

## The View From The Rail—U.S. Nationals 2007

*by Russ Vento*

No matter how busy U.S. Nationals is, I'm not giving up my spot on the rail, catching the show and talking to everyone who will give me their time and opinions. As usual, I appreciate that many of you were generous with your views. Some of you reinforced my thoughts, and some gave me a lot to consider. Either way, a lot of us were talking about what we liked and didn't like, how much improvement has been made in our breed show, and what is still left to do. What I write here is my own opinion, but most of it I heard from others as well.

Before I begin, I want to thank the show commission on a job well done. Putting on a show the size of U.S. Nationals is a huge job, and their time, effort and dedication deserves everyone's appreciation. My compliments are genuine, and my suggestions for the future are, I hope, useful.

For Nationals '07, let's start with something we all agreed on, and that was the weather. It was our last year in Albuquerque, and the ambience was beautiful. The whole area just glowed with fall and looked amazing. There were only a few days that got cool (in the 50s); the rest of the time it was in the middle 70s, just perfect. Everybody was able to get their work done comfortably, and the mood was great.

The next thing you couldn't miss was the level of talent at the show. The bar has been set so high in all the divisions that the slightest mistake could give you an average performance or lead you to disappointment. These days, not only do you have to have a flawless performance, but the horses have to be on the muscle (in the English division, some of the Half-Arabians were trotting like walk/trot or gaited horses). It was pretty special.

And then, since I'm an amateur, let me comment on my peers. In a phrase, the amateurs' riding capabilities and showmanship skills were off the charts. There were some classes that had 23 or 24 horses in them, which is not what most people are used to throughout the year, at least in English. Many of us are lucky to get 10 horses in a regional class, let alone 23. At Nationals, for our amateurs to navigate in a crowd like that is a true credit to them.

Also regarding amateurs, it was a real pleasure to see some whose dreams were shattered last year come back this time to ride strongly, and to earn the respect of trainers and other amateurs. There were more than one, and they rode the hair off their horses! It was great to be on the rail for one of them, and to hear everyone around me saying, "Look at her ride!"

Now, to the equine competition.

### Halter

With the new scoring and style of presentation (not to mention other improvements that are coming in the future), I think the halter classes will be exciting once again. I'm not

sure whether it's that something new is coming, or that there are new horses imported from out of the country and offering a different look, but the pizzazz is back.

I have always questioned bringing the European horses to the U.S., because the American and European styles of horse are different. When they are judged against each other, rather than against the Arabian standard of type—which too often has been how halter horses were judged here—it can be too subjective to be fair. We have come up with a new scoring system that will get us away from comparison judging. The idea is that breeding classes are not about the performance, but about conformation and the type representation of the Arabian breed. The Nationals judges appeared to be ready for that, and already using the standard. Whether they were using it on paper I don't know, but I think they were using it in their minds.

What I saw this year was that both Arabian styles, American and European, were rewarded. It wasn't as if we had a champion and reserve that looked alike. The horses were rewarded on their individual country's breed type, and people were excited. Did they always love the champion? No. Did they always love the reserve? No. But you saw unbelievable positive response.

The stallions were spectacular. I didn't see enough of the junior class, but the futurity stallions and the senior stallions were fantastic. They looked like Arabians—they were elegant, they had size, they had substance. They were beautiful, and they showed like professionals. While the babies, I think, are overdone, the adults didn't look stressed or intimidated; they looked like they knew their jobs and they did it like a job.

This is a good place to point out that the U.S. National Champion Stallion, Pyro Thyme SA, is freaky-beautiful. His conformation and type even overshadowed his presentation. That's another thing that tells me that the officials were judging on a standard. I'm really tired of hearing people say, "Oh, but they didn't show!" A halter breeding class is not about the show—it is about how they are conformed. If we are judging on how they show, then it is a halter performance class.

In the senior mares, we had the mare who has been undefeated for years—Maggdalina, who won—and the mare who won this year's Scottsdale, Elandra PASB. Both were breathtaking horses, one from Poland and one from the U.S., two different styles, and they were rewarded. In the Junior Mares, it flip-flopped. The European mare (Emandoria) won, and the American (Kharmel BR) was reserve. They were two totally different types of mares, two that represented their countries, and they were beautiful. It could have gone either way.

All in all, the halter horses were great. They were great examples of individual breeding philosophies, and demonstrated that good breeding will be rewarded. As breeders, we breed the style of horse that we like, and we need to support what we believe in. In halter classes, I don't care if a horse trots over the moon or doesn't trot at all. If it represents the Arabian breed, and has good type and conformation, then I can appreciate it.

## Performance

Let's start with western, because of all the divisions, I believe that the western owners and trainers have listened most quickly to what the judges and the public want. Over the past two years, they have changed their division. At the Nationals they had a panel of

judges who knew exactly what they wanted, and the trainers knew how to present to them.

Both open and amateur, the horses were soft and covering ground. I heard a lot of speculation about the length of the drape of the rein; some judges like an extreme drape, some like just a drape, some like more contact. The exhibitors found a happy medium between the three—they were flawless. When they got to the top ten, you could be happy with any of those 10 being national champion, both open and amateur. The western panel all had their own opinions, but it looked like their opinions worked together. Within that one-two-three, they were all one-two-three. That was fun.

I do have one observation regarding the Half-Arabian western futurity horses. To me, they seemed to be a little lacking in Arabian type. Our horse won, but she is extreme Arabian type. We have a multitude of colors in that class, everything from buckskins to paints to Appaloosa-spots, to bays, greys, and chestnuts—but they appear to be leaning more toward a strong western type, a stock type. Maybe they need a touch more Arabian type for me personally. But they are incredible animals, very athletic, and they looked like finished horses instead of babies. I'm not sure if that's good or bad, but I can say that they didn't look stressed at all. They looked like they knew their job and they did it well.

In the hunter division, I was pleased to see that the look is trending more toward an Arabian style of hunter. The most important points of the class are movement and carriage, and in the past, I've thought that we were asking our horses to mimic other breeds. This year, they didn't look like their heads were too low or their necks too straight, which is more on-target, because an Arabian has curves and lines and a natural-type motion. I thought that they were rewarded very well for that.

In the show hack division, some of my thoughts have not changed. With so many different styles of horse, I think we are still finding our identity. Are show hacks low-moving hunter horses, are they country horses, or are they English horses? A lot of judging emphasis goes to the transition of gaits; how do they move from a collected canter to an extended canter, or a collected trot to an extended trot? If we take the horses from the shoulders down, I think that they are doing all of those gaits correctly, and they are being rewarded for that. But that doesn't answer the question of the headsets, and there we see it everything. Should they have a real high English headset, or a high country headset, or the lower frame of a forward-type dressage set? In my opinion, the division needs to come up with a judging criteria. All of the horses are beautiful, but there are not five of them alike. That is pretty apparent, because we can see five different types in the top ten! Then it comes to the judges' personal preferences. While that is not a bad thing, I think the division needs to set the criteria for the people and the public to better understand what they are seeing.

One way to figure out a definitive show hack type is to look at the horse doing its gaits and see a whole frame, not just how well the legs are moving. A collected trot is not about how slow one can go; it is an entire movement of the frame. I think we need to critique that frame against a standard—not just the legs, but the whole body. If the collection and speed of the legs change, the upper frame, the head and neck and back, should change as well. What we should be looking for is the whole picture.

Finally, and I saved this until last, I have thoughts on the English division. Among the young performance horses in this division, so many times we see one or two English horses and the rest country horses. Or we see babies that are being pushed a little bit. This

year, I thought that the young classes were 10-deep in *English* horses—that's half or more—and the horses did not look stressed. Sure, they were making baby mistakes, bucking and jumping off their feet or running through the bridle (and the trainers were laughing), but at that age, they're not expected to be finished, polished performers. The classes were fun to watch once again. It is an English futurity, so the English horses were rewarded, and yes, there were some great ones who did not get rewarded because of their baby mistakes. But they have been started with care, and trained that way, they will be here in coming years to win their prizes. It was also nice, especially in the purebreds, to see some fresh and exciting faces by younger stallions.

I found both the purebreds and the Half-Arabian English horses to be unbelievable athletes, and the showmanship of the amateurs and trainers was incredible. It was exciting to watch and fun to be around. But I have one recommendation. I don't think we can continue to run the number of horses we did in the English classes which were combined semifinals/finals. In some, we had 16 to 20 or more horses moving at the speed that English contenders do, and in my opinion, that is too many, going too fast. It looks rushed and hurried, with everybody fighting for a spot, and it is not fair to the amateurs or the trainers at a national horse show.

The reason for the high numbers in the final classes was often that show management, which had scheduled semifinals, found that the number of entries was not sufficient for a large preliminary, so everyone was held over for the final. By the last two days, some of the larger English barns had eight to 10 horses that hadn't even shown yet. On paper, that might look like a good idea, but in practice in the English division, it was a serious issue (I am thinking primarily about the purebreds here; most of the Half-Arabians, due to their physical size, had to cut). I'm not slamming anyone or anything. I just think the English finals needed fewer horses and more room.

The way to avoid this in the future is, before boosting the number in a final, to first consider the movement of the horses. We can run 20 or more in the hunter and western divisions, because those horses work at a more controlled speed, and not at the bold and rapid pace of an English horse. If you have a nine-horse driving class, run it. But, for instance, there was a 19-horse Half-Arabian Country 55 and Over class that went on for an hour and 20 minutes, and the exhibitors did not look happy.

To management's credit, let me repeat that they originally had planned enough time in the schedule to accommodate the semifinals, and I commend them for it. A lot of time and care goes into planning the U.S. Nationals schedule, and I understand that you can't please everyone. Planners have to take into account all the different divisions and age groups, with time for the classes, time for everyone to get their work done as well as rest up, and certainly, time for the judges to get breaks. They had achieved that, and it was when the numbers fell in that grey area that those first decisions were second-guessed. It must have looked reasonable to cancel some of the preliminaries and lighten the schedule. My recommendation is to keep the cuts, even if only one horse is eliminated, rather than see 23 horses in a final, which does not give everyone a fair chance.

To me, the best number of horses in a final class is 10. I believe that the judges can get 10 "right ones" from the preliminaries—they know which 10 should be in the final—and then give those horses a chance to ride off for champion and reserve. I also think that an amateur English class should have no more than 16 or 17 in it. That's how it was designed, and it is a commitment to the exhibitors that should be honored.

## And Finally

In closing, I have one last comment that applies mainly to performance horses, and it is not new. I have said it before, and I still believe it. Horses should not be first, second and nothing on the judges' cards. As a judge myself, I understand that one judge may see a mistake that the others do not, and if that is the case, then he or she should mark the horse down—but it is very rare that a horse makes a mistake big enough to drop it 10 places or wipe it off the cards altogether without everyone being aware of it. In a variation on this theme, a horse should not be placed, for example, first-second-third in the preliminary, and then first-nothing-second in the final without some very obvious explanation, such as a disastrous mistake.

There is nothing in writing about how judges score mistakes. We all have a level of penalization for horses we see; maybe it's three or four spaces, and maybe if it is a huge mistake, we knock it down or out. But we have in our mind a penalty range for each level of mistake. At a show as big and important as U.S. Nationals, the goal everyone works for all year, I think it is important that judges score what is in front of them. Everyone respects the officials in center ring—we wouldn't be there if we didn't—and we want to respect the results too. To me personally, it is unacceptable for a horse to be one-two-three and two days later be one-nothing-three. If there is a mistake, that is another story, but I'm willing to bet that in that case, no one has any questions. The trainers know it and the owners know it, and it's up to them to accept it and get over it.

All in all, the 2007 U.S. Nationals at Albuquerque was a good and positive experience. I'll miss Albuquerque, as I miss Louisville—but next year, on to Tulsa!

For anyone who would like to email questions, topics, or comments, I can be reached at [info@battagliafarms.com](mailto:info@battagliafarms.com). I'd love to hear from you.

*Russell Vento Jr. has been involved in the Arabian industry for more than 25 years, and since 1989 has been a partner in Battaglia Farms. He was honored twice with APAHA Amateur Horseman Awards. To date, he has owned or shown 30 U.S., Canadian and National Show Horse national champions, and he now enjoys watching his daughter Skyler win on many of the horses with whom he was successful. He has been a Large R USAE/AHA judge since 1996.*