

An Amateur Point Of View

The View From The Rail—The U.S. Nationals, Part Two

by Russ Vento

Following on from part one of this column, which appears in the December issue of Arabian Horse Times, I have more to say about the 2008 U.S. Nationals. Of course I was watching the horse show, and I was so impressed with the quality of horses who were in Tulsa in October.

So let's break them down. Here are my thoughts on all the divisions I was able to get around and see at the U.S. Nationals.

The Divisions

First off, let me say that the winner of all the divisions, the no-complaints, happy-to-be-there, happy-to-support, the best experience, goes to the reining and the working western division. Those people were absolutely thrilled to death; they had their own arena and their own five judges. I didn't hear one complaint from them. It was everything they'd worked hard for, and they *have* worked hard. It all came together for them.

Halter. In the weeks since the U.S. Nationals, everything in the world seems to have been said about the halter classes and the new scoring method, so I won't express every thought I had. My opinion on the scoring procedure hasn't changed since the Canadian Nationals; it's a great system, but we need to do something about the boredom factor.

One concern I had about the scoring, and this was brought up to me several times, was that some of the Half-Arabian scores were higher than the purebreds. I know the judges are evaluating to a standard, but a Half-Arabian is a Half-Arabian. It's representing *Arabian* type, and how much of the Arabian is in the Half-Arabian. In my opinion, we need to have a Half-Arabian standard or else score them by comparison, because when they outscore the purebreds, it looks bad.

I did notice that in the amateur halter divisions, sometimes I felt that the horses who didn't give a hard standup were not scored as well as those who did. I don't want to take anything away from anyone; by the time you get to Nationals, all the horses are very good. But that standup seemed to affect the scores. Maybe it's just that we have to get more used to judging against the standard, but to me, using the standard is exactly what is supposed to prevent things like that. By judging to the standard and reducing the influence of showing style, it should be easier to identify the best horse. An example would be a situation in which a high quality older mare, who might have had a few foals, is matched up against a fitter and younger mare of perhaps a little lesser quality, but who shows a little harder. In the new system, the judges have the tools to make the right decision. Once again, though, I go back to the fact that this was the first year. We're still getting used to new things.

My primary complaint about the halter aspect of the show this year was the fact that we saw nothing of the horses after their last class on Thursday night. I'm sure that at the end of the year, after you've gone for a national title, you're glad for it to be over. But if it had had that Scottsdale feeling that we have at the beginning of the year, it would have been amazing. There, once the halter is over, everyone runs to the barns. We have stallions and babies all up and down that main row. I would have thought that halter people could use those last two days to do a lot of business. They could invite prospective customers to the show, parade the horses, hold parties—it would have been an incredible opportunity to showcase the Arabian horse without being under the pressure of getting a horse to the ring in an hour.

Western pleasure. The western pleasure horses are *so* beautiful. They know their jobs, the amateur horses look like amateur horses, the junior horses look like junior horses. It may have been that we had enough time to get all our work done, because the sessions gave us enough time in between to work, and I didn't see anyone getting lunged into the ground—which is amazing for me to say because I'm kind of an anti-lunger. But I thought the presentation of the western horses was great.

I've been complimenting this division for some time that they are soft and ground-covering, and their presentation is very good. At this show, I felt that the judges were looking for a presentation that, when they combined their opinions, was kind of mixture of the old and new style of western. The trainers might have reworked the horses a bit to meet those specifications, and in that respect, maybe the horses looked a tad backed-off in the finals. We had a lot of new champions, and I think that was part of it.

Hunter. The hunter people are doing their job. The presentation was excellent. I think the hunters were absolutely beautiful in the Ford Truck Arena, where they had more room to move. There were some of the most beautiful Half-Arabians hunters I've ever seen; they looked like Thoroughbreds, but with Arabian type, and they were breathtaking.

The hunters have really developed into their own style, and they're developing into a specific type. These days, I think the purebred hunter is a little fancier. They're a little higher-headed, they're more curved and arched, and that's the Arabian horse. In the Pavilion, though, for a hunter even at the trot to cover ground, they were running up on other horses, as there just wasn't enough space. Anyway, they're beautiful classes to watch. The riders are very confident, and their positions are good and strong. We had a lot of new champions, and a lot of new champion trainers, as well as several well-known faces.

Country English pleasure. I've complained at the last two horse shows that the country horses looked stressed, and they don't look like true country horses. At the U.S. Nationals this year, they looked soft and pretty, and I thought they were truly rewarded for their softness and brilliance.

In general, I think that as exhibitors in country pleasure, we're out of control on the motion; in a number of classes, I saw more motion than in the English division. As trainers and owners, that's something we have to fix—but at this show, the judges truly did their jobs. They wanted a true country horse, and that's what they chose. They picked horses that were happy, gave ears, and didn't have extreme motion, so the presentation was that of a country horse. I loved that the judges asked for a reverse on a loose rein. It was a good test for the horses, that we could actually see them walk and reverse without contact, and it let the judges see the natural walk of the horse. It was also good for the horses to have that 90 seconds where they could let down and catch their breath before they went the other way of the ring.

English pleasure. The English division was insane. You put 16 amateurs going for it in that small arena, and it just does not work. If you weren't very good at spacing and being aware of where you are, you got into wrecks. In a lot of cases, national champions and great horses got the gate because of collisions. (Actually, the park horses dealt better with the situation than the English horses, maybe because they're used to going at it hard.) I am not saying that the judges didn't get the best two horses; I'm just saying that I saw a lot of good horses get the gate. Maybe they couldn't get seen. It was very easy to get covered up on the rail and not be able to get out of the crowd and show your horse.

At the same time, I also think a lot of the amateurs handled the pressure very well. Actually, the situation might have helped some amateurs, because they had to think of a plan for how they

were going to present their horse. They couldn't go into a class not knowing what was going to happen, and they were very focused. There were a lot of horses who didn't go down the middle because there was no middle to go down without running over the judges (never a good plan). Your goal was to find a spot on the rail and still be able to present your horse. I thought they did a great job.

Native costume. The native costume horses were well-behaved. They went for it, but it was controlled. I didn't think it looked very good that only one judge actually stood in the center of the ring—but in the judges' defense, we have had them run over in the past, so I have to admit that the ones who judged from the side probably made the right decision. The exhibitors, however, kept everything under control, and it was a beautiful class to watch.

The maturity classes. This isn't a division; it's a great addition to three divisions—country pleasure, hunter pleasure and western pleasure—and I want to recognize it. This was the first year for the maturity classes (4 and 5 year olds), and those classes were amazing. All the horses were competing within their ages groups, and it was all amateurs, no trainers to contend with. The horses weren't over-shown or under-presented. My hat is off to AHA for doing that program. Now I think we need to ask for an English pleasure maturity. I've heard that they don't think it will fill, but so what if we have 10 horses instead of 30?

Sales

With today's economy, it was fair to expect a poor market at Nationals. But I don't think that was the case. Were sales great? No. Did sales exist? Yes. If you went there in a position to buy a horse, you could buy a horse. If you were concerned about the economic situation in the country, you didn't buy, but it had nothing to do with the quality of horses—that was spectacular. Across the board in all the divisions, the quality of our horses today is better than ever.

Judging

Here especially, these are not always my opinions. I sought out people that I respected in several divisions to see how *they* felt about their classes. Everybody thought we had a lot of great judges. What I heard, though, was that collectively, the panels didn't always work.

There are many factors that might have contributed to this. For one thing, it may have been that everyone just got tired—it's a huge thing to be on your feet 12 to 14 hours a day. Or maybe the fact that the Pavilion was challenging to show in made it tricky to judge in as well. Whatever the cause, I felt that in some instances, the officials judged on a negative scale. Because the Pavilion is so small, some judges might have had to look at their champions in the preliminaries a little more and forgive some of their performances in the Pavilion finals. But under the circumstances, I thought the judges did a very good job, and I commend them for it.

I do have one thought on our rules regarding judging the U.S. Nationals or any show. We need to revisit our 30-90 day conflict rule. Horses get moved to other farms, but are still presented by the same people. Whether it's right or wrong, or whether those horses deserve to win, doesn't matter. That's not the issue. I'm also not saying it's illegal, because it definitely is not. I'm just saying that it doesn't look good, and perception at any horse show is important. The paper situation regarding ownership of horses in order to compete in AOTR classes is out of control. A horse might have one owner at Youth, one at U.S., and one at Canada. That's four months, three horse shows, and three owners. If we're going to accept something that blatant, then why not have an ATR class, and give it a separate set of judges? Then there could be no misperceptions.

We may all need to think about this and make comments on our feelings about this situation.

As I said, I think Tulsa has a world of potential. There were some valid complaints about 2008, but overall, it was a very good experience. I'm looking forward to 2009, because with a little attention, we can realize our potential.

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.