

From the Judge's Perspective

By Anne Cizadlo, Marion, IA

Besides the countless hours of riding and lessons and clinics that we take, the hundreds of books and articles that we read, the videos that we watch and all the information that we process about dressage on a daily basis, somehow, many of us still feel nervous and unprepared when we go to sign up for a show. Why is that? Here are some pointers to help you prepare during the final stages before the show.

Before you send in the entry form, pick a couple of the tests that you think that you are prepared for and run through them at the end of a training session. Or, better yet, discuss with your instructor the possibility of ending a lesson by riding a test. This is an extremely helpful exercise, because it will pinpoint the parts of the test that are smooth and relaxed and also the parts of the test that you need to brush up on. This will guide your practice for the next couple of weeks prior to the show. Perhaps the test that you chose for today was a little too easy or a little too difficult for you and your horse for today. This may alter what you enter. Make sure that you try this exercise in enough time before the closing date to try another test (easier or harder) at another training session a couple days later to see exactly what you should enter.

Once you and your trainer have decided what tests would be appropriate at the show, you don't exactly want to practice the tests start to finish, but know the tests well enough to start practicing pieces as exercises in your training sessions. Again, don't overdo this part or your horse will start to learn the tests himself and anticipate. Many riders tell me that their horses can't practice the tests at all because they will get to know the patterns and anticipate everything. Please remember that you don't want to have to ride the test so that everything is a surprise to your horse! It will look that way in the presentation. Part of test riding is learning to control that anticipation and, if you have a horse that does this even at the lower levels, that is a good opportunity to learn to deal with this. Someday, when this horse is riding Third level, you would hope that you don't have to come around the corner and kick him and whack him with the whip to wake him up enough to do an extended trot! Just learn to manage his anxiousness to work for you and remember that you will be grateful for it in the future!

As the show gets closer, another way to relieve the stress is to try to do a few things at a time to get ready. The weekend before, for example, pack some of the things that you will need, but not until show day, such as your show clothes, show pads, buckets for the stalls, grain and other items that you can pack early. This will give

you time to prepare for your rides when the time comes instead of worrying if you remembered the feed pan. This is also a great time to start a checklist of what to pack so that if you do forget something, you will have all week to remember to get it in the trailer.

Spend a day during the week giving your tack a good cleaning. Even if you ride for a day or two before show day, at least you will only need to give your tack a quick clean even after you warm-up on Friday night. This will leave more time on Friday for braiding. Another good idea is to try to give your horse a good scrub bath a couple days before show day. He still might roll in the mud before the show, but it will still be easier to bathe him if he's relatively clean prior to the day before the show. You can also use a day during the week to do the clipping and trimming on his bridle path, face and fetlocks, bang his tail, condition his tail and get him looking like he's ready to go to a show. Again, then once you get there, some of your work will already be done.

I will always advise trying to travel to the show grounds the day or night before the show starts. This will give you a chance to scope out the facility (even if you have been there before) as well as school your horse in or around the competition rings. It is sometimes a great advantage to allow the horse to see the show ring prior to the competition day. You will also be able to get all of the details ironed out, like picking up your number and paying any last minute fees, getting your stall and tack area organized so that things are easy to find before you go to your warm-up.

The night before the show is a great time to spend some time relaxing and going over your test, making last minute clean-ups to your horse and your tack and making sure that most things are in order for the next day. This will make the competition day run much smoother and give you more time to focus on your test and your warm-up strategy rather than trying to find your boot pulls and your show sheen!

(Next month: Warm-up Strategies)

Iowa-based USEF "r" dressage judge Anne Cizadlo is a USDF Bronze, Silver and Gold Medalist and active competitor in dressage from Training Level through Grand Prix. She has also organized several schooling and recognized shows in Iowa and Wisconsin each year in addition to training and teaching students in the Midwest.