



# Hosting a Horse Show

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**H**orse shows are a wonderful way to get together with other people and show what you and your horse have accomplished. When planning a show, whether a world-class competition or a backyard fun show, the following information will help you make your event a success.

## Purpose

First, decide the purpose of your show. You must clearly define this purpose and be able to communicate it to others because it will be the basis for all other decisions about the show. Once you know the purpose or goal of your show, your decisions on facility, equipment, management, volunteers, classes, rules, judge and budget can all reflect your purpose. Some decisions are apparent, such as making cost effective decisions if the show is intended to be a fund raiser, but sometimes choices are not as clearly defined. To deal with the many responsibilities of hosting a horse show, you must understand the purpose of the show as well as the organization you are representing.

## Facility

Next, decide where you will hold your event. Some barn/farm owners have the proper facilities for shows, and other hosts will have to rent a facility. If you are hosting a show at your own place, you will have to work with what you have as far as the arena footing, parking for cars and trailers, stalls and other accommodations. If you are renting, you can choose a location that has the features you want.

Decide if your facility should be covered or outdoors. Some disciplines and breeds (hunter/jumpers, dressage, walking/mountain/racking horses, saddlebreds, polo, sometimes speed events ) are used to showing outside, so if you are hosting a show only for those disciplines, an outdoor facility may be your choice. Other disciplines/breeds, such as reining, speed events, games, western pleasure (and the majority of Sanctioned Quarter Horse shows and classes), require indoor arenas.

If you choose to hold your show outdoors, have a plan B for inclement weather. Even though some disciplines/breeds are used to competing outside, you may have lower entry numbers if the weather forecast is bad. Sometimes you can get away with showing under rain, but it is absolutely imperative that you do *not* show under lightning.

**Footing** is an important consideration when choosing a facility. Certain footing types are not appropriate for all disciplines. For example, an ideal footing for reining will be too slick for speed events. Synthetic footing, although popular among hunter/jumpers, will not work at all for reining, although it may be fine for saddlebreds, W/R/M, minis, driving, dressage and western disciplines, among others.

**Size** is another important element when considering a location. Choose the proper size of the arena for the type of show you plan to host. Although most rail and in-hand classes can show in smaller rings, jumping and speed classes will require a larger ring for safety and easy maneuvering.

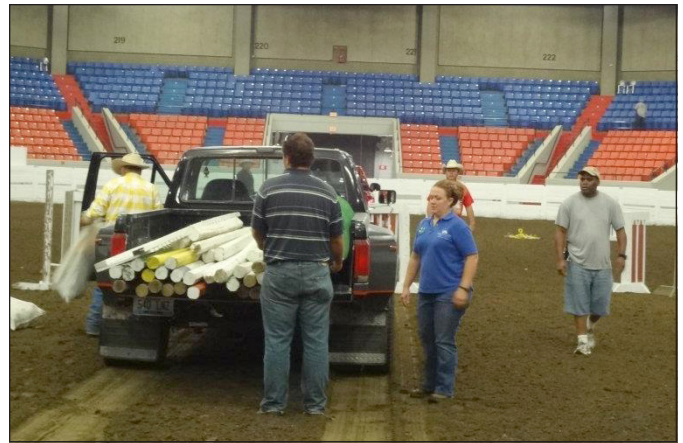
**Seating** is a prime concern if you plan to have spectators. Consider the seating options of the arena. Do they offer bleachers or permanent seating areas, or will you have to contract seating from a vendor or even have people bring their own folding chairs?

## Equipment

Some venues offer tractor drags between classes as part of the facility rental. If that service is not part of your agreement and you are planning a show that requires the arena to be dragged (speed events, jumping, reining), arrange to have a tractor and drag in place, and engage someone who can safely operate the machinery.

You will also need:

- barrels
- poles
- jumps
- dressage ring and letters
- cones
- PA system (microphone, speakers)
- tables and chairs for officials
- walkie-talkies for officials and volunteers
- measuring tape
- office supplies
- stop watches
- electronic timers
- directional signs
- back numbers
- extension cords
- other items pertinent to your particular show



(photo courtesy of Larry Curran)

## Management and Volunteers

The larger the show you are planning, the larger the number of paid staff or volunteers you will need. Hire a good staff of office help and volunteers who share in your beliefs about the show's purpose and will fully support your decisions. Take excellent care of your volunteers. A good experience is very important if you want them back.

Show management and officials include the organizers, host, office staff, judges and announcers. The ring steward assists the judge; other stewards are responsible for equipment, safety, lameness check, and the order that riders enter the ring. The show secretary is the person whose decision is final on all matters. Other people are necessary to enter horses and riders in classes, keep show records, measure distances (barrels, poles, jumps, etc) and run the managerial side of the show. You will need gate crew, ring set-up and break-down crew, people to handle awards and registration and possibly a tractor driver.



(In this photo we see the announcer and his secretary, the judge, and steward)



## Classes

Depending on the type of show you are hosting, whether multiple breeds and disciplines or a single discipline, arrange the show bill (schedule of classes) so that it has a natural flow. Usually classes are scheduled from easiest to most difficult, younger kids to adults, lower to higher jumps. Also, make sure that you don't schedule conflicting classes at the same time.

## Rules

The purpose of the show is important when deciding on a set of rules to follow. If your show is for a specific breed or discipline, participants usually expect to follow national association rules. However, with youth shows some exceptions to rules may be necessary to promote safety, horsemanship and animal welfare.

Whatever rules you chose to adopt, publish them in advance of the show so that people have ample time to adapt and comply. You cannot expect exhibitors to follow rules that were not made available before registration. If you adopt rules that differ from national association rules, provide an explanation. Posting rules ahead of the show, notifying participants of any changes prior to the show, and openness about the reason for a rule provides you with a solid platform should conflict arise. Ignorance of the rule does not exempt participants from it, therefore it is your job to make sure that people have ample access to the rules. A simple explanation can go a long way toward preventing conflict during the show.

## The Judge

The success of your show depends in part on the performance of the judge, so choosing and hiring a good judge is very important. Fairness, honesty and professionalism are key characteristics of a good judge. A professional judge does not allow bias to affect his or her placing of a class but rather will place the classes based on performance and according to a set of standards.

Before you begin to search for the perfect judge for your event, you must know what you need in a judge. Several classes, such as games (barrels, poles), jumper classes, or fun classes (egg and spoon), may not need a judge present. (Hire a steward for those classes if your budget does not allow for a judge's fee.) 4-H state and regional shows can vary in talent level so you might assume that hiring an accomplished judge is unnecessary; however, even though the talent may be subpar, integrity and education are of utmost

importance. Paying a little extra to get an experienced judge who can provide valuable feedback to the participants may be a better choice than hiring the lowest-cost judge you can find. If you are hosting a youth show, look for a "youth-friendly" judge who can give good feedback to the aspiring equestrians.

## Finding the right judge

Find the most appropriate judge for your show by referring to approved lists or by word of mouth. Breed and discipline associations (American Quarter Horse Association, United States Equestrian Federation) offer lists of approved judges every year. These judges pass a series of tests that include rulebook examinations and live judging. Word-of-mouth recommendations can also be valuable in choosing a horse show judge, especially when they come from those you know are trustworthy sources.

Feel free to ask for letters of recommendation from the judge to determine how other show managers describe him or her. Call the state associations and request a copy of the judge's evaluations. These materials should give you enough information to determine if a particular judge will match well with your horse show.

## Initial contact

After you find a judge you think will enhance your show, contact him or her. Meeting in person is the best choice for your initial discussion. A phone call may also be effective. Prepare a list of any questions you have for the judge, and take notes during the meeting or phone call.



(photo courtesy of Jennifer Moshier)

Introduce yourself and the organization you represent. Begin by discussing the details of the show: name, date, time, number of classes, level of competition, size, estimated length, age of riders, and discipline(s) of riding. Clearly communicate the purpose of your show. If the judge is available and seems suitable for your show, continue your discussion by asking about fees.

### *Fees and payment*

The judge will usually charge a judging fee on a per-day basis. Ask what is included (or not included) in the fee, such as mileage, meals, tolls or lodging. Meals and lodging can either be paid out of show funds and secured by the show committee or paid by the judge, who will then turn in receipts for reimbursement. Find out what the judge prefers and agree on how payment will be made.

Most people ask if judging fees are negotiable. The answer is not a simple one. Judges do realize that every horse show works on a budget, but remember that the judge has incurred expenses for training and continuing education. Judges with the most experience are paid accordingly.

Discuss with the judge when payment is expected. Most judges are paid for their expenses on the day of the show and will assume that you will do so if not told otherwise. However, in some fairs, show managers are required to turn in all of the judge's expenses in order to pay out money. Therefore, let your judge know exactly how and when he or she will be paid.

### *The contract*

After you have hired a judge for your show, send a contract. The contract should outline the following:

- Date, time, and location of the show
- Judge's name and address
- Judge's fees and reimbursement for expenses
- Your contact information (name, address, phone number)
- Your signature and date
- A place for the judge to sign and date

Include a self-addressed, stamped envelope for the judge's convenience in returning the contract. (Be sure to attach the proper amount of postage so that your contract will not go awry in the mail.) If you do not receive the contract back in a timely manner, call the judge with a polite reminder.



*(photo courtesy of Kathy Schramek Geelhoed)*

### *Additional information*

Keep your judge informed and prepared for the show. Give him or her all necessary information and update as necessary to relieve stress on the day of the show for both you and the judge. In addition to the contract, send the judge the following items:

- Map and directions to the show location
- Admission and parking passes, if necessary
- Show bill
- Rules and regulations for the show
- A list of the classes that will require patterns
- Information on lodging, if applicable

### **Biosecurity**

When horses from different backgrounds commingle in the same area, a prime opportunity is created for certain diseases to spread. Take precautions so that your show is not the point of a disease outbreak. Rhinopneumonitis, influenza and strangles commonly affect show and other performance horses. Advise participants to keep their horses currently vaccinated against these diseases. Require a negative Coggins test and a current Certificate of Veterinary Inspection (health certificate) for every horse that is entered in your show.

### **Safety and Insurance**

Keep safety first. You may choose to require that all participants wear approved equestrian helmets (or at least everyone under 18 years of age) while mounted. You may also choose to have EMT, first aid or ambulance available in case of an accident. Have proper insurance to cover your event and the participants, including your volunteers.



## Advertising, Awards and Sponsorship

Don't forget to advertise your show! Use invitations, flyers, social media, other webpages, radio or TV announcements. List the awards in your ads, as some people prefer to only show in competitions with good awards. Local businesses may be willing to donate prizes (supplements, halters, lead ropes, saddle pads, gift certificates to their shops) as sponsorship. Try to find sponsors to help with arena rental, judges' honorariums and reimbursements, and equipment.

## Resolving Conflict

Every competition creates an opportunity for someone to feel as though they were treated unfairly. Sound decision making and communicating clearly about the purpose of the show and the rules will reduce the likelihood of conflict. The stress of competition, the expense of owning a horse and the cost of showing in addition to the protective instinct of parents for their children (in the case of youth shows) creates a perfect recipe for conflict. Be diligent in your preparation for the show, and understand how to diffuse a hostile situation.

When dealing with an angry person:

- Listen carefully to the complaint. Sometimes a situation can be defused simply by letting a person feel that their voice has been heard. In some cases, people will talk themselves out or realize that their argument is not sound.
- Withhold your judgment and keep your own emotions in check.
- Speak in a normal tone and do not make the argument personal, no matter what the angry person says.
- Ask questions if you do not understand the complaint.

After listening to the angry person:

- Get information from other parties if other parties are involved.
- Evaluate the complaint. A safety or integrity concern should be addressed immediately. If the complaint is about a rule or a decision from the judge, usually nothing can be done.
- Make a thorough assessment of the situation.
- Ask other staff to assist if you need support or feel unsafe. Be clear that their role is to help defuse the situation and provide an account of what took place, not to rehash the argument or escalate the problem.

- Make a decision based on your best interpretation of the rules and the purpose of the show.
- Plan your response so that you can remain calm and professional when explaining your decision.

Possible responses:

- Accommodate the request. If the person has a valid argument and it can be corrected without harming others, make an effort to do so.
- Maintain the current judgment and plan to remedy the situation in the future. Sometimes the argument is valid but a change cannot be made at that point in the competition without affecting the rest of the participants and causing bigger issues. Sometimes the best answer is, "I'm sorry this happened. We will fix it before our next show."
- Maintain the judgment and offer an explanation of the rule. People sometimes get upset about things they don't fully understand. A thorough explanation may be the best solution to a rules conflict.

If the person is unsatisfied with your response:

- Remain calm and never allow name-calling, cursing, or physical contact.
- Refrain from arguing or any other actions that will escalate the situation or send it out of control.
- Ask the person to leave the premises. If they refuse, calmly state that you are willing to call law enforcement. Do so if necessary.

## Animal Welfare

You must be aware of the care of the animals at your show. You may have never seen the animals before, but you are still responsible for how they are treated on your



(photo courtesy of Jennifer Moshier)

premises. Allowing people to use excessive force, harmful training devices, illegal drugs and poor management practices is the same as condoning the behavior.

Many shows now are allowing the judge to disqualify a horse that is lame or too thin. It is good practice to have a qualified person check the horses prior to the show to prevent sending the wrong message or causing public humiliation to the disqualified participant. How you handle potential abusive situations can produce conflict; however, a conflict with an individual over a single horse is much better than the entire show and organization being labeled abusive for allowing such behavior.

When conflicts arise from addressing a welfare issue, approach the situation in an educational manner, seeking to teach rather than condemn. As hard as it may be to understand, many people who practice abusive behavior actually like their animals and do not realize what harm they are doing. Try to educate people on what is happening to the horse and reason with them rather than taking an accusatory approach.

Remember the purpose of your show. If the goal is to give a positive image and be portrayed as an organization that cares for the well-being of horses, it is imperative that you adopt welfare rules and consequences for displaying animal cruelty and animals in poor condition.

## The Day of the Show

The day of your show has arrived. The facility is set up, equipment is arranged, management and volunteers are standing by, and your judge is on his or her way. The following list of requirements for show day will help you have a stress-free and successful event.

- When your judge arrives, be the first to greet him or her.
- Introduce your judge to the show announcer and ring steward.
- Sit down in a quiet location and go over the show schedule with the judge and ring steward. Discuss how many placings the judge will need in each class (usually three, six, or ten) and any other awards that are necessary (Champion, Reserve, Danish ribbon system).
- Provide officials and volunteers with food and water, shelter, clipboards, paper and pens, and walkie talkies if necessary.

- As the trailers start to arrive, you may want the ground crew to show them where to park.
- The office should be open early so competitors can get their packets with class information and back numbers.
- Have the gate worker guide horses in and out of the ring.
- Let the judge and steward control what is happening inside the ring.
- Have volunteers set up jumps, barrels, and other obstacles that will be used in classes.
- Plan at least a 30-minute lunch break. Ask the judge what he or she would like to eat, and assign someone to bring lunch at the appropriate time.
- Allow bathroom breaks when necessary, and always have an escort available to ensure your judge's privacy away from exhibitors.
- Although exhibitors may want to ask the judge questions during the break, this may slow down the progression of the show. Inform them that the judge can speak to them after all the classes are over for the day.
- When the show is over, sit down with the judge and ask for a wrap-up of the day's classes.
- If you agreed to make payment at the end of the show, hand over the check. Ask for the mileage and any receipts for lodging and meals, if applicable, for documentation.

## After the show

When the show is over:

- Get help cleaning up and breaking down your set-up. (You should have assigned these jobs earlier.)
- Return borrowed equipment. (If something broke during the show, have it repaired before returning it.)
- Tally scores if you're planning a series with awards at the end.
- Pay any remaining bills.
- Send thank you cards to sponsors and volunteers.



Your reputation and the reputation of your organization are riding on the success of your show. Using these guidelines will help you host a successful horse show. Good luck!