

One Man's Opinion

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

by BOB BATTAGLIA



This month, I first want to thank all of you who took the time to write to me with your observations on improving the Arabian horse industry in this country. I've included some of your comments in this column, as you all had suggestions that I think deserve attention.

As I noted last time, I've experienced nearly all aspects of the breed. In addition to training and showing horses, I've been a breeder, managed stallions' stud careers, and put on public sales. That and the decades I've been in Arabians, living through the boom years and the ones that were financially difficult, have given me a fairly comprehensive perspective in looking at the state of our breed today. There is no one simple solution to the issues we are facing; our decisions on how we go forward need to recognize how the various parts of our industry fit together, and deliver benefits across the board.

Our Show Calendar

I'll begin with the show horses. My thought is that we need to expand our show industry from the ground up, not the top down. Last month, I suggested that we eliminate our system of 18 regional shows and instead have four championships around the country, leading up to our national show.

Several readers supported the idea of changing our regional structure. Mickey Aboussie wrote, "Years ago,

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Cindy Clinton, Kathie Hart and a group of us at Bazy's Think Tank proposed an idea for eliminating the regionals altogether, holding East and West Coast National Semi-Finals and a

Championship Show as the big daddy. Funny how our ideas melded."

East and west or four semi-finals around the country, we're on the same page. A change to fewer regionals would reduce the cost of showing for most people, as well as intensify the competition at the regional level. Most importantly, it would encourage more people to qualify by attending the smaller shows. At present, we are able to qualify at class A to class C events, but just try to find a B or a C show. In some places, they're not available.

If we change our system, that also would encourage the class A shows and the local clubs to become more active with promoting in their own region. Yes, there are some clubs that do promotion now, but there used to be a lot more of it going on. That is how we grow the whole breed, and it supports the breeding and selling of horses, which eventually equates to more action in the training barns and more participation at horse shows. I remember the days when the local clubs were the ones that promoted the Arabian horse. Interested spectators could then buy horses from local trainers and breeders and be involved in their own area. Right now, clubs have little incentive

to go all-out promoting Arabians by having the local, smaller shows because Arabian horses just don't sell well enough. We all know that the market is strong for horses capable of winning at the national shows, but it is not nearly strong enough for all the others. Healthy local circuits—ones where you can have a reasonably-priced experience with a decent horse close to home, as well as qualify to move up to regionals and nationals if you want to, would provide the basis we need to build the breed.

My main point is that we need to start thinking out of the box. Just look around: We live in a different world; we have to start thinking differently. Take education, for example. We're a long way from the traditional classes most adults today attended. A new program called FMA Live, sponsored by NASA and Honeywell Corp., uses innovative teaching aids such as hip hop music, Velcro® and go-carts to teach middle schoolers science—and it's getting good results. I've read that some schools are turning students on to learning by using their cell phones and iPod®, instead of telling the kids to turn them off, as has been the rule in the past. Time moves on, and we need to move with it.

"Out of the box" for my purposes here means a complete restructuring from the regionals through the nationals—and AHA, for that matter. We

need to remember that it is expensive today to go to the national events, and somewhat expensive to go to the regionals. For most people, it would be desirable to limit the number of big shows and increase the number of smaller shows on their calendar. Not only does that give them more long weekends of fun, but also it makes those big, mega-title shows all the more important and impressive.

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Let me add that on a positive note, the Youth Nationals is surviving well. Parents will always spend money for their kids, and that show is exciting. It's fun for the youth, and it's very competitive. So, if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

How Our Show System Affects The Sale Of Horses

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In my opinion, the way we regard our national shows is doing a disservice to our marketplace. These days, we place so much emphasis on winning at the national shows that it is as if there is only one prize: the national championship. A national championship is very important, no question about it; it's what we all want to win. But it should not be the only title of real importance, and the horses capable of being first in their classes should not be the only ones with significant value.

If you go to other breeds, to be top ten in the country is a huge, huge title. To be third, fourth, fifth or eighth at the Saddlebred World's Championships is a big accomplishment, and they treat it as such. (Don't let me be confusing. I'm not saying that we should change our recognition from “top ten” to numbered placings—“top ten” is fine. What I mean is that winning one of the first 10 placings should be recognized as a top-level achievement.) Yet, in Arabians today, we are so focused on being only the winner that we don't seem to care about the honor of being top ten. That is particularly sad because on any given day, there are probably 20 horses who have qualified that could be national champion.

Why is that so important? Because beyond the pride of achievement, the prestige of any award affects the value of the horse; a national top ten horse should command a figure high on the price scale. Instead, too many buyers want only the *winners*.

Let's look at the effect that has on developing a strong grass roots market for Arabians. The only horses that seem to be selling for big money these days are the halter horses, and many of those are selling out of the country. In the performance horses, everybody wants the high end. But there are some wonderful, wonderful horses for a lot less money that could win at the local or regional level. They might not be national champions, but unless you aspire to go there, why do you have to concentrate on the national shows? The national shows are supposed to be for the epitome of the horses.

It would be helpful if we could help people coming into the breed to identify the level of participation that is real for them. There are far more horses capable of local-to-regional showing—and far more families able to finance that—than there are horses and people who should be targeting the national shows. We need to set up a system that accommodates “the grass roots,” as well as the people and horses who are focused on the national events.



Observations From Readers

Most of the readers who wrote in not only commented on the issues that I have listed here, but also offered their experiences and suggestions for improvements in the breed. One person who took the time to email was Julie Cabana. You may remember her as Julie McCracken; at one time, before she took a break for marriage, family and career (as do so many of our young riders), she was a

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top-level amateur contender. She so hit the nail on the head that I'm including her letter here almost in its entirety.

“I have been on the sidelines quietly observing this industry and waiting for a chance to jump back in,” Julie

wrote. “I feel like I only rate the attention of people in the industry if I buy an expensive horse and only show at a national level. Now, don't get me wrong, yes, I would love to do that someday, but the reality is I have not just myself to think about when spending my money. I have my husband and daughter to consider. I have to be able to buy a horse and show that works within the family budget. So, what I'm trying to say is that the Arabian horse industry needs to create incentive for people to jump back in or for new people to step in. Now, if I'm feeling intimidated, I can only imagine how self-defeating it feels for someone who is trying to get into the industry for the first time.

“I agree with you that we need to build from the local shows up and not from the national arena down. And, I also agree there should only be four regional championships. Like you said, it would make a regional win more prestigious and, if your horse won, it would only make him more valuable.

“Local shows should be economical within reason and simple. We have to remember that in our pursuit for

solutions we can't make this too complicated either. I've checked out other breeds and disciplines, and many smaller shows charge a flat rate. They do this in several creative ways: flat rate for the entire show, or flat rate for a division, or flat rate for a day, or show in five or more classes and pay a lower fee per class, or the more horses you show (as in per owner, not per trainer) than the larger your discount off of your show fees. How many times do we buy something just because it's on sale or discounted? How do car dealers get us in the showroom to buy a car when we already have one? Incentives! Discounts!

“I also believe we need to have a select few classes that are specifically 'sale' classes where every horse entered in the class is for sale. I can't tell you how many times I've seen a horse in the ring and wondered if someone would sell their horse, but was too shy to ask. Again, this goes back to thinking like a non-horse owner. If I'm too shy to ask, then I can only imagine how intimidated someone would be who knows very little about this industry. What a great way to get new people excited and eager to buy if they're watching a class and they see a horse they like and they know it's for sale. How cool is that? Or, you can do what Saddlebred breeder Joan Hamilton does at Kalarama Farm. She puts a red dot on the horse's show number and, when the horse shows, that tells prospective buyers the horse is available.

“I will give credit to the Arabian industry for trying to showcase the Arabian horse with barn presentations and barn parties. I believe they have done a very nice job doing this, and I know it is a lot

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of work. I will also give kudos to horse shows that create a fun array of activities for their exhibitors in the form of ice cream socials, pizza parties, and dances. Horse shows often end up being the family vacation, so it's nice to offer something that exhibitors can share with their non-horse family that tags along. Perhaps, in the process, other family members will get involved once they feel more comfortable and see how much fun we have at our shows. How about a sports lounge? Arcade? We can do several things to attract the whole family. But, we have to create

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these opportunities—they don’t just create themselves. So, I believe the industry is starting to grasp this concept, and I see it as a positive step in the right direction. We have to make our events memorable, because that is what will keep people coming back to see these great horses.

“I also commend those who have tried to offer more prize money at the more competitive shows. I can’t tell you how many times my non-horse friends have said, ‘You spend all this money going to horse shows and you don’t win any money?’ Good point. I think we have to really focus on this and I thank the visionaries who are already addressing this subject.

“Finally, we have to remember that the most important thing in our consumer-based society is ‘perceived value,’ and right now we’re not doing much as a group to bring that to the table because when we finally do (and, eventually we will), that is when you will see me and my family back in the Arabian horse business.”

Renee Smith expressed the problem that many dedicated Arabian horse owners face. “I recently took my two mares to a show with a friend,” she noted, “and I spent almost \$1,500 when you consider gas, entries and lodging. Even though our family has a six-figure salary, I can only afford about three shows per year.”

She went on to add, “I have given my older show horse to a young family who shows at open shows because she is a good representative of our breed. I try to help people with their horses and give encouragement when I can.” I applaud that Arabians are at open shows; we need more of them there to demonstrate our horses’ abilities in so many different disciplines, and the fact that they are not necessarily “flighty.” However, it is discouraging if people show there because our shows are too expensive, or they can’t find a show that is appropriate for their horses’ abilities.

Both Mickey Aboussie and Harold Fenske offered suggestions for improving our shows in ways that would encourage new people and promote sales. “About seven years ago, I (proposed an idea) about promoting the Arabian horse by creating a system of evaluation of each horse based on a sheet resembling the CARFAX system ...” Mickey wrote. “It proposed a system of presenting each and every fact on the horse and assigning points to it, to give any buyer a general idea of the quality of animal they were considering to purchase.”

“The Arabian horse shows are missing out on a promotion by not making a show winner’s pedigree or bloodline available during or soon after the winners of a class are announced,” Harold agreed. “Typically, half of the competitors/winners in a class have been post entered. It is frustrating to drive five hours to a show, pay five bucks for a program and then not see the bloodlines or owners for a particular entry that catches your eye during the class. The winning entries are typically announced over a poor-quality speaker system and along with the shouts and whistles of the winner’s

fan base, much potentially valuable information is drowned out. Then the spectator has a decision—leave his seat and chase down the handler, hope to connect after the show (and stall areas always seem so busy after), or sit and watch the next class ready to enter the arena.

“In this age of computers I would think that even with post entries, the pedigrees, owners, and farm information could be created on a single page or two for each class and then distributed to those interested—hire some kids dressed in bright yellow t-shirts to walk through the stands with the handouts or maybe rent an electric display like professional sports teams.

“From what I have observed over the years, interest in pedigrees can become a disease that leads to all kinds of expenditures: horse ownership, breeding fees, travel and shows. I believe that Arabian shows could augment this addiction by helping interested observers connect the winning horses in each class to the farms and breeding that produced those winning entries.”

Major changes or reasonable adjustments, they are all ideas to think about. It's all about opening the door to more people becoming more involved in Arabian horses. The Arabian owners I hear from are committed to making things better, and to me, that is heartening. So much of the time, we seem stuck in in-house fighting, when what we need to do is reason for the whole breed. If we focus on creating a broader base, the breed and everyone involved in it will benefit.

Once again, thanks for your opinions and suggestions—keep them coming! I can be reached at info@battagliafarms.com. ■



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 APAHA 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 APAHA's Hoof Study Committees. For USEF, he served as Chair of the Show Standards Committee. He is a Large R judge, and was a founding member and past president of APAHA. As a breeder, he has contributed an impressive array of national winning Arabians and Half-Arabians.

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