

An Amateur Point of View

Preparation 101—Slanting The Odds In Your Favor

by Russ Vento

At this writing, most of the regional shows have happened, along with Youth and Canadian Nationals, and by the time it comes out, both National Show Horse Finals and the Sport Horse Nationals will be in the books. All of these shows have been goals for many of us, and some are now gearing up for U.S. Nationals, perhaps the biggest one goal we've worked toward all year. So it's about time for my annual comment on presentation and how we maximize our performance in those classes that are such important one-shot-opportunities for us. They really are a lot like job interviews. Yes, there will be another chance (another Nationals, another job) in the future, but they don't come around every day, and we all want to put our best foot forward. The best way to make sure we do that is to leave as little to chance as possible. Yes, I've said this before, but since it is a topic that never loses its relevance, I'll say it again—and I have to add that not a year goes by that I don't learn some new way or some new reason for advance preparation.

Your Clothing

The look you present is not just about you. It is about your horse, your tack, your whole picture. Perfect, appropriate appearance won't win a class for you, but badly-fitting clothes or a poorly-turned-out horse can distract a judge from focusing on your performance, and in a national class, who wants that?

Let's start with a key word: "appropriate." There are regulations about what we wear in a class, but there are also unwritten rules that help us avoid detracting from our performance. Overall, the rule of thumb is that daywear should be somewhat conservative, with the flashier colors and fabrics allowed in evening classes. Translated, however, "conservative" in the Arabian show ring does not mean dull and boring, and for most people, there are boundaries of good taste at night. Neither is a situation of "anything goes."

In the English division, we have a lot of a glitz and glamour, and some color helps attract the attention of a judge who will be viewing us from a distance of 20 feet or more. Assuming that you are already dressed in a coat that enhances both you and the color of your horse, add a pop of a complementary color in your vest and tie. When I say "pop," I mean the four to six inches that shows of the vest and tie—not a whole outfit of neon. You want to catch the judge's attention, not blind him.

Hats come in for some attention too. My advice to ladies is to know if you look best in a derby or a homburg, and to guys, figure out if you are a homburg or a snap brim type. It is simple: Your outfitters have mirrors. Use them. And don't go with what is popular. Go with what complements you the best. Then take care of your hat, because when you have a great suit, you will ruin the whole effect if your hat looks like it got stepped on or you

didn't take the trouble to steam it and keep it in shaped. (At Youth Nationals, I saw kids wearing a new type of hat that purposely is not shaped, and all I can say is that it looked like they didn't know any better.)

The most important aspect of anyone's riding outfit is that it is clean and it fits well. It doesn't matter if it is a western or hunter jacket or a show hack or saddle suit. It needs to fit, and since some of us are not 20-something anymore, that may be an ongoing challenge. Also, economic factors come into play when we're planning our riding wardrobe; let's face it, nothing is cheap. But good tailoring can make a \$1,000 suit, paired with a tie and a crisp white shirt from Target or Walmart, look like it cost closer to \$3,000.

Western outfits, to me, are amazing. They get more dazzling, sparkly and impressive year after year. However, the concept of daytime and evening wear applies here as well; the really heavily-sparkled jackets are more tastefully worn in evening presentations. If you must have sparkles for the afternoon, maybe the way to go is with well-tailored shirts or jackets that have just a few jewels on the collars and cuffs or around the shoulders, rather than all over them. That is just my preference, but it pays to realize that many of the judges have been around for a long time and still adhere to the old maxims of day and evening. Remember, too, that as in any division, it is important to be aware of your body. If you have a roll or a muffin top or a slightly expanded waistline, something tightly fitted doesn't look any better in western than it would in English.

For guys, in my opinion, it can be a little simpler. A pair of blue jeans, a great pair of chaps and a crisp shirt, with a tie, look great. The shirt can be white, red, green, blue, whatever; I'm not a plaid fan, but most guys don't wear that anyhow. And please be not only clean yourself, but polish your boots and belt buckles too.

Finally, before you trot into the ring, take one last look at your overall picture. I've seen people do all kinds of work to prepare for a class, get on their horse, and find they've forgotten to clean the bottom of their boots. Don't let it happen to you.

If you are driving a horse, you have a different set of challenges in planning the best outfit. For instance, no matter how good a great pair of silk pants might make you feel, you don't want to wear them on a leather driving seat. When you go around a turn, slithering to one side or another of the seat will make you wish you had selected something else. For women, don't forget to sew a penny or two into the hem of your skirt. If it blows up in your face or even threatens to, it is distracting for both you and the judge. Also, whether you're driving outside or inside, many times horses are so powerful in the rear end that they kick up dirt into your face. Adding sunglasses or goggles to any outfit can be very beneficial.

In general, I think that it looks better for men who to wear suits and women to wear some type of street clothes when driving horses unless they are riding in the next class, but that is just my preference. Whatever you choose to wear, check its cut by modeling it doing everything you will do when driving. For instance, when you are driving, your hands are

up and forward, so try it in that position. I once wore a bright blue jacket in a class without really thinking about it—and it looked ridiculous with those bright blue sleeves riding up almost to my elbow and about a mile of white shirt showing on my forearm. Likewise, ladies' skirts. Showing a little leg (or a lot) is probably not going to get the prize.

One often-overlooked aspect of driving is the shoes you wear. That is not a problem as much for the men as for the women. If you have to get out of the buggy for any reason—and many buggies have had flat tires in the ring—you don't want to be wearing five-inch heels. You also don't want to catch your heel in the bottom of the buggy. In most cases, the judges won't be seeing your feet, so it is okay to wear flats or your jod boots.

When planning ahead, women with long hair who prefer to wear it down should take into account two necessities: A judge has to be able to see your number in order to give you a ribbon, so make sure your beautiful long hair doesn't obscure a number if you wear one on your back; and when you go around a turn or if there is a breeze, be prepared for long hair or bangs to get in your eyes. How are you going to see?

If you are showing in halter, you have yet another set of considerations. For one thing, you have more choices. Do you want to wear a suit, which always looks nice, or a sweater? One deciding factor might be the weather. If you're in Scottsdale, and you're planning not only on running into the ring but being there for an hour in the sun, a suit may have you steaming. There are wonderful lightweight sweaters now that can be worn with a shirt, tie and slacks, and look great. One point to check when selecting your outfit is how it looks when you're running; it should fit well and stay relatively in place. Also, if you are going to be in a class of 20 or 30 horses, you probably want to wear color with a pop. Again, it is not that what you are wearing will make your horse win; it will just get you noticed or get you a second look. Not only that, but if a judge is thinking 'where's that yellow sweater?' when marking a card later in the class, you want to be easily remembered and spotted.

One of the biggest problems we all face in getting to Nationals or the regionals or Scottsdale (or any show) is making sure our outfits are unwrinkled. If you have to bring your suit in your suitcase, one thing that helps is to keep it in its plastic dry cleaning bag because those bags slide easily against other clothes. The same is true for your starched shirts. Going to a horse show, you don't want to heavily starch your shirts and then put them in a suitcase, because when you fold them, you're going to get lines. Go to Bed Bath & Beyond or wherever and get one of those inexpensive steamers. They're amazing; you just plug them in and they steam the wrinkles right out. Steamers are also useful for freshening up and getting the dust out of your suit as the week goes along, which is a godsend if you have one suit and more than one horse to show. They work well even with chaps that get dusty; steam them and then just wipe them with your hand. They perk up and look like they've been dry-cleaned. Why not dry clean everything as the week goes on? More than once, I've heard of people sending their outfits to the dry cleaners, and the dry cleaners have lost them. Why take the chance?

The point is, plan your appearance and your performance. You want to attract attention, and you want it to be good attention. Why is clothing so important? Just by itself, it is not. But if you feel good or proud or happy about your appearance, you have an aura of competence and that comes out in your presentation.

Your Horse

Not only do you have to be turned out to the nines, but your horse does too. So make sure that it is freshly bathed and groomed; a clean, healthy coat is a great asset in a horse's appearance. A lot of times, people wash the long hairs but not the top hairs, but at the Nationals, that's not enough. Before you go into the ring, examine every detail of your grooming job. I once saw a horse trot into the arena all polished up and ready to go—with shavings in its tail! And be sure to take into consideration all of the showing you will be doing with your horse, and remember that while sanding and polishing is fine, hoof black is not allowed in halter competition. So if you are planning to show in both divisions, plan accordingly, and don't get yourself thrown out of halter just for nth-degree appearance in performance.

In addition to getting your horse ready, make sure your tack is clean and polished. With a show hack bridle or western saddle especially, where you spend a fortune on silver and brass, take that extra 30 minutes to polish that stuff up. For horses that have braided manes, such as hunters and show hacks, take your time and do a good job with the braiding. More than once I've seen otherwise great-looking horses with poorly-conceived or -executed braiding. (Let me add that I am not good at braiding and have the utmost respect for those who are.) The braids should complement the horse, revealing and enhancing the lines of its neck. Too many times I've seen a horse's braid come loose, or as it is going around the ring, a tail braid come undone. That doesn't look good; you can have the best horse and still look like you didn't put the effort into it. A bad job won't lose you a class, but it will distract the judge.

One last comment on the subject: Do be tasteful with your choice of braid. We're Arabian horse people. We tend to think that more is better. Remember, we want to complement, not advertise. If your horse has a great neck, maybe you don't need white bows; maybe you need a darker color, rather than something that has a lot of pop. And you don't want to use pom-poms, to where the horse looks like a parade horse.

Something to notice if you have a driving horse is that a long tail might get hung up on a buggy wheel when you go around a turn. If your horse's tail is extra long, you might consider tying it up. Think ahead. Think of every possible scenario and plan for it.

Psyching Up The Best Performance

So, assuming you have yourself and your horse turned out to perfection—or in other words, accounted for everything under your control—how do you slant the odds for the best performance, which is subject to outside influences? The first step is to make sure you are not rushed before the competition. It is always best to be ready an hour before your class. Get your clothes ready the night before, get your number on the night before.

We're going to wake up, be nervous, be anxious for our class because it's what we've been working for and it's a reward—so give yourself the time and get prepared in advance. Being rushed can put you in a whole different mood, and I'm a firm believer that your mood reflects through your animal or your trainer. When we're nervous or tight, it can certainly put us in a sour mood.

Your mood—whether it be confidence or fear—comes off in your performance. Any trainer will tell you that it's a huge thing to teach people confidence. Confidence is not a smile from ear to ear, and fear is not a terrified look. Each is much more. As riders (or drivers or handlers), we want to be focused and be able to go through the maneuvers of the class at our best. If we've done our job and done our homework, all of that should come naturally, and that is where confidence comes in.

A huge thing for me in preparing for a class is to walk into the arena, sit in the stands, and see myself coming through the in-gate, going around the arena, finding my spot and doing my job. My plan of action in a class may differ with every show, so it is a ritual that never gets routine. If I'm slated for a five-horse class, I know I can be any place in the ring and the judge will see me. I'll probably plan to stay up on the rail, because it will look a strange if I'm circling the judges' box like a bird of prey when there is plenty of room on the rail. If it's a 15 or 20-horse class, though, it is a different story. I imagine different options for breaking out of the pack, and picture myself in every situation I can think of. I want to look strong and confident, like I know how to work that ring and have the horse to do it, whether I want to go down the middle or stay on the rail. Getting seen will be the key, and I have to know how to get that done. Here is a tip: If you are in a class of 20 horses, you will all be in the warm-up ring before the competition. So will all kinds of others—longers, carriages, dogs, cats, aunts, uncles, whoever. Riders will be warming up and trainers will be shouting instructions, with everyone on their own personal flight paths. If you can keep your confidence and maneuverability in there, when you hit the arena with only 20 horses all going in the same direction, it will seem like a piece of cake.

For halter handlers, again, the challenges are a little different. For instance, how do you look running? You can be the most attractive person in the world and yet run like a chicken. It's probably a good thing to practice running in front of a mirror or sliding glass door just so you know how you look. And I'll try to be tactful here, but many women run chest-forward, which can make it look like they're about to topple over. If that applies to you, you might practice running with a more upright posture.

The bottom line for me is that showing successfully—whether it be at a small or large show, whatever goal we set for ourselves—is all about planning ahead and being prepared. After that, just enjoy yourself. You've earned the pleasure.

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 has been honored twice with APAHA Amateur Horseman Awards, and has been a Large R USAE/AHA judge since 1996. To date, he has owned or shown more than 30 U.S., Canadian and National Show Horse national champions, many of whom he shared with his daughter Skyler, a national champion rider in her own right. Now Vento and Bob Battaglia enjoy not only showing, but breeding champions and following the careers of horses from their program.