

Warm-up Ring Etiquette

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Heading up to show is a stressful situation for everyone: riders, parents, coaches, horses, etc. There is always that gut feeling that you could have practiced more at home. Therefore, invariably, most everyone will want to do some last-minute training in the warm-up ring.

While it is understood that the warm-up ring is a chaotic place to be, warm-up ring etiquette should be expected at every show and taught in every lesson program. Everyone needs to practice. A good warm up is extremely important for the health of the horse; it also helps the rider and horse acclimate to the new environment. So in the name of having a more productive ride both in the warm-up ring and then later in the show ring, there are some (sometimes unofficial) rules that everyone should follow.

Control. Have control of your horse. This is easier said than done and difficult for a green horse, but where will the green horse learn show manners if he never goes to the show? Do your best and follow the rules below to make the experience a positive one for your own mount as well as the other riders and horses.

Some older books have a color of tail ribbon for every horse category there may exist. To simplify matters, we propose that all green, young, cranky, and kickers should wear a red ribbon in their tail.

Be observant. Pay attention to what's going on around you. You can prevent accidents just by being observant and taking in the warm-up ring as a whole. Don't just concentrate on your ride and forget about the others around you. Be cognizant and aware of your surroundings. Stay away from a horse and rider who don't seem to have good control.

Lunging. It seems everywhere you go (open shows, breed shows, U.S. Equestrian Federation shows) there's always that one person who thinks the warm up arena is for his or her personal use only. Certain shows have recognized the safety issues with horses being lunged together with horses



being ridden, so they have designated multiple round pens to be used for lunging, making lunging in the warm-up pen illegal (for that show). But not every show can afford to do that. So if you absolutely, 100 percent have to lunge your horse, try to find a place away from the warm-up ring. This may mean that you will need to be creative, but it is the safest way to accomplish this.

Traffic. Try to go with the direction of traffic. It is safer and easier to see what is happening around you if everyone is going the same direction.

Passing. The passing lane is generally to the inside. If you're trying to pass a slower working horse traveling in the same direction, pass him to the inside and announce to the rider that you're doing so. Allow at least one horse length before moving back to the rail. Sometimes this is not possible in the warm-up ring, and you have to ride more closely. In these cases, use extra caution.

Different speeds. If you're walking and everyone else is either trotting or cantering, leave the rail/track for those who are traveling faster. This is even more important if you need to halt to fix stirrups, gloves, helmet, etc.

Traveling in a different direction. If you absolutely cannot go in the same direction that the majority of riders are going, pass left shoulder to left shoulder. This is universal on all disciplines. Horses can become agitated when seeing another horse coming in his direction, so if everyone knows where they should be while passing by, your horse

will become less anxious. This is a cardinal rule, and many close calls and accidents can be avoided if it is followed.

Rider down or loose-horse protocol. For safety and kindness for fellow riders, it is imperative that riders in the ring halt after a fall. If a horse is loose, it is safer for you to dismount from your own horse and wait until the situation has been resolved.

Socializing. The warm up ring is not a place for socialization. It's ok to have other friends who are also warming up. But please don't just stop at the rail to carry on a conversation. Even if you think you and your buddy are not disrupting the flow, it is very likely that you are—you just are not paying enough attention to realize it. If your coach needs to hand you something, go out of the ring, pick it up, and then go back to the ring. A stopped horse at the rail is a recipe for disaster.

Keep a space between your horse and others. There is no need to be so close to each other. Make good use of the allotted space. If your horse is losing its mind and is totally out of control, and not manageable in the warm-up ring, remove yourself from the ring and find another place to warm up.

Spectators, family members, dogs, and children: Stay out of the way of horses going in and out of the warm-up ring.

Whips. If carrying a whip, keep it flat against your side. Poking, or even just touching other horses with your whip is rude behavior.

Noise. Be aware of how loud you are. When clucking, smooching, or giving any vocal cues to your horse, do it in a lower voice so other horses around you are not confused.

For warm-up rings where jumping is involved:

- Do not monopolize the jumps. Everyone deserves a chance to warm up his or her horse.
- Call out your jumps. Something as simple as “heads up” is better than silence and the element of surprise. It is better to specify which jump or jump line you will be approaching, include color and type of jump. Be loud and be specific.
- It is important to have people on foot in the warm-up ring to reset jumps that get knocked down. Please watch out for them if you are the rider. Please be aware at all times if you are on foot.
- Try not to cut someone off, but if you do, it is imperative that you apologize afterwards. Don't repeat the mistake.

To summarize what would be a good use of the warm-up ring and great warm-up ring etiquette:

Have a plan. Know what your horse needs, fulfill those needs, and leave the arena with a prepared horse who is ready to compete.

Make good use of your time. Competition demands much from you and horse both mentally and physically. Don't get yourself in a pickle in the warm-up ring so you don't stress out in the competition.

Use common sense. Listen to your instructor and listen to your gut.

Relax and breathe. Talk to your horse and use other tips that you've learned to calm yourself and your horse down.

Have fun!

Photo courtesy of Clayton Jerrell