

## TIPS FOR HORSE SHOW SUCCESS

“Fail to plan, plan to fail.” This sage advice tops any “tips for success” list because it highlights the necessity to set a goal. Yet so few of us do. Without a goal, we have a vague picture of what success looks like and a sketchy map to get us there.

For riders, short term goals include the weekly and daily lesson plan, and a systematic plan for teaching our horses a new skill. We’ll touch on these later.

Long term goals are even less frequently considered. “Where do I want to be in 2-5 years?” “Do I really want to show? If so, in what discipline and at what level?” Although there are many worthy goals apart from competition (breeding, training resale projects, pursuing certification in a horsemanship program, etc), for the purposes of this article, we’ll focus on goals for the competitive rider.

So before we get into the nuts and bolts of horse show specifics, consider the role showing plays for you.

It is quite common for riders to ask, after they’ve been taking lessons for a while, for an evaluation of their talent. I think it’s human nature to want to know how we measure up to the average standard. And many a horseman just can’t help but wonder how his horse stacks up to the others. Ten people at your barn can tell you how much they like your horse, but there is no greater thrill than when a qualified judge likes him too. Showing gives you an opportunity to test the skills you are practicing at home in a pressure situation. Perhaps you have nailed down some impressive equitation patterns at home - will you be able to do the same despite the distractions and time pressure? There’s only one way to find out!

One of the benefits of riding for competition vs. recreationally is having a goal to work toward, a date circled on the calendar for which to prepare. There is a “buzz” around the barn when there’s a show approaching that’s contagious. It’s one way to keep life exciting and motivates you to head for the barn rather than the couch after work. The winters can seem long without a goal on the horizon so it’s tempting to hibernate instead of keep a steady riding schedule.

The payoff in showing that goes beyond ribbons and titles, is found in the process. It’s about stretching beyond what is comfortable, facing your fears, whatever they are, and going for it! It’s about building relationships with other people that have the same interests and are facing the same challenge. Most importantly this sport tests our ability to communicate with a living, breathing partner whom God has wired altogether differently from us!

So if you’ve decided that you’re going to step out of the practice ring and into the show ring, following are some guidelines. Regardless of your discipline or level of competition there are common challenges for all. From many years of competing and coaching

competitors, I've discovered some ways to avoid familiar pitfalls and achieve some success, sanity and safety.

### **Have a lesson plan.**

This is where your short term goals come in. I've observed that at most amateur riders swing into the saddle and default to trotting in ovals. I challenge them to make every decision, as the dance leader of your partnership. For your warm up, exactly what line of travel (how deep into the corner, what size of circle), what frame (on the bit in short, medium or long frame) and what length of stride (will you choose?)

Although your practise session may differ slightly between at home and away, in both environments make sure you start with a plan. You may have to alter your plan to deal with sticking points along the way, in order to drop back and rebuild some weak points in your foundation. Time restraints or other unforeseen circumstances may cause a detour in the agenda.

### **Practise the tough stuff.**

Drilling the skills that you don't do really well is uncomfortable and not much fun. It's much easier to do the things that come more easily to you and your horse. If you board at a busy stable or share the ring with others who are taking lessons, I'm sure you'll agree that letting others see your mistakes as you work through tough exercises can be flustering. However the notion that everything will magically come together in the show ring is a common one and the odds will be against you. My students know are advised that they're ready to show in a class when they can do it (the pattern, course etc) at home. In fact we'll often plan mock shows before a major competition and they can be an eye opener!

Taking a step further, train those skills tougher than you have to. Set the markers for your pattern closer together than they will be at the show, jump a little bigger than your division calls for, or ride in a more distracting environment than you will likely encounter. Find ways to practise out of your comfort zone!

**Prepare for the atmosphere.** Maintaining your composure amid distractions is an important skill to learn both for you and your horse. These distractions come in the form of heavy "horse traffic" through which to navigate, the watching eyes of the spectators and judge, unfamiliar sights and sounds or unpredictable weather and footing. I will often school a horse at home by expecting him to focus on me while riding right beside a volunteer on another horse. Horses often get goofy in the presence of other horses so try to do some schooling in a busy environment. Conversely, some horses can't concentrate when separated from their buddies so ride alone on occasion. Ride in inclement weather and less than perfect footing. Hang banners on the walls, coolers over jumps, get creative.

**Contents may explode under pressure.** Some horses are initially so bright at a horse show, they're like an inflated balloon, ready to pop. They may react in an exaggerated manner to distractions in a way the novice competitor may not anticipate. Find a safe quiet place to longe to take the edge off before riding, tying or working around your horse's legs.

**Leave excess energy at home.** Despite the fact that you've done your longeing and your horse seems to be performing well in the warm up ring, it is a rare horse that doesn't perk up in the show ring. For this reason we usually increase the work and turnout time for our horses on the days before a show. We may also decrease their grain until after the first day of competition. We make absolutely sure each horse is comfortable in the show ring before his first class, even if that means riding there late at night or in the wee hours of the morning.

**Minimize risks.** As I walk around the show grounds, I frequently see accidents waiting to happen. Horses tied to trailers with swinging side doors left open or a bucket ready to be stepped in. Young children riding in busy schooling rings. A horse tied to the stall door. Unsafe trailer loading or unloading techniques. Riders sitting sideways on their horses. Loose dogs

In the stable area, clear the decks of step stools and lawn chairs. Loop those reins around your horse's neck when bridling. Don't ride down the barn aisle! I've corrected my students for bandaging their horses in the stall without having them tied up or, similarly, picking out the stall with only the wheelbarrow across the door opening.

Erring on the side of caution, when in doubt – don't do it. And watch out for the other guy!

**Shut out the negative.** Let's face it, stuff happens. Your alarm clock malfunctions. Your mom and your coach give you conflicting instructions. You forgot your saddle pad. As you wait at the in gate, ready to compete, you feel rattled and less than prepared. Now is the time to forget about all the events of the morning. Dust off your acting skills and *pretend* you are perfectly prepared. Take a deep breath and look like the winner. Imagine what your perfect performance will look like. Speak positive words to yourself. "I'm so glad for the opportunity to go first in this class!" "I'm going to ace this pattern – we've got a great left spin!" This really does work!

If you do make a mistake when you are in the ring, forget it and aim to salvage your "go" by finishing on a good note. Practise recovering with the words "Never mind. Carry on!" and nail the rest of your pattern. Afterward, evaluate your class starting with what you honestly liked about it, and then learning from whatever mistakes you made.

**Attention to details.** "Does it really matter if I don't clip his ears?" "The judge is looking at my horse – not the fit of my riding jacket." "I think these bands will last overnight." Winning is made up of 100 little preparations. There are so many things that can happen in the show ring that are out of your control, why not control as many things as you can outside the ring? Whenever possible, don't cut corners.

**. Personal space.** Often, a rider is accompanied by a parent and younger siblings or a spouse. Possibly friends and non horsey relatives are thrown into the mix as well. For safety, I have suggested limiting the visitors (and dogs) around the horse, rider, and barn area, and also a physical distance of 2 metres between young children and the horse. An emotional distance is another suggestion – limit visiting to down-times in the show

schedule. Any rider has enough to concentrate on without the video cameras, advice and expectations of friends and fans.

**An extra set of hands.** Taking along a support person who is comfortable leading, bridling, and bathing is a real stress reliever on show day. Arrange for someone to come along who can make entries, hold your horse while you watch the ring, or dust boots and comb the tail at the in gate. Offer to reciprocate at your helper's car show or yard sale!

**Be careful where you tie.** "Tie 'em high and tie 'em short," is one of my favorite sayings. I am always amazed at how and where horses are tied (to stall doors and other things that move, low enough that they could get a foot over the lead, to trailers with drooping hay nets). Not only is it a real danger to have your horse break free at a horse show, but it is a waste of everybody's time and energy, and really embarrassing to boot!

Showing horses can prepare you for many of life's challenges for which you will need to thoroughly prepare, face your fears, ignore the negatives and go for it! It is here that we develop mental toughness by having to perform at inconvenient times and in uncomfortable temperatures. We learn to care less about the opinions of onlookers and to celebrate our personal best performance. We begin to prepare for and avoid pitfalls. The show ring is a fun way to learn these important skills – make the most of it

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