

An Amateur Point of View
The View From The Rail: Canadian Nationals '08
by Russ Vento

Through the summer this year, we were hearing that nobody was going to Canada and that it was going to be a waste of time (I'm sure that had a lot to do with the economy and gas prices). So it's especially fun to be able to report that Canada was great!

No one was going? My guess is that for almost everyone who dropped out, someone else that hadn't come in the past few years—including me—decided that this was the year to go. The total number of horses there was down, yes, but not enough to hurt the show. The English division had a dozen horses in all of its classes, and there were 11 or 12 in amateur park, with six in open park (a dozen entered, and six showed up for the final). In Half-Arabian country English pleasure, they still had cuts for AOTR and ATR. There were cuts in western, amateur western and amateur hunter as well. That's especially impressive when you remember that Youth Nationals ended only a week earlier, and many exhibitors came to Canada almost directly from Albuquerque.

One reason that the Canadian Nationals remain so popular is that it is a very well-run horse show. It has had the same show commission, the same volunteers, the same personnel forever, so you know what to expect. They break their backs to make everybody happy; they have the best class caller ever, so that you know where you are and when you are, and you don't miss classes. If I had room, I'd include a long list of those who have made this show what it is, as everyone there knows his or her job and does it well.

Another great point about Canada is its scheduling. Classes start at 8 or 8:30 a.m. and run until about 11:30, then start back at 1 p.m. and go until 4 or 4:30. They begin again at 7 p.m., and are over by 9 or 9:30. Sometimes reining or trail may last a little longer, but for the most part, everyone has time for dinner and socializing. And an added bonus is that on Friday and Saturday nights, the stands are full. The Regina crowd loves horses, and can be seen going through the barns during the week, just looking at the Arabians.

Obviously, there are many good things to say about Canada, and one of my favorites this year was how well the Canadian horsemen did. They won a lot of classes, in both halter and performance. The stands would just rock when a winner's name was announced as from British Columbia, or Saskatchewan, Alberta or Ontario—anywhere in Canada. Many times in the past, horses from the United States have gone north and more or less taken over the show, but this year it was a real national competition, and both countries came away with a lot of ribbons.

A great thing to discover is that Regina rates right up there with our most sophisticated cities. You want a good dinner? There are four or five great restaurants on one street. And Canada is open till 1:00, so you can finish the horse show and have a great meal. There are parks, lakes, even a mall. There are rock and roll bars, piano bars, brunches—something for everyone. You just have to go out and look for it.

Of course, no matter how great it all was, I found a few things I'd suggest for improvement. Let me also say that what I write here is not necessarily always my own opinion. I'm also reporting on what I hear as I literally stand on the rail. We all talk, and I try to keep in mind what people are saying.

So let me start where we all start, at the show office. Show secretaries everywhere get mad at me because I comment on the paperwork processes at horse shows, and at Canadian Nationals, I was at it again. I really do appreciate the fact that show secretaries and their volunteers work tirelessly (that's a given), but I have a suggestion. We were required to hand over a blank check to be used in case we neglected to scratch or report a rider/driver/handler change. The penalty for doing that is \$100. How about requiring a check only from those who actually have failed in the past? Say, if you didn't scratch a horse or inform the show office of an exhibitor change last year, you have to turn over a check this year. Also, in the classes which often need intent-to-show forms (like driving and park), have everyone fill them out. I understand the reasoning behind the blank check idea, but I wish the judgment could be on the offenders, not everyone.

That said, I want to thank everyone in the show office for doing a great job. That was my only thought for "upgrade" there.

So let's move on to the halter classes. In this case, I have to put my comments into the context of the Arabian horse industry as a whole, and not just as seen in Canada. We've gone through two national shows now, Youth and Canada, using a "scoring system" vs. a "comparison-type" judging. I understand that it was adopted because we all wanted reasons for why horses finished where they did in a class. But ... it's boring. It's exciting when the horses come in, but after that, only exciting when your favorite horse comes up for judging. There isn't a last standup, or announcing the scores in the ring, and since no one knows how the horses scored, there is no exciting build-up (as there is at the Olympics, when scores are announced and the crowd keeps track, trying to figure out who is going to win). When the class ends, the announcement tells us who won and with what score ("The champion is number 207, with a score of 308"), but you don't know that Judge A gave it a 99, Judge B gave it 101, and Judge C gave it 108. So there is not that exciting anticipation we all envisioned; there's a more fearful anticipation to know what the scores are going to be. My suggestion is that we announce the scores as the class is taking place. I can remember going to the Egyptian Event when I was growing up, and watching the halter classes where they announced the scores while the horses were in the ring. The crowd stayed very involved, excitedly calculating the totals and figuring out the current leader and watching to see who could get a higher score. When one did, everyone went wild with cheering, and I think that was what we all had in mind when we voted in the new halter system.

I always give my opinion on judging, so here are my comments on Canada. One great thing about this show is that we always get qualified breeders and horsemen in their divisions to judge. So I'm not complaining—I just have an observation. In some cases, I think maybe we had specialists in one division judging another division. I know, as a judge myself, that we are all capable of judging the divisions we qualify for; my thoughts are about something a little more subtle, and I'd guess that it happens now and then at many shows. When we are used to judging "point" divisions, such as reining and trail for example, and then switch to a performance class where we're judging on a "comparison" basis, maybe our habits don't make the smoothest transitions. In scored classes, when a horse makes a mistake, you give it a penalty. In comparison, you judge that mistake against other mistakes in the class or against the horses you are comparing to the one you have identified as your probable winner. A few times, I felt that judges more used to the point system might have been a little heavy in punishing minor mistakes in comparison

classes. Rather than deciding that yes, there were a few mistakes by Horse A, but overall, its performance exceeded those of Horses B and C, who had fewer visible errors, the judges might pin Horse B or C for the best ribbon. But all in all, both panels did a great job and mostly got the right horses for the titles.

In the country English pleasure division, I had some of the same reactions that I did at Youth Nationals: Again, I saw horses that were stressed. When you think the English pleasure and park horses are more pleasurable to watch than country, then there is a problem. So in my opinion, we *again* need to give some thought to this division and what we really want to see in it.

My only other thought regards the warm-up ring, and it's not directed at Canada—I just had this thought while considering the situation there, which was no different from those we see in other shows. It's time we, as trainers, amateurs, grooms and caretakers, pay more attention to what is happening in our preparation areas and have more respect for others. When we have a 20-horse hunter class getting ready to go in an arena, it's not the time to bring our western horse in and lunge it, or the time to bring our English horse in and give it a lesson. Or in other words, we all need to be respectful and give other people the time and space to prepare for the class that they've worked so hard for all year.

The suggestion I offer to help this situation is simply that different arenas be labeled for different uses. Some can be for lunging, practice and lessons, while others—at least during competition times—are reserved for exhibitor warm-up. One thing we can all agree on is that when we go to a show, we want to give our best performance. So let's try to enhance the opportunity for everyone.

In closing, let me just reiterate how great Canada was. I haven't talked a lot about competition, but I'll just say here that it was fierce. If there are 20 horses in a class, 10 could be national champions. Some of our best horses, horsemen and amateurs support it wholeheartedly and take it seriously, and it has a show staff that is second to none. It's a great horse show.

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.