Judging Brings A Rider New Perspective

This long-time professional hunter/jumper rider has a new outlook on competition after two years in the judge’s box.

By Marylisa Leffler

If I could condense my thoughts on judging over the past two years since I received my license, I’d have to admit that becoming a judge has made me a better exhibitor and a better sport.

I always thought I had good sportsmanship because of my childhood experiences and coming up the ranks through hard work, practice and commitment to the sport—but now I see things a little differently. There’s more to it, and I’m writing this article to explain how and why seeing things from a judge’s perspective is really important to your role as a rider.

I grew up on my parents’ farm, Rolling Acres in Brookeville, Maryland. My sister Patty Foster and I foxhunted and started out in the small, local shows. I began showing in rated competitions when I was 9, in the children’s ponies. As I got older, I did a lot of catch riding and rode many young, green ponies.

I was actually called the pony queen because I was so short. In fact, there’s an age rule now in effect, in part, because of me. I was so small that I was able to show small ponies throughout my junior years! But I worked hard with a lot of green horses and ponies, and my family bred and raised ponies, so it was natural for me to be the one to train and show them.

During my junior years, I had some nice junior hunters to ride and was champion at the fall indoor shows. After I aged out, I was an amateur for a number of years and stayed in those divisions to get more experience in the amateur jumpers before I stepped out.

Then, in 1994, I became a professional and worked into the business with my sister Patty.

I’ve always wanted to get my judge’s card, but it was [difficult] finding the time. Trainer Geoff Teall really pushed me into it and encouraged me to enroll in the mentorship program. I started the process in January of 2010 and got my license in April of 2011.

The mentorship, if you do it the correct way and attend the right horse shows, is an easy process. It really didn’t take as much time out of my business as I thought it would. It’s important, though, that you feel you have the experience to go on if you choose this abbreviated path. After being mentored by some wonderful horsemen and judges, I felt confident in the role and began my judging career.

A Better Understanding

I think one of the reasons judging came naturally to me—and one of my strong points in this role—is that I can draw on many years in the tack on many different types of horses when judging a class.

It’s kind of like thinking about what I’m seeing from a rider’s perspective and then applying the judge’s marks. I watch the horses’ performances and then think about which ones I’d like to ride. Different judges have different strengths in this regard, and that’s what makes it all so interesting. I didn’t really give this aspect of judging much thought until I sat in that chair!

Now, when I’m showing and I look over at the judge, I better understand where that person is coming from. And, if I get a score that isn’t what I thought it would be, I don’t take offense but instead realize that the judges are maybe just seeing that particular performance from a different point of view, both from
where they’re sitting and also from their past experiences.

Being a judge has also helped me as a trainer. After sitting in the judge’s box you understand the entire picture. For instance, I tell my students not to let one mistake ruin their entire round. Sometimes riders will think, “Oh, I chipped at that jump and my round is a disaster; I’ll never get a ribbon.” They’ll stop trying.

But that rider doesn’t know what’s happened to the rest of the class, and the judge may like the horse, so that rider has thrown away any chance of pinning if he or she stops trying. Judges have their pet peeves, of course, and maybe for this judge one deep jump isn’t the end of the world. You generally don’t know that fact as a rider, so it’s important to ride to the best of your ability no matter what happens earlier in the class.

As a judge and rider, I also believe I bring understanding to the role from a horseman’s perspective. If a horse is horrible in the first class and goes perfectly in the second class, I don’t let that first class influence me.

As a rider, I’ve been there! I’ve had freaky things happen in the first class, like a tack malfunction or a spook, which resulted in disaster. I think as a rider that’s what I bring to the table when I’m judging. I understand all of the many things that can go wrong and give the horse the benefit of a doubt.

Similarly, I think playfulness in the show ring is penalized much less than it used to be, and I’m happy to see this trend. Some judges take offense to a tack malfunction or a spook, which resulted in disaster. I think as a rider that’s what I bring to the table when I’m judging. I understand all of the many things that can go wrong and give the horse the benefit of a doubt.

Similarly, I think playfulness in the show ring is penalized much less than it used to be, and I’m happy to see this trend. Some judges take offense to a horse playing in the corner, and if that’s their pet peeve, then you have to understand that. Again, that’s the beauty of having many different judges with different perspectives.

As a rider, though, I tend to look at the overall picture. If a horse jumped great in the class, played a bit, but then went right back to its job, I’m OK with that. I’d rather see some playfulness than a horse that’s so tired that he loses his jump. In fact, if a round puts me to sleep, I’m harder on that than some other judges.

The Benefit of a Doubt

I recently judged a horse show with a learner judge. A horse came into the ring for the warm-up and slammed on the brakes. Then, 20 minutes later, he came back in and went beautifully. I don’t know what happened in that time, but whatever the trainer did he gave the horse more confidence.

The learner judge had that horse second by a wide margin, and I had him first. Here’s my thought process: Did the rider come back in and ride defensively? No, he rode it to be the winner. Did the horse perform better than any other horse in the class? Yes.

Maybe the rider overslept and didn’t have time to hack the horse in the morning. Maybe a groom called

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in sick and the staff was short-handed and didn’t have time to hand-walk the horse in the ring. Whatever happened in that 20 minutes made all of the difference for that horse. I don’t need to know why; I just need to see the horse come back in and do its job. I love to see a horse go better and better over the course of a day.

If I were watching that horse to buy it or ride it, yes, that first class would have influenced my decision. But I’m judging only the one trip. You have to remember that aspect of judging, and that’s where you must differentiate between your role as a judge, rider or trainer.

If I were to describe my ideal hunter round, I’d start with the rider. I love to see the brilliant rider who comes into the ring and takes a little bit of a risk. Maybe that’s because of my background again. I’ve ridden so many rounds over so many years that I want to see someone make that extra effort. I know what it takes to make a round special, and I reward that showmanship.

It’s funny; I could ride 18 horses a day and not be as worn out as I am when I’m judging. It’s tough trying to make sure you never miss anything. I often concentrate so hard my hand hurts holding the pencil and my back kills me from sitting at attention.

You really don’t understand how hard a judge works until you do it. They almost keep groom’s hours. They get up early to review the courses and jumps, making sure all of the cards are organized and signed. They rarely get any type of break because the classes often run all day long. As challenging as judging is, it’s really fun. It’s fun to watch good horses go, travel to different areas of the country and meet new people.

I’m really glad that I got my card. Judging has helped me see so many things in a different way, and I’ve improved as a horseman. That’s really what you’re striving for. You’re always learning and growing, and that’s what it’s all about.

Marylisa Leffler, of Brookeville, Maryland, trains horses and riders out of her family’s Rolling Acres Show Stables. In addition to earning multiple USEF Horse of the Year honors and championships in the hunters, Leffler has won more than 25 grand prix show jumping events and has represented the United States in international competition. She’s held her USEF R-rated judge’s license for two years and is a member of the USHJA Professionals Task Force.