

A man with a mustache, wearing a white cowboy hat, a grey long-sleeved shirt with a dark neckerchief, and dark pants, is riding a brown horse with a white blaze on its face. He is in a western riding posture, holding the reins. The background shows a dirt arena with a line of green trees in the distance under a clear sky.

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF

Western Pleasure

By Lindsay Grice

Fads often surface as trainers and riders attempt to achieve what they think is a good result. However, stock horse associations have been quick to change their rules to eliminate negative trends and ensure the welfare of the horse.

Popularity & controversy often go hand in hand.

We both love and hate our celebrities and politicians — whatever the case, we love to talk about them!

Similarly, the Western pleasure class, while historically the most popular class in the stock horse breeds, comes with its share of criticism.

In my travels as a clinician, I am regularly “talking horse” with equestrians from various disciplines. Knowing that I judge and compete within the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) circuit, the subject of Western pleasure often comes up with the dressage, hunter, and jumper riders in my clinics.

No discipline is without its fads and extremes. Dressage, show jumping, and gaited horses have all been accused of unethical practices and “unnatural” training techniques.

In reality, everything we do with horses is unnatural. I'm quite sure that any horse would rather be out on pasture eating grass than loping around a Western pleasure ring or doing plaffe, a sliding stop, or barrel racing pattern.

Most horse people admire the calmness and manners expected by competitors in the Western disciplines. This was one of the factors that attracted me years ago to the Quarter Horse circuit and I have carried over this level of respect and focus into the teaching and training I do with all horses and riders. In the Western world, whether it's reining, Western horsemanship, or competitive trail, mistakes matter. Judges penalize poor attitude or variance in straightness, stride, or frame. Consistency and accuracy is prized on par with quality movement.

So if calm and mannerly is good, even more calm and mannerly to the point of robotic must be better, right?

That was the swing that Western pleasure took in the 1980s.

Joe Carter, AQHA director and one of the association's most respected judges, shared his thoughts with me: “Sometimes I dreaded getting called to judge in some areas. I knew that Western pleasure here would be terrible — too carried away and there'd be a lot of pressure on me. At one show I placed just three horses. The others were too low and too extreme.”

In an effort to produce a horse that was the picture of composure, exhibitors presented horses with their heads below the level of their withers, on a draped rein, at an ambling pace. I was just making the

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While the Western pleasure horse should be calm and mannerly, it's also important he have quality movement that is cadenced and straight.

