

The Meaning of Ribbons

For me, going to a horse show is like watching a foreign language film without the subtitles. I get the gist of what's going on, but I'm a little fuzzy on the details. I know, for instance, that conformation is very important, but the meaning of the word is a mystery to me. If what I hear in the bleachers is any indication, it's a mystery to a lot of people. It is just one of many mysteries.

The biggest mystery is why people go to horse shows in the first place. Why do perfectly rational human beings spend so much time and effort to ride horses in circles? A horse show is like an out of control merry-go-round. What's the point?

I'm not the only one asking this question. Even the most hard-core horse show veterans occasionally (once a week) stop and ask themselves if this is really worth getting up at 5 a.m. and hauling a reluctant animal (husband, father, boyfriend) half way across the state on a rainy - or worse, sunny - Saturday.

To be sure, it's not like horse show competitors don't get anything out of it. They get ribbons. After unloading their \$10,000 horses from their \$20,000 trailers, they ride around a ring in \$500 outfits in quest of a 50 cent ribbon.

Ribbons. They are cheap and plentiful. Anyone who has shown horses for any length of time has bunches of them. And so what? A ribbon display hanging in the family room will certainly impress an outsider, but when is the last time you invited a horse friend over to look at your ribbon collection? It would be like showing off your hay bales:

By Bob Goddard, Equine Humorist

"Did you see my bales stacked in the barn? Aren't they cool?"

"Yeah ... we all have those ..."

My wife, Jenny, accuses me of not understanding the value of ribbons. She says that ribbons are a genuine indicator of success. According to her, ribbons represent both participation and achievement.

"Bob, competitive riding takes dedication, hard work, and overcoming fear and self doubt. What's wrong with giving riders a token that symbolizes these things?"

Wow. I'm overwhelmed by Jenny's logic and I have no answer to her question. This is an epiphany for me and I need to sit down and rethink things. Because, clearly, the girls have brained-washed their mother. Brats. I think the physical and emotional wear from all those 5 a.m. wake-up calls is leaving her vulnerable to psychological manipulation. The woman is delirious.

"And, Bob, if it's so easy, if there is 'nothing to it', then why don't you give it a try." Jenny nods toward the show ring. "Hilliary's class is just about done. I'm sure she would lend you Bruiser for a while."

This is not an idle challenge. The so-called Greenhorn class is next. Horse show organizers are sadistic by nature and always make sure they include this despicable event.

"Greenhorn" is a class that is supposed to be for inexperienced riders. But for some reason, it includes mostly unsuspecting parents. The result looks like one of those electric football games where the players end up all over the field in all different directions with little real purpose or affect.

The bewildered parents hold on as the horses trot around wherever they please while the kids sit around the ring and make fun of them. It's dangerous.

"Jenny, there isn't enough beer east of the Mississippi to get me to do that."

"But, honey, if there are less than six riders, you're *guaranteed* a ribbon!"

This conversation is out of control. But, I'm saved by the P.A. guy. He is ready to announce the placings for Hilliary's class. At a horse show, the instant they begin to announce the placings everything gets real quiet. As each winner is announced, the silence is broken by hoots and cheers from small knots of bystanders. Kind of like at high school graduation. The tension builds as the announcer works his way from sixth to first. Those not yet picked know that either they are going to place high - or not at all. This set-up tends to create a lot of jaw dropping surprise or jaw dropping disappointment.

Today, we drop our jaws for Hilliary and Bruiser, because they got first in Western Reining - her weakest event. She's never placed higher than fifth, but she has been working on it for weeks. Shock turns to pride. That's my kid. She has my last name. And I paid for *that* horse. I high-five Jenny and give Hilliary an atta-girl - as she leaves the ring with her blue ribbon.

Yeah, we will be back next week.

Bob Goddard is a freelance writer from Ravenna, MI.

He is currently finishing a new book:

Horse Crazy! A Tongue-in-Cheek Guide to Parents of

Horse Crazy Kids

He can be reached by e-mail at bobgoddard@verizon.com