

HorseWise

WITH LINDSAY GRICE



When things go wrong in the show ring...

In March, I, along with two accomplished judges (one hunter/jumper, one reining), presented a clinic at the Can Am Equine Expo in London, Ontario, highlighting the common mistakes judges see riders making in the show ring, and how to prevent them. In the clinic I asked riders to look beyond the usual fixes, which often focus on rider mechanics, to consider why things go wrong in the first place.

From minor errors such as a chip before a hunter fence or a slight over-spin in reining, to

major blunders like a refusal or a spook (after which everything disintegrates), the source of the problem can often be found through the science of equine behaviour. Here are some examples:

When the judge's card says CC (cross canter)

...the post-class coach's commentary usually includes "you should have used your outside leg." But let's dig deeper into what caused that horse's hind end to slip off the track, resulting in a lost hind lead in the first place. This error is commonly seen at the in-gate, as the draw of the barn and buddies can be a powerful magnet for the herd oriented horse. The rider may steer his head, but the remainder of the horse fishtails towards home.

From a horse's perspective, there's safety in numbers. Riders can counteract the horse's draw to the herd by doing the opposite of what the horse is inclined to do at the gate. Here are some ideas: In the practice ring, leg yield away from the gate with every pass. Don't stop to rest or dismount at the gate. You can even school in the gate itself by trotting in and out, and backing through it. Use your imagination.

If the judge records HH (high head)

...in the approach to a jump or a run down to a sliding stop, the source of the issue is usually that the horse, claustrophobic by nature, feels trapped by a rider who, out of nerves or a lack of balance, is hanging on the reins.

Anticipation... shows up on the judge's card in lots of ways. Horses are creatures of routine and learn by trial and error, or operant conditioning. Research indicates that it takes an average of five to seven repetitions to learn a skill, but that any routine learned by fear is learned in only one or two repetitions. In the wild you don't get multiple opportunities to learn to flee from a cougar! A horse soon loses his composure at the centre of the ring in a reining pattern because that's where all

BELOW: The source of problems in the show ring can often be determined by looking at the science of equine behaviour.



PHOTO: ROBIN DUNCAN PHOTOGRAPHY



ABOVE: If your horse is carrying his head too high, check that you are not hanging on the reins. Your horse may be feeling trapped and claustrophobic.

the transitions, flying changes, and spins start. And if they start with a nervous rider abruptly stepping on the gas pedal, he'll scoot out of place faster than a teen driver burning rubber out of the high school parking lot.

As for the hunter who starts to jig in a hack class at the sound of the announcer's microphone clicking to call for the canter, if a rider has startled him once or twice with a hasty outside leg cue, he'll start to dread the transition like the boogie man. Upon hearing the call to canter, a better plan would be to take a deep breath, collect your horse, slide your leg back, and then ask him to step softly into the gait.

Coach, trainer, equine behaviour lecturer, and judge, Lindsay Grice, has prepared horses and riders for wins at major horse shows in the US and Canada for over 20 years. Starting her career on the hunter A-circuit, she continues to actively compete in both English and Western events, specializing now in the AQHA circuit.

Lindsay teaches Equine Behaviour for the University of Guelph Performance Horse Handler course. In her popular clinics, she draws on the principles of equine psychology and sports psychology to bridge the communication gap between horses and riders and explains both the "hows" and "whys" of training and showing.

Lindsay is an Equine Canada judge and AQHA specialized judge, as well as a certified Equine Canada and NCCP (multi event) coach.

When asked what she loves about her job, Lindsay responds, "I love putting complex principles of riding into a language that riders can understand. As someone who's been there – forgotten courses, made training mistakes, listened to hollering coaches, and still made it to the winner's circle, I share with my students the keys I wish I'd known."

For more training and showing tips, visit her site, www.lgrice.com.



"But he never does that at home!"

... A horse hasn't thoroughly learned the "system" until he responds correctly to your aids every time, everywhere. A horse show is a scary environment for a prey animal. Like asking a kid to do a few math equations on the park bench at Wonderland before going on the roller coaster, the atmosphere at a show makes it difficult for a horse to concentrate. A wise rider will systematically test all the buttons thoroughly in the warm-up ring before going in the class. If any are rusty or stuck, don't compete! When things go wrong in the show ring, you can't stop the class and re-school the problem. Exiting the ring without fixing the problem begins a downward spiral of "untraining" your horse.

When we're working with an equine partner whose native language and world view differs from ours, we're bound to have things not turn out exactly as we'd hoped in the show ring. Learning what makes your horse tick is the key to a winning partnership. 🍁