

Putting yourself on the Line – Why or Why Not to Compete

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There are many negative and conflicting ideas in the horse world when it comes to showing. I'm sure you've heard them all: "horse shows are too political, too expensive, too nerve wracking, too dangerous, too snobby, too many cruel practices, and way too much work." Then there are also the excuses that, "my hunt coat, or boots, or chaps don't fit anymore" or "my horse isn't good enough"; these last statements are usually accompanied by a wail.

A horse show is an opportunity to SHOW what you and your horse can do that's why it's called a horse show; but it is also a competition and I consider a competition to be a game, a game that involves skill, chance, practice, preparation, and luck, both good luck and bad. A horse show is a game that includes a judge or even many judges. Each judge comes to the show with experience and knowledge and opinions and you are paying for each judge's opinion whatever it is.

This year I look forward to my 50th year in the show ring and I'm excited because competition for me is a thrill and an adrenaline rush each time I enter the ring or cross the starting line. I love competition because I like to see how well my horse and I can perform under pressure.

Showing keeps me honest and forces me to stay on a conditioning and training schedule for both myself and my horses. It keeps me organized as I plan what I'll need to do in order to compete each year because showing forces me to stay on top of the rules, new tests, new styles, and changing show procedures. Competition allows me to highlight my skills as a horsewoman and is a wonderful way of advertising my teaching and training style.

Showing allows me to experience what it is like to be on the rail or in the ring as opposed to "judging from the fence" or judging from the center of the ring. I also do judge on occasion, so my own show ring experiences have helped me to understand what the competitor is going through and understand ways of smoothly organizing and directing a class.

As a teacher and a clinician I learn so much from my own showing about competition strategies, dealing with show butterflies and show ring oops moments and I cannot imagine teaching or coaching for competition if I had never been in the ring myself.

Folks really should not show if they are not willing to put the time and effort into a neat and clean turnout, or arrive with a properly trained and conditioned horse. Don't show if you cannot accept the horse show world for what it is – it's not going to change for you. Don't show if you are unable to be a polite loser and a good sport. Remember you are paying for one man or woman's opinion on one particular day.

Select shows that will meet your aspirations and interests. You can play with the big boys or you can be perfectly happy at small local shows. Be careful not to over face yourself or your horse and get your

experience at small or local shows until you are ready to move up. If you want to be successful in the ring don't buck the system, show with an appropriate horse and the correct equipment. Showing a Hackney roadster in a hunter class or a Clydesdale in a reining class will probably not result in a happy show experience for you or your horse.

Don't be afraid to have fun when you show, isn't that what you are there for to have fun? Set a good example for your students and your other competitors by being a gracious winner and loser and try to keep a smile on your face even when things don't go right, laugh at your own mistakes. Money and a fancy horse don't always win the show, elbow grease, a smile and cunning showmanship will often put you in the ribbons. Accept that you and your horse are not going to be as good in the ring as you are at home – that's why you are showing, to see how well you and your horse perform under pressure. Show at your own level until you and your horse are really ready to move on. Confidence comes from not over-facing yourself until the time is right. Pick the right classes and don't expect miracles, if you haven't mastered something at home you will not get it in the show ring. Have fun and don't take yourself so seriously, I've seen Bezie Madden flying over jumps wearing a bee suit, go ahead and enter egg and spoon or costume class now and then, your students will love you for it.

Helping my students enjoy the show ring has been something that I have enjoyed for many years. Safety is number one in my book – I don't take a horse or a student to a show until they are ready. This doesn't mean perfect it means able to cope in a new situation and be in control of their balance and their horse. Make sure that you and your students learn the rules. Emphasize that a show is not a judgment of you as a person, and not a judgment of one's parenting skills for those who have a child in the ring, but rather this is a horse show and you are being judged on what the performance of horse and rider was like inside the ring. A show is a judgment of many skills including horsemanship, organization, showmanship, training and athletic skills.

Horse shows are an exercise in performing under many types of pressure. Can you take it? Nerves, heat, cold, ridiculous show schedules, and not always perfect footing. I remember fondly a driven dressage test at Gladstone in the driving rain with four inches of water covering the arena, talk about trot on water.

Please accept that horse shows are almost always run by volunteers, volunteers aren't always perfect, and often they are not even horse people, but they are there helping to put on a show so shut up and put up (even when you are sure the idiot volunteer screwed up the stop watch again) and always remember to thank everyone for their effort.

Take an interest in the other competitors, say good morning, congratulate them on their wins, admire their horses and turnout, be friendly, help load a tack trunk or hold a horse. Your competitors are not your adversaries they are simply the other players in the game, without them you have no game. Should they be unkind to you that's their problem, not yours.

Parents need to remember to be polite to their children and children must be polite to their parents, competition under pressure remember? Nerves do not give folks permission to be rude or raise voices at one another. I have at times had to put both children and parents in the time-out chair.

Be careful not to stand ringside to pick apart someone's performance – be gentle with your criticism of others and of yourself. Remember to applaud the little wins and efforts as well as the ribbons. Be generous with your praise and be there to commiserate when needed. Smile and be happy that you're at a horse show. Let it bring out the best that you can be and remember that even with all of your hard work and preparation that horse shows are a game of chance and some days you will have good luck and some days you will have bad.

I hope that others will be able to enjoy playing the competition game. The show world has taken me to many different places and I have met many wonderful horses and people. I have learned my strengths as well as my weaknesses and I have learned skills that have followed me throughout my life. Have the courage to take yourself and your horse off the farm now and then, challenge yourself, challenge your horse, and challenge your students; but above all, have a good time!

Peggy Brown is a Level IV Centered Riding and Driving Clinician from Toledo, Ohio. She is classified as an Expert Instructor and Instructor Educator by the American Riding Instructor Association and was honored to be named the 2005 Instructor of the Year. Peggy generously shares her years of experience in competing, handling and training horses and riders. A firm believer in solid foundation training for horse and rider, Peggy helps riders learn to use their bodies wisely to prevent injury and to communicate clearly in balance and harmony with their horse. Working domestically and internationally, Peggy as the Visible Rider™ wears a bone suit that helps riders learn more about their own bodies and how the rider's position effects the horse's body. Peggy's goals are to help horses improve performance and comfort levels by helping their riders and drivers find sensitive, balanced, independent seat and hands.