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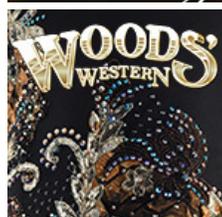
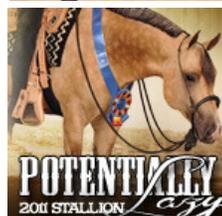
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AQHA Judge Stephanie Lynn Discusses the Hand Gallop Controversy

Stephanie Lynn

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The 2013 AQHA World Championship Show held last November in Oklahoma City saw new rules put in place and utilized in the hunter under saddle finals for open riders. Both a lengthening of stride and a hand gallop was called for in the finals of the Junior and Senior Hunter Under Saddle classes respectively. This additional gait call created apprehension in some exhibitors, delight in spectators and anger in others.

As one of the judges at the 2013 AQHA World Championship Show, I had an arena center view of all three hunter under saddle classes offered at the show. Let me first give a long explanation of why the gait was called for. Current rules for the hunter under saddle class call for horses to be presented with gaits to show "potential of being a working hunter". Horses are to move with strides that "reach forward" and "cover ground" and have "proper cadence".

Sometimes the way exhibitors choose to show their horses inhibit the judge's ability to judge the horse on the characteristics of the class description. While the quality of the horses is higher than it has ever been, riders have taken the class further away from the rules and intent of the class: a preparatory class for horses to exhibit the qualities of a good over fence horse.

Judges are looking for horses that have brilliance and smooth gaits with a stride whose reach would carry a rider down a line and over the jumps. Judges want good movers that cover the ground, are obedient and look scopey, as if they see something in front of them that pricks their ears forward in attention. Judges want the look of a hunter.

That is not to say that judges are only looking for horses that are currently showing in over fence classes. They are not. What they are looking for are the horses who display the characteristics or qualities that a person would look for in an over fence horse. Horses shown with their polls below the withers can't help but look downhill. It is difficult to judge a horse's reach when riders are doing their level best to keep the horse slow. It is hard to imagine a horse having scope when his ears are pinned back as he or she trots along the rail. These are all undesirable characteristics in an over fence horse.

And so the judges move on – to the hand gallop. In an attempt to see the horses in a forward gait that might exemplify the positive characteristics of the horses they were judging, the 2013 AQHA World Championship Show judges, myself among them, asked the riders to lengthen their horses stride in open hunter under saddle class finals.

The call was not a trick call. In fact, it was anything but that. The hand gallop has been a legal gait call in our rule book for over 25 years. While seldom asked for, it is not a new gait. As for whether you will see it again, plan on it. Judges are under pressure to ensure that all exhibitors are following the rules of the classes they are judging. Until and unless the rules are changed or the hunter in the hunter under saddle is eliminated, you can expect judges to do their best to encourage riders to show horses according to the rules.

Part II of this discussion will delve into how to show the hand gallop or lengthening of stride in the hunter under saddle classes as well as the position to ride it from.



"Judges are looking for horses that have brilliance and smooth gaits with a stride whose reach would carry a rider down a line and over the jumps," Lynn states. (Journal Photo)

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