

SUCCESSFUL SHOWING IS ALL IN THE ATTITUDE

By Jessie Haas

The most important thing is your attitude. Showing should be fun, for you and your horse. If it's drudgery for either partner, you have a problem. Winning should be a goal, not a need or an obsession. It's only a horse show. The prize is just a ribbon—a little piece of silk that's not even useful. Showing is not real life. It's a game. Enjoy it. It's a pleasure to excel, a pleasure to measure yourself and your horse against others. Anytime it isn't, take a break from it.

HOW TO STRIKE A BALANCE

Find a good teacher or coach—someone who explains things so you understand; someone who keeps raising your expectations, while making you feel good about what you've already accomplished; someone who puts your health and safety, and your horse's, above ribbons or trophies; and someone you like spending time with.

Practice—but only practice what you learn from a good teacher. Don't get good at riding badly by practicing the wrong thing. It's important to have a knowledgeable outside eye to tell you what you're doing right, and what you need to improve.

Find a suitable horse. Your beloved backyard companion may be a good show horse, or he may not. If your abilities surpass his, you may need to think about selling him or passing him on to a younger sibling, and then buying a horse that's up to the challenge.

Or you may lease a horse or show a horse for somebody else or ride several different horses from your lesson barn.

Riding one horse all the time can build a deep partnership. Riding a lot of different horses can build an ability to ride almost anything well. Which you prefer depends on your goal.

BE A GOOD CITIZEN IN THE SHOW RING

You can do a lot to make showing more enjoyable for your fellow competitors and the people doing the hard work of putting on the event. It comes down to good manners.

Do the paperwork. All the paperwork. Ahead of time. Arrive at the show with your entry form filled out clearly, with all the documents you need and with your entry fee money. Panicky meltdowns at the secretary's office at the last minute are hard on everybody.

Know the rules. All the rules. Study them ahead of time. After all, you can't practice on your horse 24 hours a day. Spend your nervous energy on reading the rulebook for your particular event. Make sure you understand what everything means, and that you've mastered the details. If you have patterns to learn, you don't need to practice them on horseback. Walk them. Clap a model horse through them. Trace them with the tip of your tongue on the roof of your mouth.

Be nice to your horse. Winning doesn't matter to him. Because horses are fairly colorblind, he probably doesn't even find the ribbons pretty. What he cares about is knowing what's expected of him, being treated kindly and fairly, and having your approval and friendship. He may enjoy the excitement of the day, too, but he doesn't have a work ethic about it. Don't expect him to pay attention to his standing in the struggle for the championship; that's your job.

Be polite to the officials. They are working hard for little or no pay because they love horses and kids. Don't do anything to spoil that. Shows are exciting and stressful, and stress doesn't always help us be our best selves. It can be hard to be patient or keep your temper, but look on that as an extra test. Can you handle failure? How about success? Horse shows can build character or reveal character flaws. It's up to you.

Be nice to other riders. Congratulate the winners. Encourage people who feel they aren't doing well. If you're disappointed, find a private place to deal with your feelings for a few minutes. Then put that smile back on your face and get out there.

Care for your horse first. He should be watered, fed, rubbed down, and completely comfortable before you take care of yourself.

Don't leave a mess. Grounds or stalls should be in the same condition when you leave as when you arrived – no manure, no trash.