

ASK THE JUDGE

This article appeared in-part in the May ASH Journal.

We speak to ASHS Accredited Judges, Adam Wellington of Kurmond, NSW, and Paul Vary of Barraba, NSW. Both Adam and Paul have competed at all levels across the country and judged at Royal and National level. Whether you're a competitor – new or old – or thinking about becoming a Judge too, we hope you'll take something from their insights.

What are your expectations as a Judge for the different events?

ADAM: LED As a Judge it is imperative that you have a thorough understanding of the numerous growth stages youngstock go through. For example, yearlings should be what is known as “bum high” (hind quarter higher than the wither). Senior horses should not be “bum high.”

As a Judge I don't want to see overly mature/ fat youngstock as there is only one way they will mature, which is heavy and coarse. I would much prefer to see a youngster in normal condition and maturity for its age, as it has much better potential to mature beautifully as a senior horse.

Another important consideration when judging the different age groups in led classes is temperament. A Judge should be far more forgiving if a young horse throws in a little bit of “exuberance” during their workout, whereas the senior horse should be much more obedient. I must stress though that I will always forgive a small amount of disobedience in a led class provided it is not in excess... After all, as Judges we should be rewarding the horse that presents as close as possible to the ideal type, and not the most obedient horse that produces a foot-perfect workout but is not the type that meets the ASHS-recognised Standard of Excellence (“STAN”). I am looking for a quality animal that takes my eye as soon as it enters the arena, and I will always use STAN when considering the types that are presented to me.

In a led class, confirmation is critical, presentation is important, however if the horse has a conformational fault that I consider unacceptable, it won't win, no matter how well presented it is.

RIDDEN It is important as a Judge to set workouts which take into account the level of the show/ event and also the age of the horses. I will always set more simple workouts for junior horses, who obviously have far less education, maturity and experience.

Performance is my most important consideration when judging ridden classes and again depending on the type of ridden class I am judging, conformation and presentation will have varying degrees of importance. For example, in a hack class I would be looking for a quality, well conformed type that is well presented, and produces a good workout sitting up into the bridle and engaged from behind with good movement, whereas in other events such as a working class, station horse class, or time trial, the performance alone is the critical consideration.

PAUL: Since Judges are individuals with minds of their own, there is no way of telling what a particular Judge would think. Six Judges could look at the same horse and have six different opinions – and so it should be. The fun of showing a horse is in finding out if other people agree with your opinion. If it is not your idea of fun for other people to disagree with you – don't show your horses.

As a Judge there is so much to examine and evaluate. There are numerous shades of right and wrong, and so many good points that compensate for a bad point. Judging is an art form in its own right. To be able to Judge a horse for what it is worth. The perfect horse has not been foaled; every horse can be faulted in some way. The significance of these faults depends on how they impact the horse's movement and, ultimately, its usefulness.

Do you have a 'favourite' movement or combination of movements to observe and judge?

ADAM: When judging hack classes, it is hard to go past foot-perfect flying changes and lengthened trots. In working classes I love to see well-executed gallop figure of eights and haunch turns.

PAUL: In a working class, the haunch turns at the gallop and the stop are absolutely vital. These two movements are the essence of what a horse does when working a beast, and they define the purpose of this class. We are Australian, and we will showcase the true capabilities of our horses rather than simply following the lead of our American counterparts. In a hack class, the emphasis is on the horse's movement, which should exhibit presence, elegance, balance, and correctness.

Where can a horse and rider pick up more points in a class?

ADAM: LED It surprises me how many people don't present their led horses as well as they could. Things that regularly stand out to me is the horse not being conditioned properly for a led class, presentation lacking, including sun-bleached coats, forelocks and tails, tails that are too long and take away from the horse's hind quarter, poorly fitting bridles or bridle styles that don't do anything for the head.

RIDDEN Ring craft is often lacking. Many competitors don't use the arena space available well enough, including riding circles too small etc. Another problem is when a written pattern is selected by the Judge and the competitor fails to do the workout transitions at the correct point of the pattern.



PAUL: What constitutes a winning horse is very much the Judge's opinion, but whether he sets his standard by looks or education, or a combination of these two, he should always be consistent. A Judge should Judge what is before him and take nothing else into consideration like what he has previously won, breeding etc. Led – Every Judge will have a favourite type, and he is entitled to indulge his opinion in line with the ASHS Standard of Excellence, so long as he does not do so to the detriment of another type which is, on the day, superior in looks and/ or performance. The good Judge will also change his type in the line-up if his preferred type is not up to standard. Presentation is only a small part of the led class; my top priorities are conformation, movement and temperament. Blemishes – if only taking away from the overall appearance of the horse – I will not penalise, but if necessary, because of the depth of competition, I may take them into account.

RIDDEN In my opinion, the clockwork precision of the pattern does not always represent the best horse in a class. I will always prefer movement, balance and presence of the horse, along with the correctness of the movements. For example, when I ask for a gallop, I expect to see a clear four-beat gallop rather than a three-beat canter. I will reward a horse that gallops and changes lead slightly off the marker instead of one that canters and changes on the marker. In a working class I will always put more weight on a balanced horse, and the correctness of the turn and the speed will be determined by the class I am judging. As many of the current working patterns (revised June 2022) are generally only weighted at total of 20% of marks for haunch turns or rollbacks, if I am able, I weight my points at 40-50% for turns. It is a working horse class. In a hack class, a horse must be balanced, moving forward, engaged in the hindquarters, with an elevated pole (above the withers) and a strong presence. It is essential that the horse is ridden into frame, not pulled into it. A true hack is a horse that you can confidently ride into town without it taking all day to get there. Small things make the difference between the best and the rest.

What are your top tips for ring etiquette?

ADAM: Ring etiquette is all about being on-time, courteous, friendly and polite to your fellow competitors, Judge etc. Safety is also an important factor. Keep a safe distance from other horses around you, listen for instructions from the Judge and steward, and always remember not to distract other riders/ handlers by your words or actions. Always be aware of your surroundings and consider the safety of others.

PAUL:

- Be on time; if you have multiple horses, it is up to you to provide a strapper to hold the horse in the designated area or ring, not the steward's job to do so.
- As soon as you enter the ring you are being judged.
- Listen to the Judge's instructions; Judges should always be addressed via a steward.
- Be aware of stallions and give them room.
- Line up on your left-hand side from the first horse called in for first place.
- Be ready to work out when the time comes.
- Don't carry on a conversation in the line-up or presentation, wait until the event is over.
- If your horse is misbehaving so badly that it is a danger or unsettling to other horses, it is polite to retire from the ring.
- It is etiquette for placegetters to follow the winner when leaving the ring.
- Don't refuse ribbons or prizes; if you wish to donate them back, do it after the event at the secretary's office.

Do you have a 'pet hate' as a Judge?

ADAM: One of my pet hates is when I give competitors a couple of different options in a ridden pattern for a transition and often, they attempt the more difficult option and completely mess it up. Another pet hate is when competitors don't use the work out area properly and either cut corners, ride very small circles etc. which can often take away from the workout.

PAUL: Too much emphasis on presentation (unless it is a turnout class). A horse and rider that is clean and works the house down will be placed over a picture-perfect horse and rider that fails to work as well.



From the ASHS – Events Rules & Regulations:

7.1.1 The horse should be clean and neatly presented.

7.2.1 Tack does not have to be new or extremely expensive. Older tack, well cared for, usually looks and fits better.

7.3.1 The handler or rider's attire should be neat – understated dress always gives a more professional appearance. The handler or rider who conveys a neat, workmanlike impression will probably score higher in the Judge's initial mental assessment than that of a less tidy or flamboyant combination.

7.3.3 Jewellery is out of place in the show ring and can be dangerous. If you must wear earrings, the tiniest of plain, discreet studs only are suitable.

Overfat horses; not listening to the Judge's instructions e.g. If I ask you to trot/canter toward me and stop when I raise my hand, do not disregard it.

What advice would you give to competitors that are new to ASH Showing?

ADAM: Firstly, enjoy what you are doing as showing horses should be fun. I would recommend watching as many events as possible to get a better idea of all things showing, including horse and rider presentation, workouts, gear etc. Don't be afraid to ask questions from those that have been very successful in the show ring, as I have found over the years that ASH show competitors are more than happy to share their knowledge. There are also many training days available and good instructors ready to help. The opportunities for improvement are endless.

What advice would you give to aspiring Judges?

PAUL: Don't be afraid to ask questions of people you respect as a Judge. We all evolve as Judges over time and respectfully asking questions is the only way to learn. Something I always keep in mind is that Judging can influence a Breed. Yes, blue ribbons can change the breeding of horses and the ASHS as a whole. Always keep true to yourself and the ASHS Standard of Excellence.

You may look at a horse that has been given first place in a class or even the championship ribbon, and you think to yourself, "Whatever made him choose that one?" Instead, try thinking, "What is wrong with that one, that I should feel that the Judge is wrong in choosing him?" You might quite well find, as the Judge must have found, that there is very little wrong with him as opposed to the runner-up, who may have had one bad fault and, however good the rest of him, that one fault makes him second-best.

Judging is not always easy. Sometimes, it is difficult to maintain a high and consistent level of concentration for the duration of the day under trying conditions. If you need to take a break, take one. Every competitor has spent countless hours preparing their horse, and they all deserve the same opportunity to be judged with the same level of concentration. 🏆

