

# Preparing Yourself and Your Horse For An Evaluation

By Pat Wolfe



If you plan to take your horse to an evaluation, be proactive! Here are a few things you can do to improve your scores.

Take a look on the score sheets. What are the judges looking for? For instance, if you are doing the conformation test, notice the mark for muscling in the body section. And in the overall section, there is a mark for condition. It takes a good month or two to get a horse in shape. If the evaluation is in September or early October, start an exercising program in

July or August and put him in a pasture where you can control his weight. The best exercise is riding, driving or lunging, four or five times a week. Riding or driving up hills builds muscle quite quickly. As with any athlete, start slow. Begin with walking. Make your horse walk as fast as he can without breaking into a trot.

Along with an exercise program, pay close attention to diet. Coat condition is important and a good food ration along with everyday grooming will give your horse a natural sheen. You can use ShowSheen but the result is not the same. What I find works well, along with grooming, is a mixture of whole oats, soybean meal, sunflower seeds and a vitamin mineral mix. For my 1000 pound horse, I use 2 large yogurt containers (750 gram size containers) of whole oats, one cup of soybean meal, one cup of black oil sunflower seeds, and 2 scoops (suppliers recommendation) of vitamin mineral mix a day, divided in two feedings. With this, my horse gets 20 pounds of timothy grass hay a day.

Take a good look at your horse's mane. If I have a horse with a poor looking mane, that is one that doesn't stand up properly, I roach it off completely three months before I'm going to show him. After the second month you will be able to contour his newly grown mane the way that looks best for the shape of his neck. In most cases, the high point of the arched mane is at the mid-point of the neck. The mane should be about three inches high at the mid-point and one inch high at the bridle path. The bridle path should only be as wide as the halter you are using.

It's a good idea to trim the goat hairs from under his chin and the hair around his ears. Just cup the ear in one hand and trim the hairs flush to his ear. It's not necessary to shave the inside of the ears or to shave off the hairs on his nose. Those hairs are there for a reason. The ear hair keeps out flies and the chin hair lets the horse know when his head is going to touch something. A good trim job gives a nice look to the head.

The only cosmetic thing I do is blacken my horse's hooves. When you put hoof black on, make sure it is even along the top of the hoof at the hair line. If you are off at all, the hoof looks crooked.



You can present your horse in a bridle or a halter. Whatever you use, keep it simple and clean with the metal parts polished. A small black leather halter looks better than a big clunky halter with a lot of brass or chrome on it. The judge wants to see your horse's head. The lead shank should match the halter. When using a halter, adjust it so the space between the cheek bones and the nose band is about two finger widths. If I'm using a lead shank with a stud chain, I go

under the chin and not over the nose. (Practice this at home.) When I go under the chin I put the chain snap through the two lower rings and back to the ring on the chain. This does two things. One, it keeps the halter straight on the horse's head and two, if you want to raise the horse's head, you just give him a little tug with the lead shank. I find if I put the chain over the nose it pulls the halter to one side and that doesn't look good.

Personally, I prefer a halter over a bridle. The leather on the head stall of a bridle is very thin and I have seen a bridle break when a horse pulls back. This happened on several occasions in show rings with stallions.

Now that your horse is ready to go, it's your turn. When presenting your horse, you want to give an all-round positive image so wear something smart. I wear a shirt and tie, sports jacket, tweed cap, and newly polished shoes. Wear light weight shoes because you have to run as fast as you can.

The judge needs to see your horse move at a trot. A good trotting horse uses his hocks and is free in the shoulder. His back feet and front feet will be at the same height when in flight. He will take a long reach with his front legs and the back foot will land ahead of the print of the front foot. The faster you run, the better his trot will show.

When running beside your horse, remember to give him lots of lead rope so he can carry his head without restraint. The horse needs this freedom in order to move in a natural way.



When showing your horse at a walk, take long strides. If you walk slowly the horse will take short strides and will probably drag his feet. If you walk as fast as you can the horse will take longer strides using his hocks and shoulders. A good walking horse will place his hind foot ahead of where the front foot landed. The horse has to be relaxed to achieve a good free walk. If he is tense the strides will be shorter.

During the conformation class your horse must stand still. It is very difficult for an evaluator to assess a horse that is constantly moving. Set up the test triangle at home, and practice walking, trotting, and standing. Standing still must be learned at home. If you are doing any performance classes, practice until you and your horse know every movement in the tests. Don't wait until you get to the show grounds.

Lastly, get your horse accustomed to the show grounds before the evaluation starts. I take my horse for a walk into the ring before the tests start. If he is accustomed to the grounds, there is a better chance he will be relaxed during the evaluation. That goes for you too. I have found to relax a horse I walk in large circles for about ten minutes.

As you can see, the key words are exercise, conditioning, presentation and practice. Nothing can compare with being prepared.