

An Amateur Point of View

Rules Require Education, Understanding—And Patience, Part II

by Russ Vento

Last month, I started thinking about the Arabian community's pastime of complaining about our rules. We identify a problem, formulate new rules to address it, and then faster than we can trot into a show ring, we start complaining about the solutions. Okay, I know, as human beings, we'll probably always complain. That's nothing new. But for our industry right now, I think when it comes to rules that have gone into place recently, we would be better served to educate ourselves—examine why and how the new regulations came to be, and what it takes to make them work—before we get negative. There are two points I should repeat from last time before I get started: 1) *I am not endorsing or condemning any new rule.* I just think it is important that we do our homework before we start filling the air with complaints. 2) While I'm not in favor of complaint, I strongly support informed discussion. That's vital to our breed in the future.

In May, I looked at the halter judging system and the procedure in place to qualify for Nationals. This time, let's think about the background and intent of the new rules in some of the performance divisions.

Not long ago, there was all kinds of hoopla about our hunter pleasure horses being high-headed, having too much motion, being shod like English horses, and presented like country horses. So we wrote a rule that said, *“Compared to an English Pleasure, Country English Pleasure or Show Hack horse which is shown in an upright frame, the Hunter Pleasure horse should be in a longer, more rectangular frame, with a neck carried lower and in a more relaxed manner with less arch in the neck and less bend at the poll. The stride at every gait should be long, cover ground, and exhibit efficiency of movement. While some degree of carriage is appropriate in a Hunter Pleasure horse, a stride that is short, high, and round is not appropriate. Horses that are, for more than a few strides, high headed, ridden on a draped rein, not in an appropriate frame, on the forehand, short-strided, or behind the vertical must be severely penalized.”*

Here are my thoughts. While I understand the concept of this rule, I can't get away from the fact that we're riding Arabians—not Thoroughbreds, which are more commonly seen in the hunt field. Arabians are perfectly appropriate hunters; they just have a different way of going. The way that our horses are built and carry themselves, they have more curves. It's more natural for them to have a rounder-type motion, and in representing the breed, don't we want them to look like Arabians (if we wanted a Thoroughbred, we'd buy a Thoroughbred)? In my opinion, our standard and our presentation of an Arabian hunter pleasure horse needs some leeway to take into account the conformation and the ability of the horse the way it is bred. Most Arabian movement is not going to be as flat and long-framed as that of the Thoroughbred.

At the same time that I believe we need more ability to recognize true Arabian movement, I come down firmly on the side of the hunt “purists” behind the rule on conservative attire: We don't need sparkly coats and jeweled boots and bridles! The way I was raised, sophisticated or businesslike colors are always the best for hunter presentation (hunt attire is based on what is

appropriate for the hunt field, so just imagine riding through the countryside in spangles and iridescent coats, and it's not a pretty picture).

To me, the key here is to respect the discipline, but accommodate the horse's natural attributes. A beautiful mover is a beautiful mover; it doesn't matter if it has a little knee or a longer stride and frame—beautiful Arabian movement is beautiful.

There was also some question that the hunter pleasure horse should be not backed out of the bridle, so a draped rein was specifically prohibited. (We went through something similar to this with the western division, in that the horses were too much on a draped rein, and it was felt that they weren't going forward and should be penalized.) To me, these are training issues. In the class, it comes down to a judge's opinion; if you are a judge and you like a horse on a direct rein, then that's the horse you should pick. By issuing a rule about that, we're taking away a judge's personal opinion. There is a difference between a horse's going on a loose rein versus looking like it has been trained not to go anywhere near that bridle. To the "oh my god, that horse is breaking the rules because it's on draped rein!" reaction, I'd respond that the bigger picture offers a more accurate evaluation. Is that horse calmly and genuinely moving, doing an honest presentation on that loose rein, or does it look intimidated? That is up to the judge, and in my opinion, parameters are the best way to evaluate a horse's performance. The best horse in the class and the best presentation should be rewarded.

The country English pleasure division offers an example of how rules can be interpreted to fit the situation. When the division was originally organized several years ago, horses were to be penalized for extreme motion. The country pleasure class was originally designed so that the less gifted horses that couldn't compete in the English pleasure discipline would have their own class to compete in. Truthfully, that rule has never really been followed. We get past it by saying, "The horse is soft and pleasurable, its ears are up and it's happy, and the rider is doing a good job." We accept and don't penalize for motion, which on the face of it might seem like exactly what we shouldn't be doing—and yet in practice, a great deal of motion is not a sure ticket to a ribbon, so it appears that that rule is working. I've owned two very decorated country English pleasure horses, the purebred Monrovia X (a 14-time national champion), and the Half-Arabian Ames Queen (a four-time national champion), and neither mare was ever accused of having extreme motion. They were rewarded over horses who had a lot more than they did. It was the whole picture that mattered.

Okay, back to the issue of complaints. Let's take a look at a change that was well done recently, and give some thought as to productive ways to make changes for the future.

A good example of a successful rule change recently is the shoeing rules that were passed a couple of years ago. That issue began with legitimate complaint, as many people pointed out that the bigger horses needed more support on their feet. Veterinarians and farriers were consulted, and other breeds of horses whose feet compared to those of larger Arabians and Half-Arabians were studied. In the end, to help our horses and support their feet properly, we were allowed to use bigger shoes, as well as pads and shapes of shoes that were more beneficial for horses with soundness issues. Lori Conway designed a gauge by which a horse shoe could be measured easily, and when shoes were thrown in classes, they simply had to fit within the little gauge

before they could be put back on. That saved the time it took to go through all the weighing—a real boon in classes where numerous shoes were cast (we can all remember marathon events where farriers saw as much as action as exhibitors). Further, we approved a rule that stated: “All horses competing in the Arabian, Half-Arabian, and Anglo-Arabian Hunter, Jumper, Dressage, Eventing, Combined Driving, Working Western, Reining Seat Equitation, Carriage Pleasure Driving and Sport Horse Sections shall be exempt from shoeing regulations. This does not exempt horses that are cross entered into any other classes from compliance with applicable shoeing requirements while competing in those classes.”

These were rules that just about everybody wanted, but even so, a lot of people griped about it. They had to stop complaining, however, because the rules worked. Now our horses are sounder and their presentations are better. In the case of having multiple shoes come off in a class, it now takes a lot less time to replace them. This was a positive rule change that we could see worked, and the results were so apparent that continued complaint pretty much died out.

So let's put my thoughts in practice, and make it more personal. Remember last year's Nationals? There we were at our new home in Tulsa, at the show which is supposed to be our highlight, our big promotion of the breed—and good grief, the complaining was off the charts. Yes, there was the unknown; everyone was having to go to the extra effort of getting used to a new situation after literally decades in Louisville and Albuquerque. Nothing was familiar. Nobody knew where the hotels were, where their stalls were, anything. Having no experience putting on a national show at Expo Square, show management was having to feel its way too. Do you think we could just be supportive? Of course not. We all complained.

My only legitimate (to me) disagreement with Tulsa is that I don't like having 16 horses galloping around in an arena the size of the Pavilion. I have to admit, though, that that is not enough reason for AHA change the regulations of the classes in question. (I've noticed that we, as Arabian horse people, often think that all we have to do is voice our opinions or write a letter saying what we want, and that's what should happen.) In reality, what should happen is what is best for everyone, and more importantly, best for the horse. To understand an issue, we need to talk about it—calmly and rationally—with our horse show managers, our regional directors, at the convention, etc. We need to learn all sides of an issue. In my case, I need to start by considering *why* 16 horses shouldn't hand-gallop in a ring the size of the Pavilion. The answer has to be more than “It's dangerous. I don't like it.” That's just my opinion. I need to be able to back it up, and in this case, that means figuring out the length of a horse's stride, the size of the animal, and its maneuverability. In a 16-horse class, do we have 12 on one rail and four on the other? That has to be considered.

An additional point to be recognized as I put together an informed decision against 16 horses trotting and hand-galloping in the Pavilion is that at the 2008 U.S. Nationals, when a work-off reduced the number of horses competing for the top spots, the Half-Arabian English Pleasure class became the most amazing and exciting event of the show. That is certainly worth noting. I have to wonder what we might have missed in the crowded regular class, with space at such a premium. Given the room to show off in the work-out, some of those horses performed at the top of their ability—and it was breathtaking.

I am entitled to my opinion that 16 horses in the Pavilion is too many (for the record, 10 would be fine with me). But all of the above must be considered when deciding to advocate a change that will affect others. I also have to consider how the procedure I want to change came about. As it turns out, in this case there was at one time a good reason that we have 16 horses in a final. When we returned to the top ten system, the show commission decided that taking only five from each qualifier might exclude some of the best-performing exhibitors, so the number of horses going on to the finals from each preliminary was expanded to eight. That made sense at the time. In Louisville and Albuquerque, the main arenas were large enough to accommodate 16 horses going at speed without limiting anyone's presentation. Now, however, the situation has changed; that many horses in the Expo Square Pavilion arena *does* compromise the final performances. Much as I dislike leaving anyone out, I like it even less that in all finals, it is hard for the horses to show at their best. So when push comes to shove, I'd rather have everyone ride harder and smarter in the preliminaries, and have only the very best qualify for the finals. It is a hard decision, but one that I think is valid.

To me, complaining is never the real answer. We have to start with getting educated about the facts, about what has gone before, and about other people's opinions. Then we draw our conclusions and try to do what we believe is right. There is no law against disagreement, and just as there have been changes in the past, we can expect changes in future. But those changes will be more effective if we start with education.

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.