

## Western vs. English Riding

It's more than just a costume...I've been to many gaited horse shows over the years, and frequently show in both English as well as western classes. Occasionally even with the same horse. However, I strongly feel that it's important that exhibitors understand and better determine how to show their horse to his best advantage. A horse's way-of-going, as well as the rider's participation is significantly different from English Pleasure to Western Pleasure riding. Granted there are many similarities in the two disciplines: a correct and willing cooperation of horse and rider being the overall goal. While many people are sincere advocates of one discipline or the other, they both have their challenges as well as accomplishments and I would never try to say one method is more accomplished than the other.

Western riding hales its history from the cowboy using his horse for ranch and range work. Western saddles need to carry not just the ranch hand, but his rope, rifle, bedroll, canteen, and anything else he may need for the entire day in the elements. Of necessity it evolved to be heavier and larger framed to spread the weight over a greater portion of the horse's back as well as have larger fenders to protect the horse from friction of the various accoutrements hanging from the saddle. This heavier, bulkier saddle and fenders reduce the close contact feel of the rider's legs and seat; and often necessitates the use of spurs to enforce the limited heel contact available. So what we end up with is a horse that must respond quickly to the one-handed neck rein, usually well before bit contact is achieved; as well as the slightest shift in the riders weight to anticipate a necessary change of direction. A horse whose head needs to be carried lower to better focus on hoof placement and trail obstacles: a working horse who knows its job of supporting the rider's in his working environment.

Modern English disciplines, in my opinion, have evolved more from pleasure and sport riding in these later centuries, than from the aspect of a working horse. It has mostly focused on two objectives: to enhance the communication and harmony between horse and rider, and for performance riding in the show ring and racing circuits. The saddles and tack are lighter and less bulky. The rider strives to achieve and maintain communication through his/her seat and legs as well as light bit contact; to facilitate a synchronized effort between them and their horse. The horse willingly responds to these aids with greater collection, balance and lightness in his

gaits and overall performance. His entire demeanor is geared more for performance than work, more focused on the rider and less toward possible obstacles underfoot.

So when we choose to show our horses we must evaluate which of these disciplines will showcase his talents the best. Does our horse work well on a *loose rein*, with minimal leg contact, a more relaxed and natural head carriage and does he respond quickly to little or no bit contact? He will most likely be judged better as a Western Pleasure horse. Does our horse carry himself with light collection, willingly engaging in light bit contact, and work well with us responding to our subtle seat and leg aids? Does he carry his head in a more elevated "look at me" demeanor while flowing forward in a natural impulsion? Then he will most likely show well in English Pleasure divisions.

You may have a horse that will do both, but please understand that to simply put western tack on a horse that *needs active* bit contact in order to maintain his carriage and balance or to gait correctly, defeats the objectives of the Western Pleasure horse. Or conversely, to put English tack on a horse that *will not* engage the bit and insists on a more relaxed head carriage undermines the performance objectives of English Pleasure riding. The demeanor and carriage of the horse, as well as the active participation of the rider are far greater influences of which disciplines a horse can, and should, show in. While most horses can be trained to make adjustments for both disciplines, exhibitors must realize that each horse will probably tie better in one division over the other depending on that horse's strengths.

IJA (International Judges Association) correctly chooses not to mandate penalties on horses being shown in the incorrect class, but the exhibitor should evaluate his horse's strengths and can certainly increase his successes in the show ring by correctly placing him in the discipline that showcases those strengths. I would much prefer to see a horse with appropriate carriage and training rewarded over a horse which may have more gaiting stride and animation but is not as suited to that discipline. I understand that this is a subjective judgment but the overall image should match the division. We, the exhibitors, should understand and expect it. We shouldn't be surprised if our horse places ahead of another horse in one class, then place after that same horse in another. After all, it is indeed more than just a tack change.

By Anita Howe