



Insights from a Show Ring Hunter Judge

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Improve your horse show placings with exclusive advice from a Senior Equestrian Judge. Learn what the judge wants to see and tips on how to get the judges attention (in a good way!).

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This exclusive book, brought to you by [Thistle Ridge Stables Skill Builders](#) ©, is full of tips and advice from a seasoned horse show judge. The tips shown in this book will

- help riders improve their placings in the hunter ring
- help coaches develop programs to improve their students
- help horses win more ribbons.

Through years of experience, in the trenches at local shows as well as judging at large national level shows every level of horse and rider can expect to gain some valuable insight. Whether you are starting out with a new horse or a seasoned competitor we know you will find something that will be of value.

Laura Kelland-May

Major Achievements

Owner of [Thistle Ridge Stables](#) and developer of the [Thistle Ridge Skill Builders Show Clinics](#). Thistle Ridge Skill Builders is a Top Ten Finalist in the Equestrian Social Media Awards. I know that is a mouthful, but it's important! Living in rural a rural area where neighbours are spread out, there were few opportunities for local riders to show and bring along young horses, or for students to learn how to show.

Not to let the grass grow under her feet Laura developed a Skill Builders series so local riders would not have to trailer significant distances. To teach competitors what the rules of showing were and to enlighten them regarding what the judge was looking for the Skill Builders format offered direct comments back from the judge.

“A clinic with ribbons”, is what Laura calls it and the [Skill Builder Series](#) was born. Here competitors rider their courses and receive comments back from the judge as to why they placed. Over the years competitors, coaches, trainers and parents have benefitted by knowing and learning [what the judge is looking](#) for.

To back up the Show Clinic Laura has 20 years of [Senior Judges experience](#) having obtained her Senior Status in 1989 and continues to judge at local shows as well as National Competitions.

When did you become interested in horses?

I think an easier question to answer would be, “when did you not have an interest in horses?” I remember in grade 4 I had a Tonka Truck with a horse trailer attachment that I would load and unload the horses in and out of. I also used to practice driving AND backing it up around my bedroom.

Have you always been a horse trainer and horse judge?

I think that horses are in the blood and my mom was a horse person. My sister is also very involved with horses and organizing horse shows. I wasn't always full time horse person. I have a degree in Engineering and was a professional engineer, designing roads, sewers and drainage systems.

Why did you become a Senior Judge?

I originally started out to become a [Senior Judge](#) so I could understand the rules of competition better and learn exactly what the judges were looking for. I was a competitor and wanted a greater insight into what it was that judges wanted to see when they judged hunters.

I also like watching the hunters and respected the jumpers so I thought if I could get my feet wet with judging.

Hunter Jumpers – What the Judge is Looking For

If you are showing in [the Hunter Jumper](#) circuit there are some points that should be considered to improve your placings. When preparing to show in the hunter jumpers the judge is looking for a particular style and the hunter jumper must perform in a certain fashion.

Even before the horse has completed the first fence the judge will have summed up the situation. Coming into the ring ill prepared and poorly turned out will force competitors to have to work extra hard to prove to the judge that they belong in the ring and competing there.

I have heard from one judge who makes a first impression of the rider based on the helmet riders wear. If you have a professional looking helmet and hair neatly placed, it goes a long way for first impressions.

If you come into the ring well prepared and with a plan, the judge is ready to place you and the horse based on your merit and ability.

*Even before the horse has jumped the first fence
the judge will have summed up the situation.*

Things the Judge Wants to See

As a judge, the hunter jumper entry must catch my eye as soon as it enters in the ring. Remember the judging of a hunter ring begins as soon as the horse steps into the ring. In jumpers the beginning of the round starts when the competitor crosses the start line.

When you enter the ring the judge is looking for a thoughtful planned ride and that the ride is executed according to the plan of the rider. Riders have to have a soft forward and rhythmic ride. If the rider has a plan and executes the plan the ride will be workman like ride that will, hopefully, be in the ribbons.

The hunter should have a WOW factor!

The Hunter

The hunter must appear to float across the ground. I call it the WOW factor. As the competitor approaches the first fence the ideal hunter should have a fluid long relaxed, ground covering stride. The hunter should have little knee action and a graceful long reaching step. Top hunters will carry themselves in a relaxed, rounded frame with a pleasant expression and ears 'pricked' forward.

As the horse jumps he should leave the ground in a rhythmic stride and fold his legs up neatly. The horse's shoulders should move up freely as well to help raise up the forelegs of the horse. Generally speaking the forearms of the horse should be horizontal as the horse is jumping the fence with its cannon bones tucked neatly underneath.

The horse should keep a round bascule –nose to tail – and keep that bascule over the jumps. Horses with round bascule and athletic jump will place higher than a horse with a flat or inverted shape.

Things to Avoid

“You only have one chance to make a good first impression” is just as important going into the show ring as it is going into a professional job interview. Remember in the hunter ring you are being judged from the time you enter the ring to the time you exit the ring. Although a young horse may have a little more leeway in a Baby Green class than a Working Hunter, the judging begins as soon as the horse steps into the ring.

With that in mind, the judge can usually size up the competition before the first jump is completed. These are some red flags that will take marks away from the performance.

Horses misbehaving

Bucking, rearing, shying, bolting or general ‘nappiness’ near the in-gate will detract from the performance and will mark you down.

Picking up the incorrect lead on preparation circle

When approaching the first jump, make sure that the correct lead is obtained. Picking up the wrong lead will drop the performance way down. I mark this as a wrong lead and in good company will drop you out of the ribbons.

Not being prepared

I have seen competitors come into the ring and then realize that they have not memorized the course. This leads to much discussion of ‘single, toward home, outside, diagonal in 6, side, side diagonal’. Please... do the judge and other competitors a favor... know your course before getting into the ring.

Un-necessary preparation circle

This is un-necessary if the jump is coming toward home and riders have to make a complete circuit of the ring to get to the first fence. Be 'on task' as you enter the ring and go promptly to the first fence.

If the first fence is near the in-gate going 'away' then a circle may be necessary. Help keep the show on schedule and be prepared to go promptly to the first jump. This is similar to ``Not being prepared`` and detracts from the overall picture.

Horse not 'turned out'

Turn out does matter! A clean shiny horse, sparkling tack and well attired rider makes for a good first impression. Horses that are not braided or poorly braided and horse with sweat stains on it tarnish the rest of the horse's performance. Overnight braids are sloppy and do not show off the horse properly. If you are showing early in the morning get up and braid the mane early. Or, stay in bed and hire someone to do it for you.

If it is warm out and the horse sweats, sponge off the horse with some fresh water and liniment in between classes. It will make the horse refreshed and give his coat a chance to release some of the sweat. This is particularly true for horses being prepared for the jog order. If you expect to jog, then have your horse stripped and sponged so you are ready to go into the ring for presentations.

Rider not 'turned out'

The rider's appearance should match the horse's turnout. It looks out of place if the horse is sparkling clean and the rider is not turned out nicely. This includes neat hair and hair net if necessary, gloves, properly fitted clean boots (not too short/tall), gloves, shirt (long sleeved if jackets are excused in hot weather) and helmet that fits correctly.

Dirty Tack

Clean tack and shiny bits and buckles all add to a superior performance. Dull tack and grass stained bits detract from the overall appearance of the performance.

Wrong tack or inappropriate tack

There is nothing in the rules that says kimberwicks are not allowed but they are a red flag that maybe the horse is a bit too strong. I have known judges who dislike pelhams and kimberwicks so much they will not place a horse with this type of bit!

Not being prompt to the first fence

This is something beyond the preparation circle. This is the rider that walks in, on a loose rein walks the horse aimlessly around casually showing jumps to the horse. I agree that some horses require a bit more time to settle in the ring but have a plan and if possible do that in the warm up round of the program. This will help keep the show on schedule.

These are a few of the things that judges look for even before the competitor has completed the first fence. Keep these things in mind before entering the show ring.

Know the Rules

Before heading into the ring make sure that you know the rules. Nothing is more irritating to the judge than having to explain rules to disappointed competitors. Some of the more common rules are known but competitors should also know other rules for tack and equipment.

What is a Refusal?

According to FEI Article 221 (Federation Equestrian International) a refusal is considered “when a horse halts in front of an obstacle, which it must jump whether or not the horse knocks it down or displaces it.” That’s the easy description. But there are many interpretations of ‘stopping’ and [other considerations](#) that are judged. There are also, run outs, resistance and an uncorrected deviation from the course.

A refusal can be penalized if the halt in front of the jump is prolonged, or if the horse steps back, either voluntarily or not, even a single pace, it counts. This means if the horse jumps from a prolonged stand still it counts as a refusal.

As soon as the horse steps back, the horse is considered to have had a refusal.

Refusals

We’ve all seen horses slide through a jump. They get ready to jump and at the last minute just don’t lift their legs and end up sliding through the jump. When this happens the judge must decide immediately if it is scored as a refusal or a knockdown. A refusal would require that the bell be rung and the competitor must stop immediately and retake the

obstacle after it has been rebuilt.

If the judge feels that the horse attempted to jump the jump but slid through it, the rider will continue and be penalized for a knockdown.

A Run Out

A run out is when the horse goes by the jump without jumping it. It can very succinctly described as when “ a horse or any part of the horse goes by the extended line of the obstacle to be jumped”.

A run out is considered a disobedience and is penalized as such. That is 4 penalties for the table A jumpers and the time taken for the speed or Table C jumpers.

A Resistance

A resistance is also considered a disobedience and is penalized as such. A resistance is when a horse refuses to go forward, stops, steps back or makes one or more ½ turns. If the rider stops the horse for any reason it can also count as a resistance. This may only be allowed if the course is rebuilt improperly. If the horse is ‘resisting’ for 45 consecutive seconds the horse/rider will be eliminated as per FEI Article 240.3.4.

Horse Training – Common Jumping Distances

Horse Training Common Distances

When horse training or horse judging, it is the course designers job to set up the courses that are suitable for the competition. As a judge, we can go to the course designer and say “*that line isn't riding very well*“, or “*the horses aren't making the distance*“, but usually the course designers have the competition summed up and supply the best distances that allow the best horse to show off their technique.

In general the distances between jumps is dependent on:

- the height of the jumps
- the size of the horse
- the type of rider/horse
- type of footing
- location of jumps.

Designers usually shorten distances when:

- the footing is crappy (muddy, hard packed, deep)
- going uphill
- going away from the gate
- indoors vs outdoors
- short approach
- crummy weather

Designers usually lengthen when:

- Jumps are going downhill
- Toward the in gate
- In a large outdoor ring

As competitions become more stringent, course designers and builders use the distances to show which horses have the best athletic ability. This is seen in major jumping competitions that have significant variations in distances. For example a long galloping water jump followed by a huge imposing vertical. Also in hunter rounds the major shows use 13 foot strides between fences rather than 12 foot stride for local or even 11 or 11.5 foot strides for local and training shows.

More experienced riders can deal with the demands of the wide variation of the norm.

Distances are measured from the back of the first fence to the front of the second fence.

Some Common Distances are listed in the following tables

	Vertical		Oxer	
	1 stride	2 strides	1 stride	2 strides
Vertical	24ft 6" – 26ft 0"	34ft 9" – 36ft 3"	24ft 3" – 25ft 6"	35ft 0" – 35ft 6"
Oxer	25' – 26ft 3"	35ft 0" – 36ft 6"	24' 0" – 25ft 0"	34ft 6" – 35 -0"

Distances are measured from the face of the landing side of the first fence, to the face of the take off side of the second fence.

Common Distances Used For Horse Shows

	Ponies			Horse		
# of Strides	Small	Med	Large	3'0"	3' 6"	3' 9"
	9'	10'	11'	12	12' 6"	13"
1	19	21	23	25	26	27'
2	29	31	33	36	37	37 6"
3	38	41	44	48	49	50
4	47	51	55	60	62	64
5	56	61	66	72	75	77
6				84	88	90

Never forget anything again!

At least when you are going to a horse show! Have you gone to a horse show and forgotten something important? Your girth? Bridle or entry papers? I know I have. I arrived at the show grounds one day, only to remember my riding boots in the tack room, back at home, 3 hours away.

[Download this list!](#) It includes everything that you ever needed to pack for a horse show. This handy check list prevents those horrible gut feelings of “where’s my girth” or “I left my money at home”.

We’ve all done it! And we’ve vowed never to do it again. Now with this [all inclusive check list](#) your horse show packing will be easy and organized.

Better yet - If you have an item that is not on the [Check List](#) and should be, please email me and we will put it on the list. I know that you would want to help others so they won’t forget important items when they get to the horse show.

Thanks very much.

If you have enjoyed this book or have comments on what you have read, [please send me an email](#). I would love to help you.

Laura

