

An Amateur Point of View

A View From The Rail—The U.S. Nationals, Part One

by Russ Vento

In the time since the U.S. Nationals, there has been much written about the show. As it was our first year in a new location and new facility, there is a lot to talk about. I want to open by repeating something I've said before, which is that not everything I include here is my own opinion. I made it my business to get around as much as I could and talk to people, asking questions and trying to find out what everyone was thinking about the show, and I was frequently approached to include particular points in this column ("Will you please say this? Will you bring that up?"). I really appreciate that people are reading, and I feel an obligation to try to represent different points of view that I hear. Thanks very much to all of you who have become a part of this piece by sharing your thoughts.

The only way to begin, in my opinion, is to stress that the 2008 U.S. Nationals was in a first-year situation; of course there were going to be bumps in the road. But Tulsa has all the potential in the world, and the people at Expo Square, as well as some of the show commission, tried very hard to be responsive to horsemen's problems and suggestions.

So here goes. I had so much to say that you'll see only half of it here. Look for the rest in the next Arabian Horse Times Newsletter online.

The Best And The Worst

The best part of the show, I thought, was that in the Half-Arabian English Pleasure open class, the judges called for a three-horse workout. For the first time in 10 days, everyone came together. We were on their feet, cheering, and win, lose or draw for our favorites, we as a group had a positive, strong outlook. The house was rocking, and the atmosphere in the arena gave you goose bumps. To come across with that kind of emotion and feeling on the final night ended the show on a great note.

The worst thing that happened was that there was no parade of champions for the halter horses. I don't know whether the halter people boycotted it, or if everyone was just tired and wanted to go home, or what, but I don't think that it was right that the performance people couldn't see the halter champions. There were no halter horses in Friday or Saturday night, whether as a presentation or a parade of champions, and that was just plain wrong.

Tulsa: The City And Expo Square

When I say Tulsa has all the potential in the world, I mean it. Many of us had a lot of worries before we got there, such as the electric boxes, the size of the stalls, the distance from the stalls to the various rings, how far away the hotels were, and so on. But it was not bad at all. The hotels were three to eight miles away, which turned out to be workable. No horses got electrocuted, we got from place to place, and I heard of only one horse that needed a double stall. Everything was under cover, which was great. When it got cold and rained, very few people had to get wet. Yes, it did rain, but what's new about that? Wherever we go, we get fall weather.

Did the town support us? Yes, they supported us; there were ads in the newspapers and on television. At restaurants, they greeted us and were glad we were there. Oklahomans are extremely nice. Did they come and watch the horse show? No. When you have large facilities like Expo Square, there are so many things to choose from through the year that I'm not sure the public spent much time at our horse show. The stands were never full. The vendors I talked to

had very slow traffic, other than the standard ones that everyone seeks out, such as Show Season, the Times, etc.

The Overall Show

The Pavilion is small for performance horses. It's smaller than Canada (it may be the same dimensions, but the rounded corners take away some of that size). Sixteen horses were too many in there for any performance division that required class work. It was said that there were horsemen on the board, and that they viewed it and said it would be fine, but to be fair, there's no way you can tell until you put 16 horses in there and see them work. On the other hand, you could put 30 in the Ford Truck Arena and there would still be plenty of room.

I talked to a steward, Barbara Arkin, whom I've known since I was a kid, and she made what I thought was a great point. She used the word 'intimate' to describe the Pavilion, and said that the emotion there is just what we want. So if we could get down to a national top ten, with all 10 going for champion and reserve, it would have been everything we have been looking for.

So, in my opinion, we should go back to running a semifinal. We used to do it that way, and then we changed, so why not change back? Everything, then and now, is part of an effort to do what is best for the exhibitors. Relative to the size of the ring, we could have a very exciting class, in which everyone had room to show his or her horse.

Again on the subject of what is happening in the arena, I have to commend the show for one procedure that was a big timesaver. It was similar to what was used in Louisville: When they were going to announce the cards, the horses remained in the ring, lined up down near the ingate. The top ten were called straight from the arena. I don't think anyone saw upset feelings or emotions, so I can't think of a downside to it. Plus, it was great to see everybody in there, because it upped the anticipation.

Another improvement was the way the photography was handled. We all know that it's a big thing when a horse wins at the Nationals, and everyone connected to that horse would like to be in the win picture. But waiting for everyone to get out of the stands and down to the ring does cost time in an already jam-packed schedule. This year, many people stood behind the rail to be in the picture, which didn't slow things down. Only the trainer or owner or wife or husband was in the ring, in the photo. It worked well. I'd like to add, though, that I like this system only for adults. The kids are a different thing. At Youth Nationals, it's good to have all the kids' friends and family in the photograph.

Moving on to another topic, the Patrons' Lounge in the Ford Arena was huge. There were two other patron areas, but I didn't go to them. The one in the Ford Arena was a great place to go, but unfortunately, people just didn't. Admittedly, I never saw it except at mealtime, but I never saw it full, which is a shame. In the past, our Patrons' Lounges have always been full, but in the past, they have been small. This one was spacious, and had round tables that had a good view of the ring. I hope that in the future, people realize that this is a new and improved Patrons' Lounge, and make more use of it.

Another great feature of the show this year was the work situation. There was plenty of room to work horses, and unless you just wanted to work in the middle of night, you didn't have to.

It is true that it was a little bit of a trek to the Quick Trip building—but that building was amazing. It had lots of arenas in it and it was climate-controlled. The only complaint from the people there was the length of the trip to the Pavilion. But as far as I could tell, except for the walk, people were happy to be there. It was very well lit and it had a good emotion to it. If the show commission wanted to do some part of the horse show there, they certainly could.

Before I Leave It Till Next Time ...

I'd like to recognize Cindy Clinton, Glenn Petty and Myron Krause. They listened to everyone's complaints and did the best job they could, even though in some instances, their hands were tied. My hat goes off to them that they listened and they tried. Sometimes, that's all you can do.

I have confidence that Tulsa will be better in 2009. A first year always has bumps, and if the show commission listens to us and makes some changes, the whole event will be stronger than ever. At the same time, I think we as exhibitors need to remember that when we want change, we have to accept the growing pains that go with it. Another thing to remember is that a lot of people had roses on their wall. A lot of people left Tulsa with a great experience. I'm not sure that was true before that last class, with its exciting spirit, but we did have those final moments when we were all on our feet, hugging each other. That feeling is what was most important about the show.

See you in the Newsletter, when I comment on the show's various divisions, my opinion of the judging, the market for Arabians—and whatever else comes to mind.

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

Russell Vento Jr. has been involved in the Arabian industry for 30 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.