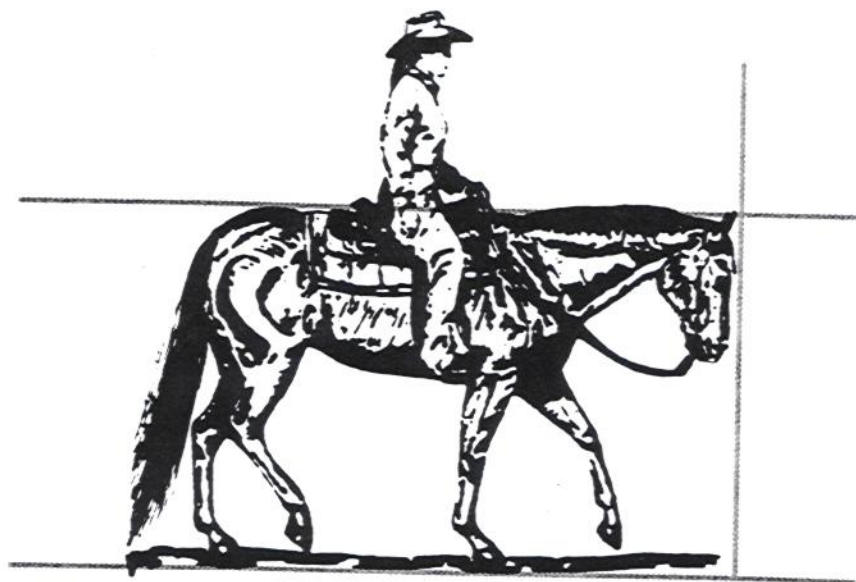


Western Pleasure... Maintain The Balanced Picture

by Margo Lea Ball



In the fall of 1989, I wrote an article entitled "The Western Pleasure Class...A Judge's Point Of View." I felt compelled to address the western pleasure class because it had become a source of tremendous controversy among judges, exhibitors, trainers and spectators. After judging approximately 40 shows that year, I felt I had observed many viewpoints concerning the western pleasure class as if I were in the middle of the pen, judging. I used the guidelines of the 1989 and 1990 AQHA rule book as they applied to support my opinions and descriptions of an ideal western pleasure horse.

Today I feel the issues in the pleasure horse industry must once again be addressed. After observing the changes in the pleasure horse industry for ten years as an AQHA and NSBA judge, I feel that the western pleasure class, as well as the industry, has made many positive moves in the right direction. Today when I judge a western pleasure class, it is not hard to find a "level, good moving horse" for my top placings. Most of these horses are well-conditioned horses that are groomed to perfection with an expressive attitude, that are bright and responsive to their riders. It is easier to find the horse closest to the ideal than it was several years ago. We must be careful that we keep these positive aspects and not over-emphasize any one aspect such as head carriage so that we lose sight of the correct, good moving horse.

It must be kept in mind that judging is not an absolute; it is an authoritative opinion based on knowledge and experience. The job of the judge is to place the horses in a relative manner on a given day. Yes, there are still a few horses in the pen that do not meet the "ideal standards" and may be reflective of yesterday's sullen and lethargic horses. These horses are the minority and can be judged and penalized accordingly.

It is important for the positive trends to continue for the advancement of the industry. We must be careful not to lose sight of the primary goal of the western pleasure horse - that of finding and rewarding the horse that is truly a pleasure to ride. We must not focus our attention on just headset or break of gait penalties but look at the total picture of a



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good moving horse that gives a pleasurable, consistent ride.

It is the responsibility of judges, exhibitors, trainers and spectators alike to become knowledgeable and informed to keep the trends positive within the industry. The standards that apply to a good moving horse should apply to the horse of today as well as to the horse 20 years in the future.

I believe the 1993 edition of the AQHA rule book provides an excellent description of the western pleasure horse. It is a description that has not varied much over the years but has become more clearly defined due to the past trends of the industry.

"A good pleasure horse has a free-flowing stride of reasonable length in keeping with his conformation. He should cover a reasonable amount of ground with little effort. Ideally, he should have a balanced, flowing motion. He should carry his head and neck in a relaxed, natural position, with his poll level with or slightly above the level of the withers. He should not carry his head behind the vertical, giving the appearance of intimidation, or be excessively nosed out, giving a resistant appearance. His head should be level with his nose slightly in front of the vertical, having a bright expression with his ears alert. He should be shown on a reasonably loose rein, but still have light contact and control. He should be responsive, yet smooth in transitions when called for. When asked to extend, he should move out with the same flowing motion. Maximum credit should be given to the flowing, balanced and willing horse which gives the appearance of being fit and a pleasure to ride." (para. 450, p. 123)

Despite this description there still seems to be some discrepancy in its interpretation. In a nutshell, I believe this means a pleasure horse should be a "level, good moving horse".

In the following paragraphs, I would like to reiterate some of my original article as it applies to the "level, good moving horse". When I am asked what I look for in a western pleasure horse, the first thing I address is the fact that the horse must be a good mover. A good moving horse is a pleasure to ride.

"...maximum credit should be given to the following, balanced and willing horse which gives the appearance of being fit and a pleasure to ride." (para. 450, p. 123)

The horse has to be a good mover at all three gaits. A good moving horse is a horse that performs the gaits correctly. For example, at the walk, the horse should

move down the rail at a flat-footed, four-beat gait. The jog is a distinct two-beat gait where the horse moves from one pair of diagonals to the other. The lope is a rolling, three-beat gait. Once it is determined that the horse is performing the gaits in the correct manner, what are the qualities that make the "correct mover" a "good mover"?

At the jog, the horse performs a two-beat gait that is smooth, he is balanced in his movements and easy to ride. I often use the term "soft". A soft mover is a horse that moves easily and effortlessly and gives a comfortable ride. A horse must have good hock action at the jog and not walking with his hind feet and trotting with his front feet. Usually horses performing in this manner are slowed excessively and the horse becomes incorrect in his movements. The diagonal pairs are indistinct and not working in unison. If the horse is asked to extend, he should drive from his hindquarters and his stride should be balanced and free flowing. The jog or trot should be cadenced and even with each step.

More classes can be won or lost at the lope and like many other judges, I place a great deal of emphasis on the lope. But, what is a "good looper"? In order for a horse to lope correctly, he must drive from his hindquarters and bring his hind legs well underneath his body in an even, reaching stride. The horse should be flat in his knees. This means, at the lope, the horse should have little knee action and give the appearance that his stride sweeps across the ground with a fluent, efficient motion.

"...the horse should lope with a natural stride and appear relaxed and smooth..." (para. 350c, p. 94)

The qualities described above are close to the ideal and should be the focus of judging and showing. We must not make the mistakes of the past and place the primary focus on head carriage and slowness of gait. In the past, the emphasis was placed on slowness and head carriage because these things were often the most obvious to the observer. Excessive slowness led to horses traveling with an incorrect four-beat lope that was not a pleasure to ride. With the current guidelines, we risk the chance of overemphasizing head carriage once again, by focusing on it more than the quality of movement which ultimately determines if the horse is a pleasure to ride and show.

I feel that a horse should have a level topline but you must take into consideration a number of factors. The first of these considerations is, you must allow for individual conformation differences. It must

be kept in mind that a horse must carry his head in a position that is compatible with his conformation. A horse may carry his head so his poll is *slightly* above, *slightly* below, or even with his wither based on his conformation and based on the fact that he appears comfortable and relaxed. It is not uncommon for a quiet, relaxed horse to drop his head slightly at the walk. There is a difference between this horse and one that is chronically low at *all* gaits.

"He should carry his head and neck in a relaxed, natural position..." (para. 450, p. 123)

A horse may have his face on vertical or slightly out from vertical, but the key is the fact that he should be relaxed at the poll. A horse that is relaxed is easier to control and ultimately easier to ride. The horses in today's western pleasure class are better suited to be level headed, calm individuals due to the selective breeding to promote good moving and good minded horses that do not have to be intimidated into performing.

Another area to be considered in the total picture of the western pleasure horse is consistence. Consistency is a broad term that applies to many areas of the class. It applies to good movement, in that the horse should be a consistent

good mover at all three gaits. The horse should be consistent in his pace and remain uniform in both directions of the ring.

The horse should be smooth in its transitions and keep its composure throughout the class. Consistency also applies to head carriage and the horse should remain close to level. A horse that remains consistent in the areas described above is one that is balanced in their way of going. It must be kept in mind that the quality of movement may be affected if the horse is excessively low or high headed.

The past trends of the industry have caused the rules to become more clearly defined and restrictive. Some of the rules have helped to insure the welfare of the pleasure horse is maintained. In maintaining the positive perception of the pleasure horse, we must be careful not to become so restrictive that we lose sight of the primary purpose of the western pleasure class. It is imperative that we consider the total picture of the balanced, good moving horse that is pleasing to ride and to watch. Just as the pleasure horse must be balanced in his frame and movements, we have to maintain a balance in considering *all* aspects of the class.



Margo Ball first became involved in RMQHA in 1965 when she started showing in youth activities. Even then she was no stranger to the show arena since she had been showing in the nine and under classes in open shows since she was four years old. By the time she was eleven, she was competing in nearly every class on the roster, including working cow horse. During her youth career, she continued to show in "everything" and proved to be an all around competitor.

Many awards and titles were earned over the years in RMQHA on several different horses. These include All Around Youth, All Around Amateur, and High Point Non-Professional, as well as over 60 year end high point awards. In addition to these, she also claimed all around saddles and buckles from Wyoming, New Mexico and Colorado.

On the national level, she has qualified for the AQHA World Championship Show, placed at the All American Quarter Horse Congress and the AQHA World Championship Show. She has also qualified several horses for the PHBA World Show. Margo's list of accomplishments include several ROM qualifiers, AQHA Champions, PHBA Champions, AQHA Youth Champion and Superior Event horses (including Superior Western Pleasure horses).

In the ten years Margo has held her AQHA judges card, she has judged many of the major shows, circuits, state fairs, and futurities across the nation and Canada. In addition to her AQHA judges card, she holds judges cards with PHBA, IBHA, NSBA, and NRHA. Margo's judging credits include: the AQHA World Championships, the All American Quarter Horse Congress, the AQHA World Championships, the Palomino Youth Congress, the Palomino World Championships, the International Buckskin Horse World Championships, the Quarterama in Canada and the Grand National Show at the Cow Palace.

Margo makes her home in Fort Collins, Colorado, where she works with youth and amateur exhibitors at Ball's Quarter Horses. In addition, she is currently the Director of the PaCE program, a cooperative job placement program for high school students.sm

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