

Judging politics—what's the real story?

reported by April Fingerlos

Margo Lea Ball



Margo Lea Ball, Fort Collins, Colo., holds judges' cards for AQHA, APHA, NSBA, NRHA, and PHBA. She's judged the AQHA World Show and the All-American Quarter Horse

Congress numerous times. At home, her amateur clients have earned countless top tens and world championships in all-around competition. She stands five stallions, including the newly acquired AQHA world champion TNT Fluid Fred.

I recently judged a show in which a small part of the show arena was sectioned off to make room for a warm-up area. After I turned in my card, I noticed a lady standing in the warm-up pen, watching one of her charges in the show pen. As the placings were called out, the lady shook her head in amazement and loudly proclaimed, "What? There must be a mistake...." The next card earned an exasperated, "What are these judges thinking?"

Each of the four judges had used the same horses, though in a slightly different order. I wondered whether this lady was at a different horse show from the rest of us.

Perspective is a huge part in the perception of politics. Spectators don't always get the same view of the show as the judge in the middle of the pen. The vantage point in the arena can change what you see, how you see it and how long you see it. Many spectators' angles of vision are different. They look at the entire pen, while I see maybe a corner and part of a rail. In essence, they see completely different events than I do. When the placings come that don't agree with theirs, the door is opened to thoughts of "they got ignored" or

"So-and-So always wins—he must be pals with the judge."

"So-and-So" is likely a talented rider who rode in the pen on a broke, reliable, well-presented show horse with thousands of miles of experience. Top exhibitors work hard to earn their wins. They've learned how to produce that something extra and devote the attention to detail that keeps them at the top of the judges' cards.

If judges see someone ride whom they see at several shows a year, they have an idea of that rider's capabilities. They may know that the rider is usually well mounted. Human nature wants us to remember the previous encounters and, good or bad, let them influence our decisions. Judges fight with this every time they enter the pen. They are humans trying to offer their opinion on a given day from a given point in the show pen.

One of the hardest things for us humans to do is to separate ourselves from our experiences and analyze them objectively. Judges have to master this to be fair. Exhibitors have a harder time with it, as they have more at stake emotionally. Learning to view the show pen from the judge's perspective is an important skill every competitor should master before making politics an excuse.

Jack Brizendine



Jack Brizendine, Lincoln, Calif., is a master at buying horses in the rough and polishing them into halter world champions. He's conditioned and shown over 20 world champions

in quarter horse, paint, and appaloosa competition. He has five AQHA national high-point horses to his credit, including one in western riding.

Politics exist in the halter horse industry, but I don't think they have as much influence anymore as people think. Halter is a class that's based solely on the judge's discretion. I believe that lack of education fosters uncertainty in our judges and that we ask too much of them.

Judges are expected to be experts in a long list of very different classes. Most of us have trouble being an expert in one field, let alone many. Usually where politics enter into things is where a judge isn't really comfortable with the halter field.

Let's say we have a judge who specializes in hunter/jumper. We put this person in front of a halter class and tell him or her to place it. This judge doesn't look at halter horses day in and day out as the participants and spectators do. He or she is in the pen trying to separate personal standards from those of the halter industry. It's a tough thing to do.

If you have a judge who's never had a halter horse and doesn't pay close attention to the sport, this person isn't going to feel very comfortable with placing a class. The judge might know the big names and knows the big names usually lead the big horses. The judge will look at those exhibitors' horses more, and probably use them at the top of the card. No one will say anything bad or embarrass the judge for picking the big name whose horses win all the time. This opens the door to the perception of politics.

Breed organizations could help control this by offering better seminars or by allowing more specialized judging in the halter area. When judges go to seminars, they usually see one good horse and three mediocre ones. They need to be presented with six top-quality horses and provide reasons for their class placings, just as 4-H kids do. This would serve to educate judges, helping them become more confident about their placings.

If AQHA would offer a specialized halter card, I'd be among the first to apply. I won't apply for a card today because I can't judge an English horse fairly. I know and accept this. I don't want to get laughed at, so I don't do it. But I'd gladly help to improve the sport of halter by participating in the area I know, whether it's by judging or by helping to provide good horses for seminars.

Dr. Jim Morgan



Non-pro NRHA judge and exhibitor Dr. Jim Morgan, Pilot Point, Texas, has held his judge's card for about 30 years. Morgan has earned close to \$500,000 in NRHA monies on horses

he raises and trains by himself. He judges three to four NRHA events per year and is on tap to judge the upcoming Australian Reining Futurity.

To be honest, I'm very glad I'm not showing halter or pleasure horses. The objectivity the National Reining Horse

Association has built into its scoring system makes it very difficult to play the political game. There's ample opportunity not only for the association to monitor itself for shady play, but also for participants and spectators to call foul as the need arises.

NRHA does a really nice job of selecting its judges. The association makes sure they know their stuff. The popularity of the sport has developed knowledgeable spectators and participants. If a judge makes a mistake in a score, he or she will know about it in a pretty embarrassing way.

Every two years, each NRHA judge is required to take a test, as are new judge applicants. We sit them in front of a television and show them several rides with a number of penalties, both questionable and severe. The judge must catch and appropriately mark a sufficient number of these mistakes in order to be issued a card.

Once the judge has a card, he or she is then under the scrutiny of the participants. Almost all NRHA events are videotaped. During each break while the arena is dragged, scores are evaluated to see if any two judges are more than 5 points off in their scores for an entry. If a discrepancy of this kind is found, the videotape of the

questioned run is reviewed. If a decision can't be made about the discrepancy between the judges, the exhibitor earns the higher of the two scores.

Usually within 30 minutes of the end of each class, all point sheets from all judges are posted in a public place. Anyone can review these sheets and identify judges who aren't awarding points accurately or fairly. If anyone believes the scores are unjust or politically driven, he or she can appeal to the NRHA board of directors. The board takes such concerns very seriously, investigating complaints thoroughly.

Standard breed shows usually don't have this level of checks and balances. However, several breed-approved judges also hold NRHA judges' cards and use the same official score sheets, ensuring standardized scoring.

When I show to judges and trainers I know, I find that they tend to score me harder, if anything. They know what my horses are capable of. Even if they wanted to be lenient, their scores ultimately will be accurate to NRHA standards, eliminating any kind of unfair advantage I might have. I like it this way.

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