

Safeguarding Our Sport: Reporting Horse Welfare Concerns and Other Rule Violations at Competitions

It goes without saying that the love of the horse is the foundation of our sport. The majority of those involved with equestrian competition go out of their way to ensure a safe and enjoyable environment and a fair and level playing field. Sometimes despite these efforts situations can occur that endanger this safety and enjoyment—situations that violate the rules and regulations put in place to protect human and equine athletes.

The USHJA and the USEF take safety and horse welfare very seriously, and neither entity has any tolerance for neglect, cruelty or abuse at licensed competitions. As members of these organizations, we take responsibility for our horses' welfare, not only by adhering to the rules and safety guidelines ourselves, but by promising not to turn a blind eye to safety concerns or inappropriate behavior on the part of others.

Competition officials are only able to monitor so much at one time, so the observations and input received from participants and spectators are essential.

To help educate members on the process of reporting an incident at a competition, the USHJA Horse and Rider Advocates Committee has outlined the basic information you should know about the roles of competition officials, what to do if you witness abuse or a rule violation, and how USEF utilizes member feedback and reports received by the USEF Regulations Department.

Understanding Competition Officials Roles & Responsibilities

At USEF licensed competitions, officials are in place to ensure the rules are being followed and that horse welfare and safety are at the forefront of the competition. While competition management, judges, veterinarians, and stewards all serve a role in maintaining a safe, enjoyable and fair competition environment, the competition steward is the foremost individual responsible for safeguarding the welfare of the horse, and protecting the interests of competitors, judges and competition management by ensuring compliance with the rules. Stewards are specifically trained to deal with reportable issues and are responsible for conducting the initial investigation of reports made during competitions. Additionally, if an incident is not severe enough to warrant formal charges, stewards have the authority to issue warning cards directly to any competitor, spectator or participant for improper conduct, unsportsmanlike behavior, or a rule violation.

In addition to the steward, complaints or violations may also be reported to other competition officials such as competition managers, judges, or the official competition veterinarian.

Ways to Report

There are several ways to report incidents experienced or witnessed at a licensed competition, depending upon the type of issue you are reporting.

Reports Requiring Immediate Action

The most immediate and effective way of reporting an incident during a competition is to find or contact the horse show's Official Steward (or other Licensed Official).

Stewards are trained and tasked with handling all types of reportable situations, and they will be able to speak with witnesses, collect evidence, and initiate an investigation into the matter. They can also take appropriate action on site, such as issuing an official warning.

Additionally, exhibitors can call the Director of the Regulation Department directly (859) 258-2472 to report an incident during or after a competition. The Regulation Department is available weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (Eastern), but individuals expressing concerns about conduct at a horse show occurring over the weekend or on a holiday can call the USEF Weekend/Holiday Emergency number at (859) 312-5186 to speak with a person immediately.

Reports of Abuse

For concerns regarding mistreatment of a horse, there is a separate [eyewitness abuse report form](#) available. These forms may be submitted directly to the USEF Regulation Department or given to the Competition Steward. Depending upon the severity of the incident, the steward may either act immediately or include the form with his/her official report submitted to the USEF for further investigation and follow-up after the competition.

Reporting Feedback on a Competition

If you have feedback on any aspect of a competition, the simplest and most basic way is to submit a confidential [competition evaluation form](#) made available in the show office and online. These evaluations are submitted directly to the Federation and assess all aspects of a competition including footing, facility, officiating, etc. The data collected from these evaluations are used to recommend improvement opportunities for competitions and/or praise competitions for positive feedback.

Though each of these reports can be submitted anonymously, if a full investigation were to require more information, having the name and contact information for the reporter/witness may be required to fully prosecute a violation. As USEF Director of Regulation Emily Pratt assures, "We [USEF] are actively trying to get people more comfortable in reporting and in understanding that everything is absolutely confidential."

We are not going to divulge their name or any other telling information without their permission."

What to Report

The USEF Rulebook outlines many reportable violations, but it is important to keep in mind that members can complete a confidential report for anything that appears unsafe, unsportsmanlike, is a possible violation of the rules, or is generally unsettling. USEF [General Rule 7](#) (Violations and Penalties) and [General Rule Subchapter 8-F](#) (Welfare of the Horse) outline specific violations that are reportable and require investigation. If you witness something you feel is inappropriate, contact an official. Ringside staff will be able to get in contact with the competition steward to request immediate assistance. While waiting for a steward to arrive, or if the steward is unable to witness the violation, there are a few things you can do to help with an investigation:

- Take photos of and/or video the act; include a timestamp if possible
- If you do not know the violator, make note of physical characteristics of the person, the horse's description, and the back number to provide a description
- Make a note of other witnesses

Often, the matter can be resolved by the steward while at the competition. In other situations, the matter is forwarded to the USEF for further investigation.

What Happens Next

Once reported to the USEF, all non-drug rule violation related incidents are treated in the same manner and follow the same investigative process. See how a report gets processed here:

According to the USEF's Guide to Rule Enforcement and Hearing Process document, "when the Federation receives a report of an alleged rule violation, an investigation is initiated by the Regulations Department. Initially, the Regulations Department will send an inquiry letter to the person who allegedly violated the rule to gather information and provide them with an opportunity to explain the circumstances surrounding the complaint."

The response and any other information collected about the alleged rule violation is reviewed by the Chief Executive Officer, or his designee, to determine what action should be taken. He may take no action; issue a Warning and close the file; offer an Administrative Penalty and after accepted and complied with, close the file; or issue a Charge."

For more information on the investigation and hearing process, see the complete [Guide to Rule Enforcement and Hearing Process document](#).

Common Concerns

Sometimes, witnesses are reluctant to report incidents or rule violations for fear of repercussions or retribution. Things to keep in mind:

- Reporting incidents as serious as horse abuse is for the good of the animal and should be everyone's number-one priority
- USEF ensures that the confidentiality of every witness/reporter is expressly and carefully protected
- Do not discuss your report with other exhibitors who may start rumors or spread the word
- Utilize anonymous reporting opportunities, if available, but understand that anonymous reports may limit the ability for the situation to be followed-up thoroughly

The overall intention of USEF's reporting process is not to penalize exhibitors or competitions with fines or suspensions. The true goal is to open a line of communication between all parties to improve facilities, discourage unfair play, and provide opportunities for greater improvement and overall enjoyment of the sport.