

One Man's Opinion

Thoughts On The State Of The Arabian Horse Industry, Part I

by BOB BATTAGLIA

As I look at the state of the Arabian horse industry in this country, I can't help but have two simultaneous thoughts. Yes, we have problems. But at the same time, I feel strongly that the horse business is alive and well. Like everything else now, it is a little depressed, but we have lived through things like this before and we will again.



And there is good news. From what I can tell, we're seeing an increase in sales and a smaller, but real, increase in breeding. I think that is due to the fact that people are adjusting to the economic situation in our country. They have decided that they do have a little extra money to spend and that horses are worth spending it on. Horses may be a luxury, but they are also a lifestyle—a family lifestyle, actually.

So, while I am definitely not lost in the doom and gloom, I do think there is a lot we can do to improve the Arabian industry, and we have to address our issues if the breed

is to grow. Beginning with this column, I'm going to explore problems and look for solutions, because I'm convinced that we can find the answers. I invite reader participation; everyone's thoughts and ideas will be valuable as we consider the future of the Arabian horse in this country.

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Let's start by looking at what we're up against. Our biggest problem—the underlying issue confronting every horse breed and discipline—is that we are faced with a different world than the one that has been known in the past, and I'm not talking about changes that came with the economic downturn. Horses are not a necessity for transportation, as they were at the turn of the 20th century, and they are no longer the heart's desire of every child who watched “Bonanza” (or “Roy Rogers,” and all those other television shows that put horses in everyone's living room). We don't see horses on “CSI” and “American Idol.” In years gone by, there were horse shows everywhere, and local stables and bridle paths. Little of that exists anymore. It is not a given that the public will get much exposure to show horses as an exciting hobby or trail horses as best-friend companions. Add to all of that, young people today are attuned to electronics. Talk about a revolution! Computers, iPads, cell phones, texting, etc., have changed the way we communicate. I suspect half the kids don't even talk to each other these days; they text.

None of that is the result of the economic climate. It's the evolution of our world, just as the automobile was a century ago when it basically took over the horse's job in society. Horse owners and breeders dealt with it then and they did it so well that to this day we are all enjoying some of the activities they created.

All of this leads me to believe that at this point in time, our biggest challenge is to find a way to introduce new people to the Arabian horse. New people, and new or revitalized activities, eventually will support the breeders, owners, trainers and shows that make up the business. Traditionally, newcomers were best reached through local Arabian organizations—shows, club functions, open houses at breeding farms (large and small), etc. The shows and activities introduced people to Arabians, while the farms supplied the horses and provided background and education. It worked well because there were places to buy horses and a range of activities to do with them. Some of those people, then, aspired to regional and national competition, supporting yet another aspect of the industry.

A great tool for exposing people to Arabians at the time was the Arabian Horse Fair, which AHA and the Registry put on in the 1970s. It was a selling tool for everyone. Stallion owners exhibited their stallions to the public and promoted breeding, while others marketed show and pleasure riding horses. Educational seminars were put on, and information was presented about all the things you can do with Arabians (not just showing). That was particularly important because although we all like the fact that the top show horses are glamorous and expensive, it does not help the breed to have an image in the public as being beyond the means of “regular people.” The most expensive show horses do cost more than many people want to spend, but we need to make it clear that the average Arabian does not—and Arabians do many things very well. Going hand-in-hand with the expensive show horse image is the one of their being “flighty,” which

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indicates that Arabians are unstable to be around. So, the first job is to teach people about the advantages of being around horses, and how much Arabians can be enjoyed for relaxation, companionship and, if you want, shows for many levels of expertise.

That is the groundwork. The next step is show competition. I think many people are competitive by nature, so the task we have is to offer the venue. I come from the show end of things, so that is the part I'll address here.

Every level of the show ring is important, and they all relate. I believe that at this point in time, we need to focus on rebuilding the foundation of our system. The exciting, expensive national shows rest on a framework of regional and local shows, and if the framework isn't solid, the success of the national events is not assured. The fact is that everything is so expensive now that it is a lot harder for a new or small Arabian horse owner to participate—often, even, at the local level. And we can't forget that many of our biggest and most involved owners and breeders began at the local level. If it hadn't been there and hadn't been viable, they would not be in the breed today.

AHA is addressing this issue with its local shows, and we need people to get more behind that. It is a *positive* answer; the local shows are what made this breed what it is. Taking Arabians to open shows, so that people can see that the horses aren't “flaky,” is also a good idea. Until the advent of all-Arabian shows, the open shows were where owners showed their horses, exposing the breed to thousands of new potential enthusiasts.

It is not realistic, however, to suppose that any horse show will ever be “cheap” again. Very little in life today is cheap. However, local events are certainly less costly than regional or national shows, and well within the scope of many families' leisure budget, if they offer an enjoyable experience.

To further boost that segment of the industry, we need to strengthen the class A through class C level and open shows. I believe it is time for AHA to reorient the structure of the regionals and nationals in this country. We have 18 regional shows, and they are hurting our small shows. We've tried everything to force people to go to the small shows—rules and regulations, points, all of those things—and nothing has worked. I propose that AHA drastically reduce the number of regionals by dividing the country into just four regions. Each of those four regionals would host a championship, featuring as much prize money as possible, to qualify exhibitors for nationals.

This would serve several purposes. With fewer regionals to concentrate on, owners could afford to attend more local and class A shows to qualify for regionals and nationals, and with that kind of support, local clubs could offer more shows. Also, it would enhance the importance of a regional title because there will be fewer of them. And finally, most importantly, I hope that as the local shows get more participation, the local clubs would use the money to restart or expand their Arabian promotion programs.

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In formulating this idea, one of my concerns is that too often, the only horses who are selling well are the ones who can win at the national level. We need to create something else to do with our horses—local shows, fun shows, trail rides—and get behind it. As it is, it is hard for the small breeder to breed and sell his or her product. It is also hard for the small show to exist because so many people want to go to regionals and nationals that when an exhibitor is on a budget, small shows have gotten cut out.

I believe that this would help local people sell, and when they can sell, they can breed. Not every horse that is bred is a potential winner at nationals. We used to have various levels in this industry, and that was what kept the breeders alive—there was a place in the hierarchy for the majority of the horses. Also, it pays to remember that many of our greatest national champions came from small breeders.

To end on a bright note, this year in particular Scottsdale was very successful, down only about 20 horses even in today’s economy. Sales were slow, but there *were* sales, and what we’re seeing now, at the beginning of the year, is better than what we saw at the end of last year. Breedings, too, have picked up a little. I think we’re seeing something positive in the industry, in all breeds, not just ours.

I truly believe that we can meet the challenges we’re up against in today’s world. I’ve been a breeder, done public sales, had up to 150 horses on the place, stood five or six stallions at a time, and over the years, been through the highs, the lows, the highs, and now the lows again. I don’t see our situation as desolately as some people do, but I do think that improvement is in order.

I’m interested in your thoughts, and particularly, in any suggestions you have to improve the health of the Arabian horse industry. We’re all in this together. I can be reached at info@battagliafarms.com. ■

“One Man’s Opinion,” by Bob Battaglia, will appear in Arabian Horse Times on a semi-regular basis.

Trainer, owner and breeder Bob Battaglia has been involved with Arabian horses for more than four decades. He has lost count of the number of championships and reserves he and his amateurs have won at the U.S., Canadian, and Youth Nationals; more than 10 years ago, it passed 450. He has been named APAAHA Horseman of the Year four times, Saddle Seat Trainer of the Year three times, and English Trainer of the Year. In addition, he is known as an instructor with a unique ability to communicate with amateurs. Among other industry contributions, he has taught at AHA judging seminars, been a member of the AHA Judges’ Steering Committee, been Vice Chairman of the National and Regional Classes Committee, and served on AHA’s Whip Study and APAAHA’s Hoof Study Committees. For USEF, he served as Chair of the Show Standards Committee. He is as a Large R judge, and was a founding member and past president of APAAHA. As a breeder, he has contributed an impressive array of national-winning Arabians and Half-Arabians.