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Saddle Seat Equitation

“The Qualities of Horsemanship, Finesse & Elegance”

By Paul C. Kostial

Competitive Saddle Seat Equitation riders must possess the unique quality often referred to as “finesse.” Specifically, Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary describes “finesse” with two basic definitions. First, finesse is defined as “refinement of workmanship” and second, as “skillful handling of a situation,” or “adroit maneuvering.” Both describe the poise and skill required of a competitive Saddle Seat Equitation rider, no matter what breed of horse they show.

The ideal reflection of a winning Saddle Seat Equitation “style” includes two components – the ability to ride and manage the horse (also known as “horsemanship”) and the ability to exhibit their show horse with the elegance desired to make the job look easy even if it’s complex.

Anyone who has competed in Saddle Seat Equitation knows the difficulty of this high level of competition. Thus, the ability to complete these tasks both correctly and while simultaneously creating a look of ease requires great skill and poise. These components combined create the “finesse” a rider must demonstrate to outshine the rest and win the blue ribbon from a judge.

When evaluating a Saddle Seat class, a judge will determine each rider’s “horsemanship” before evaluating each competitor’s overall style. Once horsemanship has been determined, a judge then determines each rider’s presentation style or “ringmanship.” This evaluation, tempered with an overall impression of horsemanship, will become the judge’s final class placings.

Often, a rider who presents a “pretty picture” yet little demonstrated horsemanship will receive an award that’s lower than the rider who possesses a bit less style yet a greater degree of horsemanship. As the highest priority, it’s always horsemanship in Saddle Seat Equitation, then combined with showing elegance and style. These riders will place above the rest of the class.

Horsemanship is exhibited to the judge in many different ways. Each judge determines horsemanship based on the skills they have personally determined to be the most important in their mind. Everything a rider does in a class will affect the judge’s positive or negative opinion of the rider’s horsemanship. Once the gate opens and the riders enter the arena, the judge seeks to quantify this immensely important skill for each rider in a very short amount of time.



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Evaluating rail work, transitions from gait to gait, maneuverability during the class and patterns are part of horsemanship. The overall picture of ease and poise communicated throughout each of these phases determines the judge's evaluation of each rider's style. Style is exhibited by both tangible and intangible rider qualities.

Some of these qualities include the rider's position in the saddle, the rider's ability to flow smoothly with their mount at each gait, the ability of the rider to create a picture of ease, the ability of the rider to cue their mount with utmost subtlety, overall ringmanship, and most importantly, the nearly imperceptible use of all these skills to affect a magnificent performance from their horse. All of these combined become the judge's evaluation and resulting placings.

Referring to proper Saddle Seat Equitation body position (including the proper position of the torso, head and neck, back, arms, wrists, hands, legs, ankles and feet), it's mandatory to remember that each horse and rider creates a unique combination, a team unlike any other.

And, although the USEF Rule Book includes specific information about rider, there will always be those variations according to different body types and the resulting differing fit with any particular horse. It is imperative that every Saddle Seat Equitation rider review and understand the information about position written in the USEF Rule Book with their instructor/trainer.

When evaluating a class, a judge evaluates each rider based on their own body type. Often, the taller, leggy rider seems to have an advantage; however, many equitation riders who are not so tall or leggy have competed very successfully in this division. Not unlike showing a great horse, a rider's body type does not guarantee show ring success. Although a great horse may enhance the overall picture, the judge does not credit the rider for a particular horse unless the rider is able to manage the animal sufficiently. And, when a rider shows a more difficult horse, the judge will frequently credit this rider's horsemanship ability as long as the problem is handled and, does not interfere with other riders or with the ability of the rider to demonstrate skills.

One of the most common faults seen in Saddle Seat Equitation is exaggerated form, most typically seen in the arms and wrists and, the lower leg, ankle and foot. Often, it appears that riders with such exaggerations may seek to emulate a style they observe on a winning rider. However, without proper guidance, this style can become easily exaggerated and often appears uncomfortable and perhaps even disconnected from the movement and grace of their mount.

A judge will often penalize a rider who appears uncomfortable in this exaggerated position. It's important to remember the origin of Saddle Seat Equitation as the form-to-function of a rider



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and his/her horse. Thus, the rider must sit comfortably on their mount, with ease and fluidity. The position of the rider should clearly be both comfortable and workable for both the horse and the rider. Exaggeration in any of this functionality is highly discouraged and penalized.

Many judges require top riders to perform a pattern or series of tests in the final judging phase. The purpose of these tests is to further demonstrate each rider's ability to handle their horse and, often in a difficult (solo performance) situation. The rider must present their horse with the finesse, poise, showmanship and style. This rider is awarded the most credits in this phase.

In completing a test or pattern, each exhibitor should seek a smooth, precise test, complete in each specific maneuver. Note that a mistake initiated by the horse but quickly (appropriately) corrected by the rider will win favor with a judge. Many riders have won top honors on mounts that are not always very predictable. In these cases, the judge must determine whether to charge the "error" to the horse or the rider. Remember too that an unpredictable show horse is a greater risk than a more diligent counterpart. However, risk taken with a potentially unpredictable but flashy mount can often outweigh a predictable yet less showy performance.

In closing, it is important for riders competing in any equitation division to have fun in their chosen sport. Of course, they need not wear the "plastic smile" as they perform but, rather, and more natural look of ease and presence that demonstrates comfortability and confidence. These traits often make the difference between those placing lower and a National Champion.

Paul Kostial is an USEF "R" Judge who's adjudicated for more than 35 years and, throughout the United States, Canada, Brazil and many foreign countries. Paul has judged the United States, Canadian and Brazilian National Championships many times, along with the prestigious National Show Horse Finals several times, the Breeders World Cup, and the Scottsdale Arabian Horse Show many times, plus countless Regional Championships. At 11 years of age, Paul won his first U.S. National Top Ten in Saddle Seat Equitation. Since then, Paul has owned and shown numerous National Champion and Top Ten horses and competed across many show divisions.