

An Amateur Point Of View

Accentuate The Positive—Eliminate The Negative

by Russ Vento

Every year, we all discuss what's happening in the Arabian horse industry, and usually we have a whole array of things we want to change or things that need to be improved. When we look around at how other breeds are getting along, we can always find a few who are doing something better than we are. Usually, though, it's on an issue by issue basis—no one gets everything right. The only thing we can be sure of is that as humans, we can always find something to complain about!

This is not to say that in Arabian horses, we are either behind the eight-ball or close to perfection. But I got to thinking about what's been accomplished over the past few years in our breed, and I realized how much we've done. There will always be more things that we want to improve about our industry, but it doesn't hurt to stop for a minute and appreciate everything we've attained so far.

Improvements In The Show Ring

Shoeing. Probably our biggest achievement has been the shoeing rule change. We have a measurement gauge now, and horses can be shod in ways that help them. In the beginning, everybody was saying (or at least thinking), "Oh my God, they're going to be over-shod, and they're all going to be lame, and people aren't going to know what to do!" Since Arabians and Half-Arabians have always had problems with cast shoes, that was a real fear. But what we've seen has been the exact opposite. We've seen horses that are better-balanced, that aren't throwing shoes nearly as often. People were worried about putting so much weight on the horses, and the bands—but the bands are actually helping the horses. Unless we're overriding, the shoes are staying on. And when we have had a thrown shoe, we've measure quickly with the gauge and tacked the shoe back on. The time a cast shoe costs us has been a whole life change! You can check the shoe in less than 60 seconds, and put it back on. It is like night and day.

All of that was a change a lot of us weren't sure about, but in the end, it not only didn't hurt our horses, it helped them by supporting balance and soundness and movement. Our horses are happier.

Halter Judging. Over the last year, there has been so much discussion about a new scorecard, which goes into place in April. So for the first time at U.S. Nationals we'll have a five-person judging panel that will judge all the halter classes, which will all be held in one ring. The basics of evaluation (legs and feet; head; neck and shoulder; back, loin and hip; movement; type) will be broken down into scores, which will then be announced.

This halter system is going to be exciting. It gives people reasons for the judging—why their horses placed the way they did. But one thing we have to remember is that we are paying for an *opinion*. We will have a judging panel, and there will be a lot of variations and a lot of similarities, but it is an individual judging of that horse against a standard, not the against the other horses in the ring, where personal preference can play too large a role.

Age Splits. Another big improvement in the Arabian show ring has been the age splits. Now we have the amateur competition at U.S. Nationals broken down into competition for ages 18 to 35, 36 to 54, and 55 and Over. The 55 and Over riders are thrilled to death because they don't have to compete against the 40-year-olds. Add to that, the horses don't have to go as many times as

previously, which makes it a lot easier on them. As a result of all of this, sales are up for those horses, because people feel like they can go to the Nationals and they can compete. That's a huge benefit.

The U.S. Nationals In Tulsa. I've been there, and there is a lot to say for it. We will have a more condensed, more attractive show ring for our final, and huge rings where we can run 24 horses in a cut and everybody can be seen. We will have more rings for reining and cutting and other disciplines. The larger facility, more spread-out facility, is going to benefit everybody because they can easily go watch the discipline of their choice.

I've already heard people worrying about the weather. My thought there is that the weather anywhere is unpredictable in October. We can do an Indian dance and pray for sunshine, or we can accept and enjoy the people around us and the horses around us, and get together and take everything with a positive outlook.

ATR Classes In Canada. Also improving amateur competition, we now have the AOTR and ATR classes in Canada instead of the age splits. That has given people two options. It has been particularly effective because for the past several years, we have had separate sets of judges, which means that these classes really are entirely new competitions, even when the same horses are involved. We have had different national champions in these classes. To me, this is proof that although we all complain at the judging, at least in these classes, the judges have been making decisions based on the merits of the class in front of them, and not on performances earlier in the week.

Qualifying System For U.S. Nationals. A few years ago, we also added a new qualifying procedure for Nationals. Again, many of us questioned whether it would work well, but it did. It was nice to go to horse shows and see greater numbers in the classes.

Now, before I move on, let me point out that we have Peter and Lori Conway to thank for much of the work that made both the shoeing change and the new halter rules successful. They pretty much spearheaded both efforts, and it paid off for all of us. Lori's 30-plus years of involvement in the Arabian horse industry, and her years of experience as a trainer and breeder, provided the right support for Peter's business-type approach to our problems. He thinks logically: 'This isn't working, how do we make it work? Everybody's complaining, let's find an answer.' He took the time to come up with programs that benefitted everybody.

Excitement And Prize Money

Futurities. For years, we lamented the relative lack of solid financial prize systems in our industry, just as we recognized a need to restore excitement to our show ring. A few years ago, the reining community led the way with their futurity at Scottsdale—talk about excitement! And talk about prize money! Wow. The effect was electric. It was followed by the Half-Arabian Western Pleasure Futurity, and now there is the \$100,000 English Performance Futurity. The stands are full—full with breeders, spectators, and buyers, whether the competition is for open or amateur horses.

The great thing about these new futurities is not only the money and the excitement, but that they are based on the breeders. Anyone can be involved, which is how it should be. All you have to do is have a stallion; it's affordable for everyone. You don't have to be a big breeder. And the competitions were well thought out when it came to the horses too; under-saddle competition doesn't begin until the age of four. Next year the English Performance Futurity is adding an in-hand class for yearlings at the Buckeye, but that has been planned to fit within its framework of

having the horses ready to compete again at four—that early class will be judged on suitability for an English career, and will not ask too much of the youngsters.

Another positive point about the futurities is that they are being held at Scottsdale, which is not only a big show for Arabians, but also a huge show for spectators. Many people who don't show at Scottsdale do go to watch, so that in addition to the public that attends that show, the horses get great exposure within the industry. Also, the judging systems have been designed so that competitions are easily understood by audiences not already familiar with the disciplines. Horses are scored on an individual pattern, and then they go into a group competition. The scores are combined to decide a winner.

Now we are seeing that the English Performance Futurity is taking the idea a step further. At the Ohio Buckeye show this year, there is a yearling performance halter class, with a prize of \$50,000. It's all English-oriented. The youngsters will be allowed shoes, but only a plate—no pads, no weights—because we are protecting their feet with a shoe, rather than shoeing them up to enhance their motion. They will be judged on their potential, and what their future will be as performance horses. An entry may not be the highest trotting horse, but how is its cadence developing? How does it carry itself? Does it carry its neck up? Is there balanced motion behind? The class is mostly related to movement, with very little stand-up.

The performance halter class is beneficial on a number of fronts. For one thing, it opens up venues to show our young performance horses without jeopardizing them, and the possibility of early financial return will enhance the selling of stallion breedings and youngsters.

Another advantage is what it offers amateurs. I think that every two to three years, an amateur needs a new horse. Now, while they are showing their amateur horses, amateurs can buy that young one and let it grow up, go through the ranks with their trainer, and then be ready to show with them. It is another option.

What the futurity-sponsoring organizations have done is give us different options for the future. That affects not only the show ring people, but breeders and sales too (“my horse is nominated for the English or Western Futurity, and that will make a difference in whether someone wants to buy it”). It's not like a Sweepstakes, where we can't always cover our show fees. Our western horse was fifth in the Western Pleasure Futurity, and she won \$5,000! That was pretty darn good. I'd love for her to have won the big prize, but \$5,000 ain't chunk change.

In addition to these futurity improvements, we've seen more attention paid to stallion row jackpots, some of which have been in place for years (like the Minnesota Medallion and Iowa Gold Star programs), and some that are more recent (such as the Scottsdale Signature Futurity). When they auction off stallion seasons, they give the buyer the right to the foals from those breedings in competitions where the payouts are \$20,000-plus to the winner. Even the top 10 or top eight get a few thousand dollars, so it's very beneficial for the people to get involved. In the new ones especially, we are seeing those programs take a step further, expanding the futurity competition from the traditional halter ring into the performance and amateur arenas. We always hear that ‘breeders want to show, but they want to show against other breeders, not trainers,’ and many of these programs developed classes for that. They have been a very positive support for the Arabian horse and its owners. And again, the best part has been that the programs don't single out a specific individual or big farm—everyone can be involved.

A side benefit to these new programs is that anyone with two good yearling fillies or colts or geldings now has more venues for showing. One horse can go in a show's competition, while the other can be exhibited in a futurity program class. Sometimes that breaks down to an owner

showing a yearling against other amateur handlers, while the trainer takes the colt or filly or gelding in an open competition.

New Shows

For years we have discussed improving promotion for our shows, and at the same time, making the shows more relaxed and fun for participants. Last year that happened at the new World Cup Show in Las Vegas. It was designed to promote the purebred Arabian, and structured primarily around breeders. It is sanctioned by the USEF, but not by the AHA. Now in its second year, it has a whole new outlook, and it is refreshing. Some of the judges are from other countries, so we get to see how their opinions fit with American views.

At the Las Vegas World Cup, it was exciting to see the crowds, and there was a lot of movement and motion—that creates excitement. Again, we are taking the competition more away from the stand-up, and we're able to judge the horses on their own merit, their own conformation and type. We have incredible handlers out there, but it's not about the presentation; it's really about the horse as an individual, and how it is conformed.

We need to remember that there are performance classes at Las Vegas too. Halter takes place during the day, while the performance runs on Friday and Saturday evening from 6:30 until about 9:00 p.m. There are about seven classes an evening, all purebred—English pleasure, park, western pleasure, hunter, show hack, native costume, all the gamut that represents the purebred Arabian horse. The first year, there may have been only six horses in the English pleasure open, but four of them were national champions. In the country English pleasure, of about nine entries, two or three were national champions. So the performance section is being represented by great quality horses; it's just going to take time to get the numbers there.

The show also provides the relaxed social atmosphere that many of us have asked for. With only eight classes a day, starting late and ending early, it leaves lots of time for people to talk to each other about their horses and their breeding programs. And it is all in the hotel! You leave your room, go down to the basement, and your horse is there. People can actually sit at tables by the show arena to watch the classes. If you don't want to watch a competition, you can go up to your room easily, or get a great meal (not your normal horse show food), or, if you enjoy gambling, catch a quick game of blackjack. Those who want to watch the performance classes can get ready for their evening on the town in Las Vegas, watch the performance, and then go out to dinner.

Further enhancing the social aspect, the whole event starts with a gala, in which everyone dresses up in fancy clothes, basically to meet and greet, kind of like we used to do in the old days. There will always be the "halter vs. performance" rivalry, but in this atmosphere, it wasn't halter vs. performance—it was Arabian enthusiasts enjoying the Arabian horse.

Like the new futurities, the Las Vegas show reflects another case of a group of Arabian horse lovers getting together to create a new way to promote Arabian horses. I think it's important that we support these new things. Sure it's a little far, but it was a horse show filled with excitement. Yes, our Half-Arabians weren't there, but maybe in the future there can be a horse show like this for them too. People had time to talk and do business and just have a good time. It was fun and different, and I suspect that the second year will outshine the first.

The Sales Arena

At one time or another, we all need to buy and sell a horse, and the Addis Auctions, now in their 11th year, have added a new dimension to our sales opportunities. They cover the spectrum

from the first-time horse to the finished show contender to the young prospect. Also, at the Great Lakes Sale, Addis has added an innovation never seen before—or, at least, I haven't seen it—on the Arabian auction scene. When you buy a 2-year-old horse there, you are able to bring that horse back as a 3-year-old to compete in a futurity class in English, western and hunter. So the company has developed not only a sale venue for us, but also a related horse show with a prize-money class, where in some cases it is possible for the buyer win more money than he or she paid for the horse!

Bill and Terry Addis have several auctions a year, spread throughout the country; they are trying to benefit regions and breeders across the country. In the long term aspect, those sales haven't affected private sales at all—those are still going well. Addis has simply provided another venue in which to move horses.

The Cedar Ridge Sale also has seen consecutive years of success. This year, a record was set when Baske Afire became the highest-selling stallion at public auction. The sale is new and it's fresh; there are finished show horses and young show horses, as it is designed primarily for the national-level competitor.

So the auction is coming back strong, and it's exciting. It is so easy for us to complain and say, "So-and-so didn't do this or that, and I can't give my horse away, so I can't breed because I can't sell what I've got." Now we have new options and a different outlook: There are places to sell those outgrown show horses, as well as prospects and breeding stock.

My Conclusions

As I said, once I started thinking about it, I could find lots of examples of change and improvement in the Arabian horse industry over the past few years.

Now let's start talking about the positive aspects instead of the negative things. I'm not sure whether we as an industry have any cheerleaders any more. Sure, we have team spirit for our own barn, but too often, we don't support the other guys, and too often the big, busy barns don't take the time to support the 'little guys.' I have a simple, but I think important, suggestion. to me, it's important to remember that those 'little guys' will someday be a part of our barn, or at least will support our barn. And the best advertising for the Arabian horse is still word-of-mouth. If, for example, the BNTs (Big-time National Trainers, as the trash pages call them) would just take five minutes and talk to the not-so-high-profile exhibitors—just say hi to somebody when they're walking past, or offer a simple comment like "I saw your horse and it's beautiful"—it might reap tremendous rewards for everyone over time. We *all* need cheerleaders, in every aspect of our business.

So, in closing, let me just say again that I have to commend everyone, from Lori and Peter Conway to all the rest of us in the rank and file. We're thinking and we're trying. We used to just complain and then not do much about our problems, but in the past few years people have stood up and changes are being made. In the future, when I see aspects of our industry which need to be improved, I'm not going to waste time being angry or discouraged. I'm just going to remember what we have proven that we can do, and take aim on the future.