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Photo:

rules.jpg; Caption: Do horses enjoy these things? 1) Cruel, pain-inflicting hoof methods; 2) Restrictive and leverage tack; 3) Restrictive nosebands; 4) Leverage bits; 5) Spurs and whips; 6) Greased eyes and muzzle, removed sensors (whiskers, eyebrows), clipped protective hair (body, ears). Are they examples of good horsemanship, fairness in competition, and horse welfare, or do the rules need to be re-examined?

Taking the OW Out of WOW: Changing the Rules of Competition

By Suzanne Engler Case

Everyone has heard the phrase “rules were meant to be broken”. More and more people are starting to come out of the woodwork and question how and why rules in the horse industry have come about and how they can be changed. Just like any other evolving endeavor, things do change as people grow and explore the ideas behind any given philosophy, whether it be riding horses, training dogs, or nuclear science. For many in the horse industry, following tradition for tradition’s sake is becoming less and less prevalent. People are questioning age old ideas such as the use of bits, spurs, whips, routine vaccinating and deworming, metal shoes, tail-breaking, and so on. In the competition arena especially, where rules must be followed in order for one to compete, people are wondering why more humane ideas are not being explored more actively by the authorities, and they would like to know if, and how, the rules can be changed. There is good news for these people, and for the horses - the rules *can* be changed. The following information should prove helpful for those interested in bringing about change in the industry.

The United States Equestrian Federation (formerly American Horse Shows Association), is a large governing body that covers many disciplines from dressage to western pleasure to breeding competitions. This organization has been around since 1917 and published its first rule book in 1937. It originally recognized nine divisions and presently recognizes 26. They have a board of directors that oversees rule proposals and the many committees that specialize in specific disciplines. A proposed rule change, depending on the nature of the change, would either be handled by the board of directors or be passed on to a special committee for review. The process is explained on their website (www.usef.org) in the rule change form and brochure under “forms and publications”. Guidelines to deal with acts of cruelty are available there as well. Anyone interested in proposing a rule change should follow the rule-change guidelines; any acts of cruelty can be reported by using the USEF website and reviewing the “Eyewitness Report of Abuse” form. All the forms are very straightforward. This organization operates nationwide and handles a large portion of the competition world. If you don’t have a computer, you can call the USEF at 859-258-2472.

USPC (United States Pony Club) is another large organization catering to many young riders who are interested in learning the basics of dressage, cross country, stadium jumping, and horse keeping. The USPC follows the rules of the USEF except for a few rules specific to Pony Club, such as the helmet requirement. The Pony Club requires a certified safety helmet in all phases of their competitions whereas the USEF does not. The USPC has no formal rule change forms or procedures, because most of the rules come from the USEF. If someone wants to change a rule specific to the USPC, one can call and ask to speak to someone about rules. This person will ask the caller to write up a detailed proposal and send it to the USPC labeled "rule change proposal". From here it will be submitted to a committee in a particular discipline and reviewed. It could be six months to a year before there is an outcome to any given proposal. It seems that the USEF is, in most cases, the organization to go through to propose rule changes. You can reach the USPC at 859-254-7669.

The 4-H Club is a different animal. The 4-H is a much broader and diverse group. It is a partnership between a federal program and a state and local program dedicated to the development of youth, and it just happens to have a horse program. The funding is provided federally, but the rules, regulations, and the program's priorities are made by a state's Cooperative Extension Service, which is part of a state-land-grant university. At the federal level the 4-H does not have forms or procedures for rule changes, because they are simply not involved in this way. The 4-H leaders from each particular state are the ones responsible for developing the rules and regulations for their local programs. Many states combine teams of Cooperative Extension equine/animal science specialists with a 4-H staff and volunteers to review and develop program rules and regulations. Again, their horse programs rules and regulations are typically modeled after none other than the USEF. Sound familiar? The USEF seems to have a hand in every bowl. The 4-H Club is clearly not as wrapped up with the USEF as the USPC (which typically co-sponsors events with the USEF). Dealing with the 4-H will probably not be as political as dealing with the USPC or the USEF, and there may be more room for change because of their grass roots aspect.

So...in order to propose rule changes, one must contact their local 4-H program and find out their particular procedures. The 4-H can be reached through the Cooperative Extension Office located in the county (blue) government pages of the phone book, or via their website at www.4-h.org. The Extension Office will have a directory with the local 4-H information. If you want to contact the 4-H at a federal level, call the US Department of Agriculture at 202-690-1568 and ask for the 4-H program specialist. They are very friendly and helpful.

Changing or adding rules through any of these organizations can be a lengthy, but worthwhile procedure. After speaking to a representative at the USEF, I was surprised to find out that rule changes are proposed often. She said that there are many proposals made every year in every department. She stated clearly that it was an ongoing procedure of fine tuning the rules that already exist and adding new rules that not only make the competitions as fair as possible but also keep the horses and competitors as safe and

happy as possible. She cited a few examples: safety helmets for a particular discipline; attire for English trail classes, and a rule concerning golf carts and minors at horse shows. She reiterated that rule changing criteria are directly connected to the mission statement of the USEF that stresses fairness in competition and welfare of the horse. If a rule proposal supports their mission statement, it will be considered very carefully. This is good news for those of us who want to take this statement to a new level and redefine what it means to protect the welfare of the horse.

The challenge of change is to bridge the gap between the old and the new by recognizing the intentions of the people who have worked to make our industry what it is today and by helping these people to move forward in considering new visions. Many of these people and industry organizations are immersed in tradition, and may have a hard time seeing a fresh perspective. They may not be able to understand why someone may want to compete in dressage without bits, spurs, horseshoes, or even a saddle. They may not be able to understand that much of what is currently accepted in competition does not keep horses and competitors safe and happy, such as leverage and restrictive tack, which gives a false sense of control to the rider and causes pain in the horse. They may not be able to understand that current judging, which rewards a certain 'look' or outcome (however it may be achieved) rather than genuine horsemanship, is not keeping horses happy, and breaches their mission statement regarding 'welfare'.

If the existing organizations are too old-school and not willing or ready to consider other perspectives in relating to animals, will people one day end up considering the formation of new organizations? They most likely will, and rightfully so.

Hopefully the well-established organizations will learn to be open to at least trying some of the progressive ideas that are brewing in the natural horse world. It is up to us, the competitors and organization members, to become proactive and work hard to help these existing organizations evolve, or to form new organizations. The true welfare of the horses is reason enough. Just think of all our equine friends who are actively competing right now under rules that promote abuse and harm rather than welfare. It is important to ask why, for example, in certain dressage competitions it is prohibited to compete without spur, whip, and bit, when this equipment could be considered obsolete (once used for survival in battle to direct the horse swiftly though painfully) and potentially harmful in the wrong hands.

Maybe we should be asking ourselves and others what the horse might enjoy. Haven't we been using and abusing the horse for centuries for our own needs and enjoyment? It is time that this relationship between human and horse becomes reciprocal. For an animal that has been so passive and easy to manipulate, and has served us so well, this idea should not be so far-fetched... a relationship that is enjoyable and respectful to both species.

Please find a way to get involved. And by all means, show up at horse-friendly competitions to demonstrate and support humane horsemanship and riding. Contact these organizations if there are rules you would like to see changed, or start a new organization,

and help pave the way for progressive new ideas to become more the norm. It is the least we can do for our equine companions, who deserve nothing less.

About the author:

Suzanne Engler Case is a dressage instructor with a BHSAI Certification from the Talland School of Equitation and holds a learner judging status through the USDF. Her career started about 17 years ago upon receiving a scholarship to the Violet Hopkins Seminar from her local dressage and combined training association. Suzanne now teaches dressage at her facility, Clearwind Farm, in Mebane NC. Her goal is to honor the horse by incorporating natural horsemanship with dressage in hopes of discovering humane ways of pursuing dressage as an art form. She can be reached at suzengler@mebtel.net.