

Tales From The Judge's Box

As told to Anne Lang

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MORGANE SCHMIDT GABRIEL

Ever wished you could be a fly on the wall when judges get together and swap stories from the many shows where they've presided? Well, we persuaded 10 U.S. Equestrian Federation judges (Thom Brede, Bob Crandall, Liza Dennehy, Bill Ellis, Bucky Reynolds, John Roper, Randy Roy, William Sparks, Leslie Stohlgren and Frank Willard) to (anonymously) share some of their most memorable anecdotes. Maybe you'll recognize some of the stories or characters!

Emergency Landing

At one particular show, the judge's stand was a small tower where you had to climb a ladder to the platform. It was an extremely windy day, and the tower was shaking. I radioed over to the announcer and said, "It doesn't feel too safe up here. How does it look to you?" He said, "Yeah, it doesn't look so good from here, either." Sure enough, less than a minute later a huge gust of wind toppled the tower. I could feel that it was about to go down, so I jumped out to the side—about a 10-foot drop. The tower kept going, crashing into the ring and breaking into pieces. If I hadn't jumped out, I might have ended up in pieces, too.

Thinking Out Loud

Many years ago, I was at a show in Oklahoma. It was a cold afternoon in March, and I was judging adult hunters in the covered arena. A woman came in and hand-galloped the length of the ring to get to the first jump, which was at the far end around a turn. But as she got closer to the jump, she started going slower and slower. I could see her face; she looked terrified. At the base of the fence, she pulled back and leaned out on the neck. The horse jumped, but very awkwardly. As they landed, the lady yelled out: "I suck!" I felt bad for her, but it was also pretty funny. I mean, most people might think that about themselves

when they're having a bad trip, but very few would actually shout it to the world.

Close Encounter With A Swamp Thing

At a November show in southern Florida, I was assigned to the main hunter ring, and I chose to sit in a spot where I could enjoy the sun. About halfway through the first class, the announcer called me on the walkie-talkie and said, "Umm...we have a bit of a situation. You need to stay really calm and not make any sudden moves. Behind you, right now, is an alligator that has climbed out of the pond and is sunning itself very close to your chair." Without turning around to look, I said, "OK, I definitely want you to hold up the next horse. Meanwhile, I'm going to walk forward across the ring." I stood up and made my move, and as I went in

one direction, the gator went in the other direction and slipped back into the pond. Nowadays, I'm very careful about where I situate my chair when I'm judging.

Charting A Creative Course

I was judging a class where a horse stopped at a fence about midway through the course. The rider raised his crop to give him a spanking, and the horse took great exception to this. He took off, ran to the end of the ring and kept going, jumping over the border fence. He bolted up the hill and finally halted at a wire fence at the top of the embankment. The announcer piped up and said, "There will be no riding outside of the designated show rings!" So the rider turned the horse around, galloped back down the hill, jumped back into the ring and proceeded to finish the course. However, the next rider had already started her course, so briefly, two horses were jumping in the ring at the same time, which just added to the chaos. Obviously, the second rider was granted a re-ride. But in the meantime, I must say that the two most beautiful jumps by the first rider were the ones he did going out of the ring and coming back into the ring.

Horse Of A Different Color

I was judging a leadline class, and the show manager had asked me to talk to the children while they were lined up at the end. There were about 10 kids, and I walked up to a little boy who was sitting on a spotted pony. I asked him his name and his pony's name, and he told me. Then I asked him the color of his pony. The boy said, "Bay." I said, "No, your pony isn't bay; it's spotted." He looked at me, then he looked down at the pony, then he looked back at me and said, "But this isn't my pony. My pony is at home, and he's a bay."

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Morgane Schmidt Gabriel
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Can You Hear Me Now?

I had just judged a performance hunter class in California, and the numbers were called to jog back into the ring. The gentleman whose horse I'd placed second was talking on his cell phone all the way through the jog. I happen to know this man, and as they were walking out, I went up to him and said, "So, how's your mom?" He pulled the phone from his ear and said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, I hope your mother's OK, because that would be the only excuse for why you would be on a cell phone while jogging a horse in the ring!" He quickly hung up; it turned out the person he was talking to was a client. I said, "You know, any other judge would've turned you out." He just said, "Ohhhh!"

The Beasts Know Best

Often, at smaller shows that offer a lot of maiden, novice or limit classes, there are horses that make multiple trips with different riders. In those cases, the horses figure out the course way ahead of the riders. By their second or third trip, they know all the strides, the turns, where to lengthen, and where to shorten, so it's always amusing to watch the riders trying to tell the horses what to do. And then the riders walk away saying, "You know, I think my horse got better as the day went on." You wonder if the horses are going back to their stalls at night and saying to one another, "Can you believe she thought that line was a five when it was really a four?" Horses truly indulge us, at all levels of showing. We think we're so in control and doing such a great job, when in reality, they've got it all figured out. And when you're watching from the judge's box, this becomes very apparent. I think most horses probably wish that their riders would just shut up and sit still.

Potty-Mouth Pony Kid

This was an episode that I observed involving another judge, who had asked a pony class to jog for ribbons. The pony that was called in first appeared to be sore. So the judge asked the steward to go and tell the pony's rider, a little boy, that the judge was sorry, but the pony was a little off, so he couldn't be placed after all. Well, the boy, who couldn't have been more than 8, went into a tirade. He

marched that pony toward the in-gate, letting loose a loud stream of profanity the entire length of the ring. He was dropping the F-bomb everywhere, and everyone's jaws fell to their knees. The boy's rant went on and on, including how much he hated horse show food and how he'd rather be playing baseball. The steward felt that the boy shouldn't just get away with using that kind of language at a horse show, especially where everyone could hear him. So he went over to write the boy up, but it turned out he didn't belong to USEF or any other organization. The show officials talked to the boy's embarrassed mother, who told them she couldn't imagine where her son had learned such language. But he'd definitely learned it somewhere, and he wasn't shy about using it.

Standing Up To A Legend

About 14 years ago, at a show in northern California, I was judging a beginner-adult class in a covered arena. An extremely novice rider was having a hard time on course, and just as she was coming down the line in front of me, a guy on a very loud motorcycle rode by right outside the arena. The horse spooked and ran into the middle of the ring, and it was all the lady could do to stay on. I went running out of my booth, waving my clipboard at the motorcycle rider. He stopped, I told him he had spooked this lady's horse, and that the least he could do would be to go and apologize to her. What I really wanted to do was tell him to cover her entry fee, but I didn't go that far. Later, that lady came up to me with a big smile on her face and told me that the man had apologized. Then she asked me if I knew who he was. I said I didn't, and she said, "That was [former NFL star quarterback] Joe Montana!" She was thrilled. Meanwhile, word spread pretty fast, and for a long time afterward, horse show people everywhere teased me for having yelled at Joe Montana.

A Noble Act

At a big indoor horse show, the winning ride was going around. Suddenly a potted tree fell down in front of a jump just as that horse was approaching. The horse spooked, and the rider fell off. We [the judges] agreed to a re-ride, but the steward called it

an "act of God," or whatever. So we went on. The last horse in the class was going around, and winning. The rider hand-galloped to the final fence, and three strides out, he dropped the reins and threw up his hands. The horse jumped the fence, but the rider knew he had disqualified himself. If he hadn't done that, he would have won the class and been champion. But since he disqualified himself, the rider who had fallen off became champion, instead. That last rider knew he'd been on his way to winning the class, but he disqualified himself as an act of good sportsmanship. I don't know how many people could be that generous, especially at a major show. It's just not something that you see every day.

All Hands On Deck

I don't remember the year, but the show was in Virginia, and I stayed at a lovely home on a working farm. The first morning, the host farmer gave me a ride to the show in his truck. We had plenty of time before the first class, so at the show manager's request, we stopped along the way to cut some roadside brush to use on the jumps at the show. The farmer then suggested that I ride in the bed of the truck to hold down the brush. So we pulled into the show grounds with me wearing my coat and tie, riding on top of this huge pile of brush. And then we proceeded to help the crew get the jumps ready. But I didn't mind doing what I could do to help make things run smoothly.

Putting The Animal First

I was judging a pony classic, and a little girl came in and had a great first round. She was my top scorer, but I got word from the gate that she wouldn't be coming back for her second round. After the class, I found out that the pony had nicked its fetlock, and the concerned little girl felt that her pony had had such a good first round that it didn't need to go around again. Later, the trainer told me that even though the nick was superficial, the girl loved animals so much that she chose to pull out of the second trip. I thought that was a really kind gesture by a young child, especially in such a competitive division as the ponies.

A Lesson In Sartorial Etiquette

I was judging a jumper class in California when a young lady came into the ring wearing a spaghetti-strap top. She finished her round, and as she walked her horse past my booth, I asked her to stop for a minute. I said, "I just wanted to let you know that even though I went ahead and scored you, the attire you're wearing is inappropriate." The woman snapped back at me, "Well, I didn't know I'd have to show today, and this was all I had to wear." I held up my hand and said, "Whoa, let's take a deep breath. Other judges would have eliminated you, but I wanted to give you a chance in case you didn't know that there are actual rules about inappropriate attire." Then she did take a deep breath and said, "I am so sorry. I forgot my show clothes, but I needed to ride, and I won't let this happen again." That was a nicer way to end the whole thing, and I'm pretty sure she probably never wore a spaghetti-strap top in the ring again.

Courageous Or Crazy?

Last fall I was judging in Arizona, and there was a pony derby going in a big field. On one part of the field, the jump crew had not taken down a line that had been set earlier for jumpers going 3'6" to 3'9". We were on the handy phase of the pony derby, and most of the riders were either turning inside the 3'9" oxer, or going around it. But one little girl on a smallish medium pony sighted in on this 3'9" oxer, sailed over it and galloped on home. Afterward, the girl said, "I knew my pony had seen the jump, and I felt like we'd be fine, so we jumped it." It would have been kind of great if we could have allowed her to win the class.

Riders Say The Darndest Things

Many years ago, another judge and I judged a breeding show in New York. The breeding quality was good, but it was a terribly long day, and we were sitting on the back of an open pickup truck. The performance classes went at the end of the day on a big grass course, and it was just one of those times when nothing went right. The horses behaved horribly, and there was just one catastrophe after another. One girl came in and proceeded

to chip every jump about as badly as anyone could possibly chip and still get over it. The horse was standing on its hind legs, it was chipping so badly. The final jump was an oxer, only 20 feet from where we were sitting. The girl found the distance, the horse jumped it, and in mid-air she screamed, "Good boy!" I was laughing so hard that I had to run from the truck, leaving the other judge by himself. He was laughing, too, but one of us had to stay and keep judging! I wasn't even able to come back to the truck because I just couldn't control my laughter.

A Practical Exhibitor

At a major outdoor horse show, another judge and I were judging a sidesaddle under saddle appointments class. There were about 20 riders, all decked out in the sweltering heat. We got to the fifth lady in line, and I said, "Gee, it sure is hot today, isn't it?" She said, "Yes, it is, and I'm not wearing anything at all underneath these clothes." Well, what can you say to that? We paused for a second, and then we just moved on to the next lady in line.

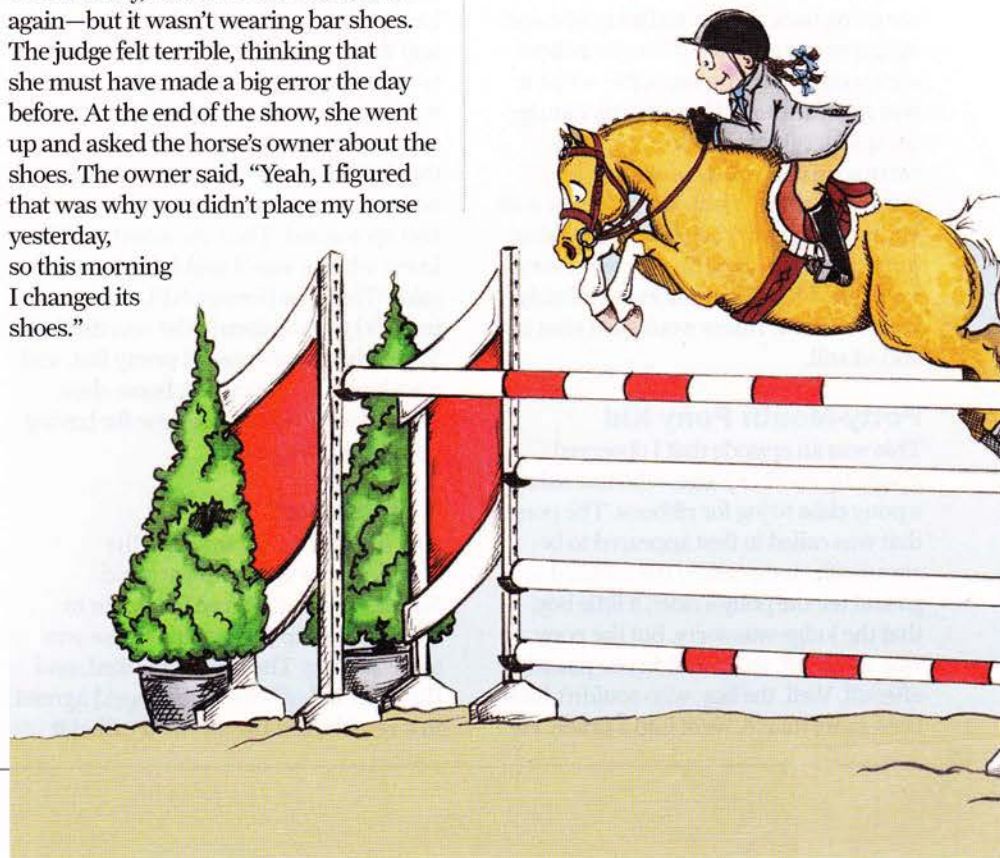
If The Shoe Fits

A friend was judging a green conformation model class. There was a pretty horse in the class, but it was wearing bar shoes, so she penalized it accordingly. The next day, that same horse showed again—but it wasn't wearing bar shoes. The judge felt terrible, thinking that she must have made a big error the day before. At the end of the show, she went up and asked the horse's owner about the shoes. The owner said, "Yeah, I figured that was why you didn't place my horse yesterday, so this morning I changed its shoes."

At Least She Was Honest

I was waiting to judge a short-stirrup class, and when I looked over at the schooling ring, I saw that a little girl had fallen off her pony. The girl got up, walked over to the pony with her crop, and whacked it as hard as she could on its hind end. Well, the pony took off and ran straight for the judge's booth. I stepped out of the booth, keeping my eye on the rider who was currently on course, but waving my hands to stop the runaway pony—because if I hadn't, it would have run onto a nearby road. The trainer ran up to get the pony, and I stepped back into the booth. The next day, I was judging the short-stirrup flat class. I like talking to the kids when I can, because it takes the edge off them thinking, "Oh my God, it's the judge." The little girl who had fallen off and hit her pony the day before was in the class, so I went up to her and said, "You had a rough day yesterday, right?" She nodded. I said, "I'll bet you learned that it's not a good idea to whack your pony like that." She just smiled, not in a mean way, and said, "Oh, but I probably will again."

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Squeaky Wheels Get The Answers

When I was a learner judge, I was judging at a show alongside a judge who had an answer for everything. The steward came up and said there was a very unhappy lady who really wanted to talk to the judges about a pony class that had just ended. The lady came storming up and said, "I want to know just one thing: What is the matter with No. 286?" And the senior judge said, "You know, we've just been talking about that! What IS the matter with No. 286?" Well, the lady didn't know what to say to that, so she just walked off. At another show, a lady came up and told us that the horse we'd pinned sixth in the model had previously won 16 out of 19 model classes and was second in the remaining three. My judging partner looked at her and said, "It sounds to me like that horse needs a rest, ma'am." And amazingly, the lady replied, "You know, you could be right. Thank you very much." Seriously, I know the non-winners are unhappy, and I just wish more of them would ask the judges questions, if there's time to do that at a show—because we always have answers. When people approach me, I'll ask them why THEY think they didn't win or place. A lady came up to me at Palm Beach and wanted to know why I'd pinned her horse sixth. When I asked her if she recalled any problems on course, she said, "I guess I was a little close to the green rolltop, and I was a stride late with my lead change on the diagonal." I said, "Well, you're exactly right. And that's why you finished where you did." She thanked me and walked off.

