

# Do Right BY THE HORSE



EACH OF US KNOWS THAT JUDGING IS NOT ONLY FUN AND exciting, but it is also a privilege bestowed upon us by AQHA and, most importantly, its membership. Let me repeat, it's a privilege bestowed upon us by our membership. We assume a responsibility to be the Association's representatives at every show we judge. We are at a show on behalf of the American Quarter Horse, the horse we all enjoy and respect. Each of us has earned our judging privileges by being involved, studying and putting a lot of effort into our industry and, hopefully, becoming more knowledgeable than others in the breed. We are looked upon by exhibitors and our membership as influential and knowledgeable people ... at least until they see us judge. Sometimes after we have judged, just like they do with sports officials, people realize we are only human and not nearly as smart as they thought we were when we arrived on the grounds. But even with its limited negatives, judging remains fun and an awesome responsibility.

As a judge, an educator and as a horseman, I have never known our industry to face as many challenges as it does today. The economy has been devastating to our industry. We are a "disposable income" industry. By that, I mean that even though many of us make a living in the horse industry, the people who hire us, buy our horses and send us their children do so with the extra money they have, their disposable income. Most estimates indicate that people's net worth is 20 to 30 percent less than it was before the economic crash. Thus, the people capable of spending money on horses, training and shows have less money to spend and are more careful where they spend it.

Another challenge to our industry is that there are simply more activities to pursue during our free time than ever before. This is especially true of our youth. Young people do what is fun and what they enjoy. Competing on the athletic field takes more time than it did a few years ago and (that activity) competes with the horse industry. And don't forget that many competitions

## *The future of our industry hinges on how we treat our American Quarter Horses.*

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**By Jim Heird, Ph.D.**

**Photos by Christine Hamilton**

*Editor's Note: Jim Heird, an AQHA judge for more than 30 years who is executive professor and coordinator of the equine initiative at Texas A&M University, spoke on animal welfare in the "Judges' Responsibility" portion of the 2009 AQHA Judges Conference in Dallas in December. His speech follows:*

in which our young people participate have definitive ways to evaluate success that are not based on a judge's opinion or reasoning. Plus, a soccer ball doesn't eat, need a trailer, wear fancy clothes or have to be trained to use it.

We all know about the issue of unwanted horses. Most of us have definite opinions about the issue of equine slaughter. Some of us may even think it is the most important issue facing our industry. It is certainly one of the most contentious.

Some of the other issues facing our industry include competition for trails, fuel prices, alternative medicine, the use of drugs and medications in competition horses, compounding of pharmaceuticals and many others.

I personally believe that the greatest danger to our industry is the inhumane treatment of our horses during their training and the resulting appearance in the show ring. The magnitude of this issue is heightened by a society that is more broadly informed and aware, and by our own habituation and blind defense of what we do. I believe that we, as an industry, are in a period when many of our personal ethics conflict with those of society.

There are many activist groups in our society. Yet, I think we always have to remember the words of former Chief Justice Louis Brandeis when he said, "The greatest deterrent to freedom are men and women of zeal, well-meaning, but without knowledge or understanding." The fact of the matter is, if there is nothing that goes against the norm of society, there will be no activist groups. So rather than just automatically condemning activists, I believe we need to make sure that in the eyes of society, we are not violating societal ethics.

We know that winning is important. We know that a pleasure horse needs to be compliant, quiet and consistent; a reining horse is "to be dictated to completely"; a halter horse needs to be fit; and a race or speed-event horse needs to run fast. We also know that we won't win unless our horses do these things, and thus, we won't get paid and won't be able to sell them. Society loves horses; people see them as noble and majestic animals. I suspect most of us started out our love affairs with horses feeling exactly the same way. However, as we become more deeply entrenched in the showing/winning aspect of our industry, we often lose contact with why we entered the industry in the beginning and shift our emphasis to winning rather than on the well-being of the horse.

The descriptive term for this is "habituation" which is "a

reduction of a behavioral response to a specific stimulus that occurs repeatedly." In other words, in the case of extreme training techniques, we learn to ignore those stimuli that at first we find offensive. We ignore them because we want to win and believe these techniques are necessary to win. We ignore them because we see successful people do them. Worse, we ignore what we see happening because we are afraid of being embarrassed and ostracized for speaking out. Habituation prevents us from seeing that some of our actions and techniques are counter to our responsibility of protecting the horse and its dignity, the animal that is the very reason we entered the industry. The horse brought us to the dance. Sometimes we forget who brought us and forsake our original intent for "winning at all costs." Further, we learn to ignore our responsibility to the societal ethics in which we were reared.

This is where the tension between societal ethics and personal ethics reaches an impasse and eventually conflict results. If a piece of society chooses to ignore societal ethics long enough, these violations will come to the attention of the people in the segments of society that are looking for a cause for which they can be the spokesperson. That's where we are with animal welfare, especially equine welfare. Society has seen too many racehorses break down. They have seen too many horses hauled in livestock trailers, unloaded maimed, cut and abused. They have seen enough Tennessee Walking Horses being sored, over-padded, over-weighted and abused. They've seen enough three-day event horses dying on a course because of the course's severity. They've seen enough Arabians being whipped and scared senseless before going into a conformation class. They've seen enough hunters and jumpers being poled and forced to jump oxers backward in schooling. They've seen enough gaited horses being gingered, and I am afraid they are starting to see enough of some of the things we do to our own Quarter Horses.

I fully believe that all of us were offended when we saw our first lethargic pleasure horse going with its head below its withers, a reining horse running with its head down to its knees, a cutting horse being jerked and spurred before a competition, a youth horse being drilled until it loses all association with its world, a roping horse jerking a calf upside down or over-stretching a steer, a barrel horse being whipped from the gate to the end of its pattern, a halter horse so overdone that it can't move or be the athlete it was bred to be, or any

other type of extreme, unnatural performance.

I know most of you love horses, and you want to give something back to the industry. Go a step farther and take on the responsibility of protecting the horse – our horse, the American Quarter Horse – the animal that we loved and respected enough to get into this industry.

So what can we do as judges? I understand that we have to place what comes into the ring. I understand that we don't see everything that goes on in the ring, especially if it happens behind our backs. I understand that most training takes place away from the show ring. But we can walk by the warm-up arena, we can watch the schooling that takes place in the ring and we can refuse to reward intimidation regardless of who is showing. We can look for abuse, either mental or physical. As leaders of our breed and the chosen few who are respected by our fellow members, we can choose not to accept or defend or, more importantly, practice actions that are inhumane.

At Colorado State University, I was privileged to work with Bernie Rollin, Ph.D., a philosopher who has taken on the task of protecting the welfare of all animals, particularly farm and laboratory animals. He is not a radical. He has refused to ignore the inhumane practices to which people may have become habituated. He has stood tall in his unwavering efforts to protect animals and the people who produce them. He has thoughts that I think are important to us as judges and leaders.

He believes that as an industry we are “low-hanging fruit” for the animal activists of the world. He believes that, as an industry, we have conflicted the line of personal ethics and societal ethics, and that, in fact, we are guilty of ignoring the things that we at first found offensive and have now even begun to defend. He believes that the show ring is the next place for animal activists to spotlight. He believes we must immediately cease what we are doing that is inhumane and that can't be defended to any rational audience that loves horses.

My favorite quote of Dr. Rollins' is that we “need to stop doing the 5 percent that society spends 95 percent of its time criticizing.” Think about that for just a moment: Let's stop doing the small pieces of what we do that society spends the most time criticizing. Each of us can think of a few things that are so obviously wrong at our shows and in training that we would all agree are not pleasant, comfortable or enjoyable for the horse. We can generally agree on training regimes and appearances that detract from the dignity of this magnificent animal. I think everyone in this room could make up a list of five things and most of us would have many of the same five things listed.

I know there are some of us who are saying they (the animal activists) just aren't that strong, they can't stop us, they are just radicals and, besides, the American Quarter Horse is the largest breed in the world. People in the Tennessee Walking Horse industry thought the same thing at one time. Forty years ago, Congress passed the Horse Protection Act, a part of which mandated that at every Tennessee Walking Horse show of any size the government would supply inspectors who would decide whether or not a horse could be shown

that day. In 2005, the government inspectors basically eliminated enough of the horses in the championship class that no world champion was crowned that year. Today, Tennessee Walking Horses are known throughout the horse industry as the breed that shows abused and tortured horses.

The American Association of Equine Practitioners has singled out the Tennessee Walking Horse with a report that details how that industry needs to improve its training methods. Everyone who knows anything about horses knows about the abuse that takes place within their show ring and within the industry. This is a breed of horse that, as a general rule, is quiet, a pleasure to ride and affordable, and a breed that I and others believe could easily have been the second most-popular breed in our country, if it didn't have the stigma of soring hanging over its head. If we as an industry don't want outside authorities dictating how we show and present our American Quarter Horses, we need to begin cleaning up our industry. I don't think any of us wants the government to control what and how we show.

There are all sorts of ways to address an issue: We can defend it, ignore it and hope no one notices, or we can fix it.

As judges, we can do what we have been asked by the Executive Committee and judges committee to do, we can do what our members as a whole want us to do – we can do the right thing for the benefit and the future of the horse.

Years ago, when I gave a talk to judges about behavior, procedures and ethics, I asked the judges to pick two or three judges they admired and to emulate them in their judging career. I was a young judge

when we had some of the great, knowledgeable judges in the history of our breed: Sonny Jim Orr, Billy Allen, Susanne Jones, Don Burt and Carol Harris or the real master of doing the right thing for the industry and the horse Jack Kyle. I could ask them how they would have handled a situation.

Think about some of the great stalwarts of our judging fraternity, both past and present, and ask yourself what they would do from the middle of the ring to protect our breed and our horse. Be a judge who is known to protect the horse, our industry and our future.

It took me a long time, but through the years, I finally figured out how to end the halter presentations I have done for many years. I did it by asking you as judges to think about our responsibility “to pass on to the next generation a better horse than we inherited from our forefathers.”

As AQHA judges, leaders of our industry, the people our members respect, you need to think about our future. Think about all that could happen to us as a breed if we don't do something ourselves to stop the criticism we are receiving. Ask yourself what you can do to pass on to the next generation of young people, breeders, exhibitors and judges a better, more humanely treated horse than we inherited.

The American Quarter Horse has been good to each of us; let's make sure we are good to it in return. 🍷



*Many thanks to Jim Heird for permission to print this speech. To comment, write to [chamilton@aqha.org](mailto:chamilton@aqha.org).*