

move from the hunter/jumper circuit into the Western disciplines at this time and I was puzzled to see sullen "peanut rollers" placing at the top of the class, while showing off their four beat lope.

"During this period of these fads we lost the horse's movement, getting caught up in the idea of 'the slower, the better,'" said Christine Little, a Decker, Manitoba Quarter Horse breeder and AQHA specialized judge. "Suddenly horses went from being natural movers to these mechanical looking animals, dragging their heads, loping down the ring sideways, and not truly loping as a result. Trainers were making Western pleasure twice as hard on themselves and the horses since we were changing so much of their natural way of going. I believe there was a time that the horses were forgotten about and it suddenly became a competition to see who the best trainer was, who could create the best 'robot' so to speak. Then suddenly everyone took a step back, or maybe listened to the outsiders' criticisms, and said 'wow, our horses really are not moving like horses anymore.'"

Trends and Changes

Among stock horse breeds, the AQHA has been the consistent leader of the pack with the others close on its heels in terms of guidelines and revisions. Each year upon receiving my handbook I scan the pages for the underlined rule changes. They are always plentiful, and many of them over the past decade have pertained to Western pleasure. Amendments have been quick to put out the fires of undesirable fads, such as:

HEADSETS (even the word grates on me!). In an effort to display the submissiveness of the pleasure horse, head carriages became so low that they were a picture of subservience. The term "peanut rollers" was fitting for these competitors. Rule changes followed, stating that horses

shown with their ears below their withers or noses behind the vertical would be disqualified.

FOUR BEATING. The walk, jog, and lope lost their natural cadence and slowed to a crawl. Normally a three beat gait, the lope gained a beat and lost any suspension at all. It deteriorated to a flat shuffle which would result in most horsemen calling the vet if seen out in the pasture.

Gaits became slower as competitors made every effort to lay claim to the rail, never to pass the horse in front. When a gait transition was called, judges endured a long delay before someone was brave enough to initiate, which inevitably necessitated pulling out to the inside lane.

"Sometimes as a judge you have to do things to make them show their horses. At one large show I chose not to cut a large Western pleasure class so the riders would have to get out and pass," Carter recalled. "At another I had to keep calling for more extension until they got up to speed. The people were just about ready to hang me, saying 'What are you doing to the Western pleasure?' 'That ain't Western pleasure,' I said. I like a good challenge."

In 1991, AQHA responded with a rule that penalized excessively slow gaits, followed by rules that required forward motion and prompt transitions when called for.

Like a gun at an arcade, the stock horse associations have shot at the fads of overly canted hips, illegal drug use, unnatural tails, over-used spurs, and underweight horses.

The challenge has been to get the judges, many of whom also compete, to get on board and enforce the rules. At recent judging conferences I've attended, we have been reminded to judge by the specifics in the handbook and watched videos depicting both unacceptable and breathtakingly beautiful moving Western pleasure horses.

Carter has been on task forces and educational committees to address the problem and advise the judges. "It's at the little weekend shows we tend to have the most problems. Since we've been monitoring the big

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Today Western pleasure horses must travel with their ears at or above their withers and noses at or in front of the vertical.

shows — the Quarter Horse and Appaloosa World Championships, for instance — things have really improved. The classes are videoed and the judges are given guidance before the shows. Our aim is that these shows will set the standard for the weekend shows.”

How did we get caught up in this stuff?

Ontario Appaloosa Association president and trainer, Kris Simpson, shed some light on this. “I think a lot of the fads Western pleasure has endured come from the quest to go slow on a loose rein. People will always try new trends to try to reach what they think is a good result. Unfortunately this is not always so. I myself have always tried to maintain proper movement and not be too trendy, but it is very easy to fall into the trap of copying what you see. [Each negative trend] was a result of that quest.”

Her husband, AQHA judge Jamie Simpson, feels that many negative trends resulted when people with less talented horses tried to copy the more talented horses and put them into a box they weren't meant to be in.

As a trainer and coach, I understand the pressure to “produce.” Staying power in the industry depends on one's ability to have your horses in the winner's circle. Clients have a lot invested in their horses and many expect results. Missing training deadlines for the big shows costs the owner in entry fees paid up front. Ambition and simple financial survival motivate people to push the limits of good sense.

Trainers Jason Duquette and Suzanne Pickard based in Bothwell, Ontario, focus on the bigger US events. “Futurities are becoming more popular because there is a chance to profit. There is higher money at stake so people are striving to find the best movers to compete. [Futurities] are attracting a lot of money and have higher entry fees which (unlike shows like a weekender or even the Congress) eliminate the person that just comes to ‘show their horse for fun.’ These people don't spend hundreds of dollars for one class to just ‘show their horse for fun.’”

Still Popular

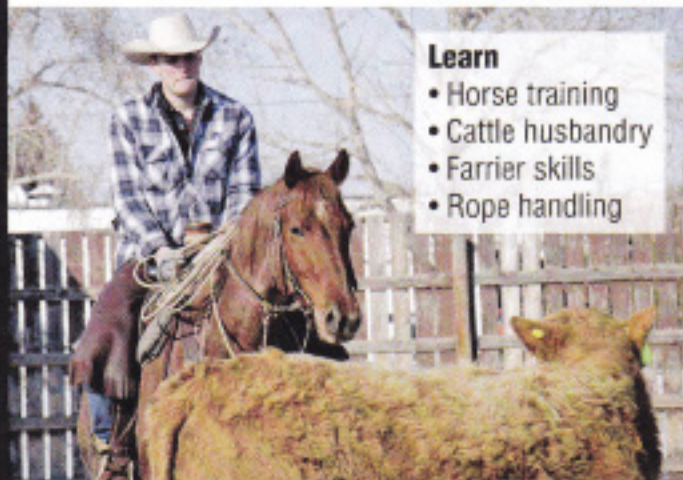
Because of the specialization of the Western pleasure horse and the questionable techniques to produce a winner, many of my amateur

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