

# Competition

WE HUMANS ARE A COMPETITIVE BUNCH. IT'S not hard to imagine that, shortly after the first horses were domesticated, the first horse race took place when one rider said to another, "I'll bet my horse can beat yours to that tree!"

For as long as horses and humans have partnered, there have been horse races, chariot races, pulling contests, jumping competitions, and the like. The competitive arena has given equine superstars a public stage on which to display their talents, giving legions of fans the chance to enjoy the athletic prowess of horses such as Brentina, Gem Twist, Hollywood Dun It, Wing Commander, and Winsome Adante.

The American Horse Council Foundation estimates that more than 2.7 million horses are involved in competition in the United States every year.<sup>62</sup> The vast majority of riders don't have Olympic or World Championship ambitions, however; they just want to compete for the fun of it and for the satisfaction of achieving personal goals. On any summer weekend, you can find horse enthusiasts around the country putting their skills on the line in an array of competitions, from informal backyard shows to officially sanctioned championships.

## **The Benefits of Competition**

We all carry with us poignant memories of time spent with our favorite equines—a quiet moment of affection shared in the stall late at night or a lazy trail ride through beautiful scenery.

If you've spent much time competing, your mental memory book likely also includes a snippet of a moment full of possibility—standing at the entrance to an arena with your horse, looking ahead at the challenge that lies before you. It might be a show ring full of competitors, a trio of barrels, or a perfectly groomed dressage arena just awaiting your horse's hoofprints. It's a moment you've worked hard to reach: your horse is fit and confident, facing the test ahead with ears pricked. You are both perfectly turned out, with appropriate spit and polish, and stand ready to show the judge your best.

So much work goes into those brief moments of glory in the competition arena. Months, or even years, of preparation: lessons, daily practice, moving carefully up through the levels. Ribbons and prizes may come along the way, but the greatest reward often is simply the

partnership you experience with your horse. You meet the challenges of competition together, trusting in each other's skills and sharing in the satisfaction of your accomplishments, as well as the disappointment of defeat.

There's something truly special about this aspect of the equine-human partnership, which perhaps explains why so many amateur riders find themselves drawn to competition, even though most have no illusions about ever reaching their sport's highest levels. These riders happily take time off from work, travel long distances, and spend hard-earned money on show fees, just for those opportunities to shine in the arena, even though they may last only a few minutes. That test is what motivates many horse people to improve their riding and horse-management skills, thereby indirectly benefiting their equine partners.

Competition (sometimes) provides its own rewards to the rider, in the form of ribbons, prizes, and recognition. There's nothing so satisfying as working toward a goal, matching the skills you've learned and your horse's talents against your fellow competitors, and being rewarded for it. While ribbons and prizes are wonderful, many other benefits are equally important, even if you can't hang them on the wall or put them in a trophy case.

Organized equestrian sport provides a ready-made ladder up which one can progress. Let's say you've decided to start out eventing at Beginner Novice. You're introduced to the basic concepts of the sport, where the challenges are achievable for good riders who are capable of an introductory level of competition. The dressage test rewards obedience and accuracy, but doesn't demand perfection. Cross-country allows the horse and rider to learn how to "gallop" (a nice canter is perhaps more accurate) and navigate simple natural obstacles in the open. Show jumping provides a final test, but with a very forgiving and elementary course.

As you move up the levels, more concepts are introduced. The dressage includes more difficult movements, and judges expect a higher degree of self-carriage from the horse. Cross-country courses begin to include water, ditches, or banks—small and easy challenges at first, but gradually

becoming more difficult. Show jumping begins to demand that the horse be agile and careful.

The rules for each level spell out not only the height and width of fences, but also the degree of difficulty. You will easily sense if your horse is enjoying the challenge as much as you are. (If not, it is your responsibility to do what's best for him—even if that means scaling back your goals or finding an alternate activity that allows him to thrive.)

This logical progression is set forth by the governing associations for every sport. Judges, trainers, riders, and other experts determine what should be required and when to allow horses and riders to progress safely, learn the skills they need, and enjoy their success. The progression through the levels provides a built-in set of goals that doesn't necessarily revolve around placings. Winning doesn't need to be your only objective (and it definitely doesn't matter to your horse—your approval is his reward); it can also be advancing up the levels while still remaining competitive. There's a great sense of satisfaction in starting out at the lowest levels with a green horse and gradually moving up as the horse gains confidence.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with embracing that competitive spirit, if you do so with respect for the horse and your fellow competitors. On those rare occasions when all the pieces come together, and both you and your horse perform to the absolute best of your abilities, you *do* deserve to be rewarded with a ribbon or cooler or first-place check. They're rewards for your hard work and your skill—enjoy them!

Your placings serve another important function. They can help you measure how well you're meeting the criteria for your sport. Winning should never be “the only thing,” but it certainly is a good gauge of how well you're doing.

For example, if you participate in endurance rides, and your horse consistently finishes among the “best conditioned,” you can feel pretty confident about tackling some tougher or longer rides. If dressage is your sport, and you're consistently placing near the bottom of your

classes, you're probably not ready to move up to the next level, as you haven't shown mastery of your current level. You should keep working on the skills required for the classes you're showing in, perhaps seeking guidance from a trainer or instructor who can help you pinpoint where you're lacking.

By nature, a competition pits you against your peers and fellow equestrian enthusiasts, as you're all trying to best each other for the top prize. But the horse world is rather small, and in most sports, your adversaries in competition are also your friends. You all attend the same competitions throughout the year, and perhaps even ride at the same barns or with the same trainers. You may even have grown up together in Pony Club or 4-H!

While there are exceptions, most equestrian competitors are friendly and cheer each other on. They offer hearty congratulations when you perform well enough to win, but they are also there to help you up and dust you off when things don't go quite so well (and catch and load your horse into the trailer, if need be).

Perhaps the supportive atmosphere is due to the fact that horses have such a way of humbling their human partners. Even the best of riders falls off occasionally or deals with horses who don't feel like being cooperative on a given day. An otherwise perfect effort can be marred by a spook, a buck, or an act of God. When your athletic partner is a species that can be stricken with panic at the sight of an umbrella, you have to be prepared for things not to go your way. The more you compete, the more such humbling scenarios, best met with sportsmanship and good humor, fill your memory book.

Winning is great fun, but for every success is a disappointment, and it's the ability to accept these gracefully, pat your horse, and return to ride another day that is perhaps the most valuable thing you'll gain. This may be the greatest contribution that competition can make to a horseman's education—sportsmanship.

## The Drawbacks

Although taking part in competition has many benefits, it also has its downsides. Competition is hard work, for both horse and rider, and it's important to be cognizant of the effects the additional stress and mileage will have on your horse.

Imagine that you've traveled to a multiday hunter/jumper show a couple of hours from home. It's a warm summer day, but your horse stayed comfortable and cool in an airy trailer with a full haynet to keep him busy. You get to the show and hand-walk your horse around the grounds so he can stretch his legs and see all the sights. You find your stall in the temporary stabling area: it's smaller than you would like, but you've bedded it deeply.

You arrive at the showgrounds at 4 A.M. the following day to braid your horse's mane and tail and tack up for a quick school in the main arena. Then it's back into the stall for your horse, where he can munch on some hay while awaiting your early-afternoon hunter classes.

After lunch, you tack up again and head to the schooling area to warm up for your first class. The footing isn't the best and the ring is very crowded. You warm up well and head over to the main ring, where you and your horse lay down a beautiful round in your first class. Unfortunately, your second class is delayed by a medical emergency in the ring. You return to the schooling area to re-warm up, since your horse has now been standing around for half an hour, and then have another lovely round in your second class.

It's now mid-afternoon—it's hot and there's no shade. You have one more ride, in an under-saddle class, but it will be delayed for half an hour by two riders in your division who first must complete the over-fences class. You remount and head back to the schooling ring for another quick warm-up, ride in your last class, then finally untack for the day.

This hurry-up-and-wait routine is repeated on days two and three of the show. By the third day, your horse is a little stiff from being stuck in that small stall with no turnout, so you try to hand-walk and graze him

several times a day. On the final day, it rains. The arena footing is deep, sloppy mud, and your horse slips on the approach to a fence and slides to a stop. Fortunately, he's not hurt, but the refusal means you are out of the running for the division championship. Nevertheless, you pack up for the long trip home feeling like it was a successful outing.

Over the course of this hypothetical show, your horse was ridden and jumped much more than normal, over sometimes-suspect footing and in summer heat. His routine was disrupted, with daily early-morning braiding and meals coming at different times, depending on class schedules, and he didn't have the benefit of his usual turnout time.

Even with a conscientious owner who doesn't enter an excessive number of classes, warms his horse up sparingly, and provides lots of supportive care (liniment baths, standing wraps overnight, lots of hand-walking), showing is a lot of work for the horse. He has the mental stress of being away from home in a new place with a new routine, and the physical stress of extra work in sometimes less-than-ideal conditions. If you show many weekends, that stress is multiplied.

Most veteran competition horses know their jobs and settle into a show routine easily. If a horse doesn't enjoy it, he'll let his rider know. Conscientious riders do their best to minimize the mileage on their horses and won't hesitate to withdraw from competition if they feel the weather is too hot or cold or the footing is too hard or too sloppy. "Save him for another day" is a mantra you hear often around caring competitors.

Unfortunately, the adrenaline of the show ring and our own competitive natures can sometimes drown out the voices of our inner horsemen. For professional riders and trainers, competition isn't just for fun, it's how they make their living, and their paying clients want top placings. When a client's expensive new horse isn't progressing as quickly as anticipated, or doesn't seem to be quite so talented as was expected, there can be tremendous pressure to rush the horse or resort to extreme methods to squeeze a higher level of performance from him. And in the heat of competition, when a top ribbon or prize is on the line, there's always the temptation to take unacceptable risks or to push the horse dangerously close to, or beyond, his limits.

Even for amateurs, there's a great deal of self-imposed pressure. Going to competitions requires a lot of time, money, and preparation. Understandably, those who compete hope to do well. Spending hundreds of dollars in entry fees, getting up in the wee hours to braid or bathe the horse, eating terrible horse show food, and riding in the oppressive heat or drenching rain is much more tolerable when you have a blue ribbon at the end of the weekend to show for your efforts! End-of-the-year awards in many state equestrian associations are based on cumulative points, rewarding those who compete in show after show, a scenario so common it is called point chasing.

The struggle we all face is how to balance our competitive ambitions with our stewardship of our horses. If a Western pleasure mount is clearly tired and souring on showing but is just a few points shy of qualifying for the World Championship show, should the rider give him a vacation or just try to make it through another one or two shows first to qualify? What about a barrel horse who is having some aches and pains, but is sound with a little Bute—should the rider continue to point toward the national shows or finish the season early? The humane horseman makes these decisions in favor of his horse: his horse's needs, desires, and preferences matter, too.

In many sports rules are in place to address these issues. But many decisions about the horses' welfare are entirely up to the owner. She decides how frequently to show, at what level to compete, how many classes to enter, what conditions to ride in, and what amount of medication (within the confines of the rules) she is willing to use. The competitive horse world presents a never-ending series of small ethical dilemmas that constantly challenge us to rein in our own competitive desires and do what's best for the horse.

There are unscrupulous individuals in every sport, however, who are not troubled by ethics. Or rules, for that matter. Or even laws. For them, winning at any cost is the priority, and the horse is just a means to an end. They have no compunction about using drugs or abusive training methods, as long as they think they can get away with it.

Such individuals are fortunately a small minority in the competitive equestrian world. But their actions show how the relentless pursuit of ribbons or prize money without conscience can eclipse the original purpose of equestrian competition—to enjoy and showcase the incredible athleticism of the noble horse.

Finally, consideration must be given to the fate of the athletes when their competitive days are over. What happens to horses—those who are successful and those who aren't—when they can no longer compete?

Our equine athletes give fully of themselves, often experiencing wear and tear on their bodies that will eventually limit their usefulness for sport or even casual riding. A severe injury may convert a relatively young horse into a pasture ornament, leaving the owner with the prospect of caring for an unrideable horse for many years.

Horses are not just “sports equipment,” like bats or balls, to be used up and discarded. They are living beings and our willing partners in sport. Humane horsemen commit to taking care of their horses for life or making sure that someone else will do so.

## **Competing with a Conscience**

If you find yourself torn between the thrill of good-natured competition among peers and the stress on your horse and the risk of injury, you're not alone. Many of those who compete do so very conservatively. They're not aiming for the Olympics or even year-end awards; they just want to have fun and test their skills in a safe and constructive way. Ribbons and prize money are an added bonus.

It takes a special disposition to be at once competitive and also a guardian of the horse's welfare. In fact, even among the most highly regarded and accomplished riders and trainers, there are individuals who readily admit they've made errors in the past. Perhaps they pushed a horse to competition too soon or past his natural capabilities. Maybe they showed a horse when there was a nagging feeling that he wasn't quite “right,” or kept showing a tired horse against their better judgment.

We're all human, and we all make mistakes. (And the more experience we gain, the more obvious our past errors become to us, so if you think you're immune, just wait!) There's one litmus test that should be applied to every decision you make: what's best for the horse? The answer should not depend on whether you're in last place or first, or whether prize money or points are at stake. Lost time and money are regrettable, but your horse's health and soundness are irreplaceable. There are always other competitions.

Your considerations for your horse's welfare should not be confined solely to his physical well-being; it's also important to consider his mental attitude toward competition.

The best show horses truly love their jobs. They "light up" when they get into a ring in front of a crowd, and they enjoy putting their talents on display. They can feel the electricity in the air at a big competition. Many even respond to the roar of applause when they finish their performances, giving a playful buck and head-toss that seems to be the equine equivalent of shouting "Whoo-hoo!" and pumping a fist in the air.

Such horses are the product of careful training and preparation. They're fit and confident and ready to perform to the best of their abilities.

But that's not true for every horse you see in the competition arena. Some seem to be saying quite clearly that they'd prefer to be somewhere else. They voice their displeasure in the only way they can—by refusing or running out at jumps, resisting, misbehaving, or acting out.

If moving up a level seems to be a struggle for your horse, reconsider whether he's prepared or truly capable of what you're asking him to do. Keep in mind that there is no set schedule for how you or your horse should progress. Competing at a certain level for a period of time does not automatically mean you're ready to move up to the next level.

In fact, you don't *have* to move up at all; if you're comfortable at your current level and want to stay there, that's okay, too. It can be difficult to prepare for upper-level competition sufficiently when you have other responsibilities in life, such as a full-time job or a family. Many amateurs

keep their ambitions modest, planning to advance only as far as their limited availability allows.

When you ask your equine partner to join you in your sporting endeavors, you are acknowledging that he risks being injured by doing so. Most injuries are minor, and many horses are able to recover and return to the same level of competition. More severe injuries may mean that your horse might not compete at the same level again or has to move to a less stressful sport. In some instances, injuries are career-ending, although the horse can recover to be pasture sound and still live happily for many years to come.

Your responsibility to your horse doesn't end when he ceases to be useful for your chosen sport. Whether he sustained his injuries while acting as a willing partner in your competitive ambitions or via a pasture accident, he deserves to be cared for and valued regardless of his usefulness as a competition mount.

Fortunately, riders from all levels of competition recognize this covenant. Many Olympians have fields full of retired former partners who graze away their remaining days in pampered comfort. Many lower-level riders who can only afford to keep one horse change sports or forgo competition altogether if they must, to care for their horses in the manner to which they're accustomed.

Whether you keep your former competitive partner yourself, rehome him with a rider who doesn't require him to carry a very heavy workload, or pension him to a retirement farm, you owe it to your horse to ensure that, whether as a therapeutic riding mount or pasture puff, he is just as treasured as he was when winning ribbons at the highest levels.