



By Christina Keim

Training *on the* Triangle

A Venue for Future
Stars to Make
Their Debut

In hand showing gives the owners and breeders of young sport horses or breeding stock the opportunity to have their animals assessed by experts and ranked against others in their age class. Successful outcomes in the in hand arena can lead to greater prestige for breeders, higher sales prices for young stock or simply can provide a fabulous exposure to the show arena for a future prospect.

However, presenting an inexperienced animal to their best advantage is no easy feat; understanding just what judges are looking for can help you decide whether in hand showing is the right venue for your horse. In addition, proper preparation for horse and handler are going to be critical to a successful outcome.

Here, our experts offer their thoughts on keys to successful sport horse showing – from both the perspective of the judge and of the handler.



Horses are evaluated in the walk and the trot, and judges look for several important qualities, including the purity of the gait, how the horse uses their body in movement, and the overall quality of the gaits.

Catching the Judge's Eye

According to the United States Equestrian Federation Rulebook, the purpose of dressage sport horse breeding classes is "to encourage the breeding of horses suitable for dressage and to provide an opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of breeding programs." To this end, judges share a similar scale of priorities that they use to assess the animals presented in each class.

"The factor that is of greatest importance is what will be the future for that horse," says Kristi Wysocki, Vice Chair of the United States Dressage Federation Sport Horse Committee and "r" dressage sport horse breeding judge from Elbert, Colorado. "I look for function over fashion. What I mean by this is that I need to see how the horse's movement relates to their conformation. Issues that will cause unsoundness or training issues in the future are significant."

Wysocki says that the job of the judge is to look for horses whose conformation and movement will allow them to be trainable and remain sound in their career, as opposed to simply selecting the flashiest or most extravagant mover.

Sport horses in hand are judged both still and in movement. "It is very important to see how the conformation relates to movement," says Wysocki. "There are horses with wonderful conformation that can't move well, and there are those whose minor conformation faults don't drastically affect the movement. However, correctness always comes first, even if the horse is an extravagant mover."

Horses are evaluated in the walk and the trot, and judges

look for several important qualities. First amongst these is the purity of the gait; the walk must have four clear, even beats, and the trot two. Next, judges look to watch how the horse uses their body in movement and how correct that movement is. Horses should move straight, with hind legs swinging in the same line as the front legs. Finally, the overall quality of the gaits is factored in. "Correct gaits that are not fancy can still be quite competitive," says Wysocki. "If one horse has pure, correct gaits and another has a flashy trot but a lateral walk, horse number one will win."

Gail Hoff-Carmona, an "r" dressage sport horse breeding judge and long time breeder of Swedish Warmbloods from Ojai, California, says that judges must not allow their personal preferences to influence their judging of a horse's gaits. "Some horses are flatter movers, and some have more knee action," says Hoff-Carmona. "A flatter mover who pushes well and is uphill is acceptable; judges must look always at the purity and quality of the gaits first."

To this end, judges generally do not know the bloodlines of horses that they are assessing, as this cannot be used in their appraisals. Judges work to evaluate what they see in front of them that day, and even if they have judged the animal before, they cannot consider that previous performance on a new day.

The walk is assessed first. "In the walk, as they move away, we look to see if the horse tracks straight," says Hoff-Carmona. "We are looking for the action of the movement, and to see that the hind legs are just behind the front legs."

Deviations from straight movement, such as paddling or



Photo: Carlen Schippers

One of the factors that judges must consider is the age of the animal they are assessing. Foals, yearlings and two year olds change a lot as they mature, and conformation is not as much of a factor for them as it is in an older, mature horse.

One Triangle or Two?

Specifications for the presentation of horses and the setup of the arena for in hand classes are spelled out in the United States Equestrian Federation Rulebook, under DR 209 (2009 edition). Owners and handlers should be familiar with these rules prior to entering a sport horse class.

Traditionally, two triangles are set up for the presentation of horses in hand. More accurately, one large triangle has sides of thirty meters each; a smaller triangle with sides of fifteen meters each is set up within the larger triangle. Horses are sent to the right over the smaller triangle at the walk, and then the larger triangle at the trot, after being presented for conformational assessment at the apex of the triangle.

However, many shows are finding it challenging to provide the room needed for a thirty-meter triangle. In order to accommodate as many venues as possible, judges are finding it increasingly common to see "large" triangles with smaller dimensions. "The minimum requirements are to have twenty-five meters across the far side, and twenty meters on the two sides going away from and towards the judge," says Kristi Wysocki, an "r" dressage sport horse breeding judge from Elbert, Colorado.

"We want to make it so more shows can hold these classes," says Gail Hoff-Carmona, an "r" dressage sport horse breeding judge from Ojai, California. "At some shows, because we are using a smaller triangle, it makes sense to have the horses walk and trot the same triangle." This is generally done when the walk triangle will be so small that judges find it hard to fairly assess this important gait.

Show organizers using a smaller sized triangle or only one triangle will generally indicate this in their prizelist.

winging, are noted.

"On the part of the triangle where we have a side view, I look at the articulation of the joints," says Hoff-Carmona. "I like to see good freedom of the shoulder, and also that the movement of the hind leg matches the reach of the shoulder."

In addition, horses should use their backs well in the walk, and move with energy and freedom.

In the trot, judges want to see that the horse uses their hindquarters positively. "For example, as the horse trots away, do you see him drive forward with his hindquarters, or do they push out behind?" says Hoff-Carmona. "Horses moving with nice impulsion will move better, overall. From the side view, we can evaluate how the horse carries himself." This is where a horse that doesn't have picture perfect conformation can shine, if they are able to use all of their parts to their best advantage.

In sport horse prospect and under saddle classes, movement counts for a higher overall percentage of the score than does conformation. "This

is because although conformation is very important, if a horse doesn't move well, they are probably not going to be successful as upper level dressage horses most of the time," says Hoff-Carmona.

One of the other factors that judges must consider is the age of the animal they are assessing. "Older horses are able to engage better, they are stronger, and can show more freedom of the shoulder," says Wysocki. "The necks of babies change a lot as they mature, so we don't get as hung up on that in a young horse. An adult is done developing, so everything you see is confirmed."

"Judges are hopefully also breeders or have otherwise been exposed to how the horse matures," says Hoff-Carmona. "Two year olds, for example, are usually not well balanced, and are croup high or have underdeveloped withers. Foals tend to be narrow in the chest and toed out; as they mature, the legs straighten and the chest broadens. If you see these faults in an older horse, they are more important in your assessment."

The USDF Sport Horse Committee has decided that current year foals will be separated into a different division for the USDF Breeder Series Championships. "This will level the playing field," says Wysocki. "Having foals of the year and three year olds in the same class is a little bit like comparing apples and oranges."

Overall, judges are trying to find the best qualities of the horse presented to them, rather than focusing on the negative qualities. "We are looking for potential FEI prospects," says Hoff-Carmona. "We are trying to find what is right. Horses can have brief mistakes, like putting their tail over the back, then relaxing and moving forward, and still score quite well."

Go With a Pro?

So you have the young horse of your dreams and you wish to have him show on the line – the next step is to determine if you should handle your own horse or hire a professional to do the honors for you.

"Handlers are key," says Hoff-Carmona. "Sometimes we see a very nice moving horse, with good freedom and balance, but the handler can't keep up with it. On the other hand, you can have handlers who run a horse without much movement off their feet."

Phil Silva is a professional sport horse handler from Pepperell, Massachusetts, and he agrees that handlers can make or break the success of the horse. "I find that owners often get more nervous when showing their own horse, whether they are riding or [handling them] in hand," says Silva. "For this reason, it is usually better to hire someone. Other times horses have their owner's number and you need to put someone new next to them. However, there are some horses that are better behaved next to their familiar owner than an unfamiliar handler. It can be a fine line to determine which is best."

One factor that may influence your choice is your motivation for entering these competitions with your horse. Silva says that he meets owners with different goals, some who just want feedback from the judge, while others really want to win; this can put a great deal of pressure on a professional handler to use all of their tools to show the horse to their best. Hoff-Carmona points out that just as in ridden dressage, new competitors should not expect the same results as those who have been showing longer.

"Professional handlers can get the best results," says Hoff-Carmona. "The horse must be properly presented and trained in order for the judge to see the horse's true potential."

Experienced handlers have a lot to offer breeders and owners

of young stock. "Judges are different in what they want to see," says Silva. "We try to present the horse in a manner in which they show their best gaits. It isn't about the handler; it is about presenting that individual horse."

While conformational faults can be hard to outright hide, an experienced handler can do their best to present an illusion. "For one example, you might ask the horse to lower their head and neck in order to encourage them to lift their back," says Silva.

In addition, because they handle so many different animals, experienced handlers usually have a larger "bag of tricks" with which to get the best performance out of each individual. "If you only have one horse, your emphasis is on that one horse, and you may not have the depth [of experience] needed to show them at their best," says Silva. "The best handlers mold themselves to a horse. They have experience with many young horses and different needs."

In particular, professional handlers can use their experience to determine the best techniques for "pre-show" preparation for young stock. In particular, they need to decide whether it will be best to bring the young horse directly from the stabling area to the arena in time for their class, or to allow the horse to spend some time ringside to acclimate to the environment. Silva says sometimes it can make a difference whether he himself brings the horse from stabling to the ring, or whether he just meets the horse ringside.

"This is an important consideration," says Hoff-Carmona. "Young horses especially are sometimes at first quite high and not free and relaxed. Then in their next class, they may be more settled and show better. Sometimes you get this same horse into the championships and now find they may be totally dead."

Sometimes handlers must change their plan of action for an individual based on their performance. "Horses are not always the same from day to day," says Silva. "The same horse on different weekends, or even over the course of the same weekend, can show very differently."

Practice and Preparation

Wysocki says a lack of preparation for in hand shows can at best, prevent your horse from showing their true potential and at worst, be a down right hazard. "You must train these horses, especially babies. People don't realize the amount of preparation needed. If your horse doesn't behave, we can't score them as well because the disobedience interferes with the performance."

Safety issues quickly ensue when horses, away from home for the first time and not accustomed to being handled, act up. "Babies especially can be dangerous," says Silva. "In Europe, only the mare is handled, while the babies are allowed to be loose. In my opinion, this technique best allows them to show their natural gait. Here, foals are not allowed to be loose, and they can knock handlers around." In the U.S. most facilities don't have arenas to accommodate babies, plus there is a considerable time factor involved when trying catch loose foals.

Even if you do not plan to show your own horse, you can still do much to prepare the animal for their upcoming adventures. Silva recommends setting up obstacles at home, and practicing leading the horse in straight lines and turning the horse to the right, away from the handler.

"Practice with your horse at the walk and trot at home," says Hoff-Carmona. "Watch a video, attend a clinic, or go to a show to see what will be expected so you can practice correctly." Hoff-

Carmona says that horses who have been taught to walk and trot in a straight line, and to stay out of the handler's space, will generally present better in the arena.

Another technique that horses can be taught at home is the use of a whip or whip handler. Whip handlers are a second handler who knows when to apply an aid to send the horse more forward. "A whip handler is not someone simply standing there with a whip," says Hoff-Carmona. "They need to know when to push

Choosing a Handler

If you have decided to "go with a pro" for your young horse, how do you know who will be the best match? While a good handler should be able to respond to each horse as an individual, your best bet is to at least start with someone who has handled horses for someone who you know and respect.

"I think all clients should get reference on their handlers," says Phil Silva, a professional sport horse handler from Pepperell, Massachusetts. "If you have time, it is ideal to introduce the handler to the horse in advance, whether this means that the handler comes to your farm or the horse goes to see them."

Owners should hire someone who enjoys handling young stock. "You feel like you mold yourself to the horse," says Silva. "It feels like you are dancing with the horse."

While experienced handlers are a valuable asset in the sport horse ring, Silva says that the sport must also invest some efforts towards getting new, younger handlers involved. "At our farm, our rule is if you are not comfortable handling horses on the ground, you should not be on top of the horse," says Silva. "We need to develop new handlers. This is not a sport where the handler gets a trophy when horses win; some sort of an incentive program to recognize winning handlers may attract more young handlers."

"Breeders have such a sense of gratification when they see the success of their breeding [in the ring]," says Silva. "I have a lot of fun just running next to these horses."

and when to back off."

Silva prefers whenever possible to have a horse brought in to his farm for preparation. "This is not always feasible," says Silva. "In this case, I try to handle a new horse at least one day before the show, so I know what to expect."

Equally important to handling practice is a bit of spit and polish. Again, an experienced handler can provide advice in this department. "The grooming and braiding helps immensely," says Silva. "A shining coat, a nice bridle or halter, provides a presentation that shows that you want the best for your horse."

Wysocki says that in her experience, a prepared horse at least knows what to expect and tends to do better overall. "You do not need any fancy setups," says Wysocki. "These are skills that you can practice in your pasture."

Final Thoughts

Successful performances of talented young stock can put a



Photo: Carole MacDonald

An experienced handler, like Phil Silva, knows how to get the best performance out of each individual horse.

breeder and their program on the map; it can also provide an introduction to the show ring for a future prospect.

"The exposure for young horses is generally a wonderful experience," says Hoff-Carmona, who has seen progeny of her own breeding program win championships at Dressage at Devon. "If you own a young horse and want the opinion of a judge, it is a valuable tool."

If you choose to show your horse in hand, proper preparation and a fair understanding of the judge's expectations will give you the best chance of a successful performance. ■

What is Expression?

According to the United States Dressage Federation "Glossary of Judging Terms", expression is "increased impulsion, with harmony, balance, and cadence – imbuing the performance with 'feeling' and artistic quality."

Putting into words such an aesthetic quality of movement is never easy, but judges know an expressive horse when they see it. A well built horse who moves with purity, correctness and expression will be sure to be the top of the class in an in hand competition.

"Expressive horses are alert," says Gail Hoff-Carmona, an "r" dressage sport horse breeding judge from Ojai, California. "They have an interest in where they are going. They want to push from their hindquarters and move with great freedom and articulation of the joints."

Hoff-Carmona says that handlers can help a horse to move with expression; common mistakes are to run a horse too fast and onto the forehand, or too slow, preventing freedom of movement.

"Speed can be a mistake," says Phil Silva, a professional sport horse handler from Pepperell, Massachusetts. "It isn't about how fast you go, but what brilliance you can show in the horse's gaits."

Silva and Hoff-Carmona agree that a horse that moves with expression tends to be right on the edge of being "too much." "The horse must still be respectful," says Silva.

"They should not be so high that they are standing on their hind legs," says Hoff-Carmona.