

The Oldenburg Horse, April 2003, It's Show Time!

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Jan Williams

I sometimes think, I must be the most terrible mother on earth! Last year, I was so poorly prepared for my daughter's dance recital. I was supposed to have two different colored tights for the different dance numbers, her hair was supposed to be slicked back and in a bun and I was missing some of the accessories for one of the costumes. Ugh! What a ding-bat! I know what it takes to get a horse into the ring and be successful and I know that I should have taken the time to be prepared for my daughter's dance recital.

The key to success for most performance related activities is PREPARATION--whether a college exam, a dance recital or a horse show, proper and timely preparation will alleviate some of the stress and the anxiety and improve the chances of having a safe and successful competition.

How long does it take to prepare for a horse show? Just as for a college exam or a performance in a ballet, the amount of preparation and time required is very much dependent on the level of expertise in demand. The amount of preparation might be a lifetime's worth. But we all have to start somewhere and rarely (thankfully) is that at the top! Should you be planning to bring your weanling or yearling to its first horse show, or your 4 year old to its first dressage or jumping competition or the seasoned competitor to the first show of the year, all require the necessary preparation to achieve the desired result--a safe and successful competition.

In today's highly competitive arenas, horse show preparation is a year round job. Meticulous and appropriate daily grooming, training, nutrition and conditioning are essential to get the horse into the show arena. But as show time approaches some additional preparations are needed. Just as the dancer has a dress rehearsal and a college student might take a "mock" exam it is necessary and wise to bring the horse to a schooling show or equivalent to prepare the horse for the upcoming horse show. It is impossible to completely prepare a horse for their first few competitions. Even the most seasoned competitor might behave unpredictably in the horse show atmosphere.

To prepare the horse physically and mentally for their first horse show, it is helpful to try to understand how the horse might perceive the entire horse show experience. They might have to load onto a trailer in the wee, cold and dark hours of the morning. Ride in a shadowy, cold and noisy trailer to arrive at a show with lots of scary and strange things and other strange horses neighing anxiously. Understanding and respect of your horse can take you a long way, and will help you to develop confidence-building situations that will enable you and your horse to arrive at your first show safely and successfully. It should be your first priority that the first horse show is not a traumatic experience for your horse but a stepping-stone learning experience that continues to strengthen their confidence and desire to compete. Having a great horse to compete doesn't just come with the territory, just like training of a discipline, training and developing the horse for competition takes time, understanding and respect for the horses needs and fears. Some horses are born competitors. They seem to love the excitement of the show, and thrive on applause. While other (and maybe most) horses become tense and anxious and would rather be home. In

general, most horses lose about 25% or more of their capacity the moment that they step on the horse show grounds. Given this, it becomes extremely important to make each experience for the horse a positive one. Each experience which builds confidence and desire can develop the horse as a lifelong successful competitor. Even the seasoned competitor might need a quiet show or two before entering a competition at an intense venue. While another seasoned competition horse might regain the competitive sparkle by abstinence from the show ring. Each horse is different and should be treated with respect and understanding, by doing so, a successful and happy competition horse can be developed.

At least a month or two before the first horse show I will take my young horses to weekly lessons at a nearby farm that is safe and relatively quiet. This will allow them to experience traveling away from home without the excitement of a horse show and other horses that are also anxious about being away from home. Since my horses live at home with me, they never have the opportunity to work "in company". This can be an upsetting experience for a young horse at a horse show to suddenly be expected to pay attention and be obedient where many other horses are working. It might also be difficult for the horse to leave the "herd" in the warm-up area and enter the competition arena--alone! It is important for the young horse to experience and gain confidence in a safe and calm setting before the horse show than to be faced with the entire horse show atmosphere without preparation. By doing this, you will have a better idea how your horse will behave at the horse show, and what you might need to do before or at the horse show in order to have a safe and successful competition.

I am very careful at choosing my first horse show for my young horses. I usually try to choose a horse show that is close by, within a short

trailer ride from my home. This will enable me to ride my horse sufficiently at home before loading onto the trailer and arriving at the show. By taking "the edge" off my horse at home, it can make my job at the horse show much easier. I don't like longeing at a show. Many shows do not offer a safe place to longe, if they offer longeing at all. Longeing can be dangerous, since your horse is in a strange place and might be more excited than usual, there might be a greater chance that they will injure themselves or get away from you. If you feel that longeing is inevitable, be sure to choose your shows wisely. Be sure that there is a suitable and safe place designated at the show for longeing.

I prefer to ride my young horses early, before the show begins and the excitement of the show is in full bloom. This can help to settle the horse before they need to work with company. But it means that you, as the rider, must get yourself out of bed early and be one of the first to get to the show.

Bringing the young horse to their first show is usually not easy. It is sometimes best done by a professional that has had a lot of experience in preparing young horses for competition. If you should decide to have a professional work with your horse, be sure to send your horse to the professional well in advance of the horse show so that the horse can become familiar with the new person before having to face new environments, too!

Even horses to be shown "in hand" should have at least one "outing" before going to the horse show. This will give you the opportunity to iron out the logistics of loading on the trailer. Should you be bringing the mother as well, lining up handlers necessary to keep everyone under control and happy is vital.

Showing horses in hand is every much an art and technique as showing horses under saddle. It is sometimes necessary to hire a "handler"

to show your horse in hand. I have witnessed on several occasions horses that are excellent movers and have outstanding presence, but in the hands of a smaller, weaker handler the horse's attributes are compromised.

Just as under saddle performances, the horse must be trained to show in hand. By attending clinics and horse shows, purchasing or renting videotapes you can learn how to show the horse in hand and what the judge expects from the horse shown in hand. The judge often gives the horse a lot of latitude, since they are primarily scoring conformation and gaits. But the horse must be obedient enough to stand to be judged, walk freely, calmly and relaxed and then to **TROT** off with expression. Even the best handler will not be able to present the horse to its best if the horse has not received in hand preparation prior to the show.

As show day nears, more attention must be paid to the grooming of the horse. The coat of the horse should be in excellent condition. It should have a shine or luster about it. Coats that are too long or have been sun-bleached give the horse the look of poor condition. Should the coat be too long it will be necessary to clip or shave the horse's coat. This needs to be done at least 2-3 weeks before the competition to help soften that "just been clipped" look. There is nothing that detracts more from a horse's overall appearance than a coat that is long or dull. If you do have to clip your horse, be aware that it might be necessary to blanket the horse depending on the weather conditions.

Trimming of the whiskers around the muzzle, fetlock hairs, bridle path and any hair that protrudes from the ears helps to give the horse a more polished and clean cut appearance. It also helps to clarify the conformation of the horse. This final show trimming should be done just days prior to competition. Show grooming should enhance the horse's appearance, not

detract from it. It is not possible to improve the horse's actual conformation, but I have seen clever ways to improve the horse's appearance and presentation through careful and thoughtful grooming, trimming and braiding. It is sometimes necessary to experiment well beforehand with what types of braids look best on your horse, or whether the horse's tail should be pulled, braided or natural.

Braiding is a very large part of the presentation. Whether your horse is shown in hand or under saddle, a good braiding job seems to enhance the overall picture, but a poorly braided horse seems to have lost the class even before entering the arena. I am not a particularly good braider, and I am not fond of the job, but I see to it that my horse is braided neatly and the braids consistently follow the crest of the horse's neck without deviation. I do not use white tape on my braids for two major reasons: 1) My braiding is not good enough. 2) If a braid becomes ever so slightly out of alignment the white tape accentuates the deviation like a fish out of water. I always put my braids in as close to the competition time as possible and they are removed as soon as the horse is finished competing for the day. The braids are never in overnight. You try to sleep with braids in your hair! If necessary, I will even re-braid between classes.

If you don't feel as if you do an adequate job braiding, pay a professional at the show to do it. Be sure that the horse's mane has been properly pulled and not too slippery clean. It is not possible for a professional braider to do a competent job if the mane is too thick, too long or too dirty. It certainly makes sense to hire a braider, even if you are a good braider but your time schedule is tight. By the time you arrive at the show, paying for braiding becomes insignificant and it is always nice to hear someone tell you how beautifully your horse is turned out!

Success at the horse show is preparation and attention to details. Tack is a key element to details. Whether your horse is shown in performance classes or in hand classes, the tack should fit well, be clean and enhance your horse's appearance. This must be done well in advance of the show. It might be necessary to try many bridles, bits, saddles and saddle pads before finding the right combination that fits, works and looks good. It is a difficult to get the right tack for the horse and sometimes an ongoing process, but it is a detail that cannot be neglected for success.

The rider or the handler must also be turned out neatly and appropriately. Clothes and footwear should be comfortable and safe for the task and the weather. Clothes that have some stretch enable the rider or handler to move freely and comfortably without restriction. Bulky clothes allow freedom of movement for the rider and handler, but can be cumbersome and even weighed down in adverse weather conditions. Trial and error with clothing and footwear well in advance of the show date is the best tact. Clothes should always be conservative as to not divert attention from the horse. For the handler, the color of the pants should be different than the color of the legs of the horse, so that as the horse moves, the judge can clearly discern the horse's legs from that of the handler.

For complete rules and regulations regarding the presentation, expectations, tack and apparel of the horse, rider or handler, please refer to the USA Equestrian Rule Book available by calling (859) 258-2472 or at www.equestrian.org.

The key to a successful show is preparation. Careful and meticulous preparation in the months, weeks and days prior to the show, hopefully we can learn what to expect from our horses, how to get the best performance at

the show and how to alleviate and avoid as much stress as possible on the day of the show.

Well, what are we waiting for? There's a lot to do--and I need to prepare my daughter for this year's dance recital. Have fun and good luck at your next show!