back on track. I guess I never paid too much attention to this trend when I was showing. However, in the short amount of time since I have retired it seems like the "fashion frenzy" can only be matched by the feeding frenzy of great white sharks in blood filled waters off the Australian coast. If it does not turn at some point are we going to see diamonds put in the headstalls or sewn into the outfits? Maybe someone will contact Donatella Versace and suggest that she bring some of her creativity to this end of the fashion world. What if the trend in horse show attire steers toward the gothic or punk look? How would the judges react to the Marilyn Manson look? Would we see exhibitors putting fake piercing in their horse's nostrils or dying their hair the same color fuchsia as their outfit. I truly hope not. As competitors seem compelled to try to outdress each other each year, it won't be long before we reach that end of the spectrum. When we reach that point I can only hope I am dead.

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