

The Online Horse Show—How to Host

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Have you thought about hosting an online, or virtual, horse show? Chances are that you have seen these opportunities growing in popularity to showcase a horse from the comfort of your own home—or in this case, arena. At first glance, one might wonder how this new form of showing would work, but upon closer inspection, you realize it just might be a brilliant opportunity. Riders video their pattern or run and submit it to the online show. From there, the judges score their video, and placings are made. The benefits of this type of showing are tremendous. There is no hauling, no overnighting, no getting up at 3 a.m. to find warm-up space, while allowing for procurement of private feedback and multiple opportunities to redo that pattern when your horse decides to act like today is not his day. So, how does one begin to offer this clever opportunity for exhibitors? Following these tips can help you get a start on conducting a successful online horse show.



Figure 1. Providing clear and concise instructions to exhibitors on best practices for producing a good video are vital to the success of a virtual horse show.

Rules and Regulations

First and foremost, managing rules and regulations may require some ingenuity. No longer can the judge walk up to the rider and ask them to drop their bridle to check a bit or determine if the age of the horse is indeed appropriate for a futurity class. However, some of these things can be demonstrated to a certain degree in a video. Requiring an unedited, continuous video would most likely mitigate some foul play. Management could require the rider to drop the bridle in the video for evaluation immediately following a pattern. Admittedly, bit measurements such as length and diameter could, unfortunately, not be assessed simply by looking at a bit in a video. All things considered, online show management will likely have to accept the fact that they are going to have to rely on the good character of their exhibitors to follow the rules set forth. Just be very clear and upfront with your rules and regulations. Also, make every attempt to bring awareness of rules to your exhibitors, as some might get too relaxed in the comfort of their own setting and completely forget that required piece of attire or stipulation about pattern size.

Online Money Management

Exchange of money, such as payment of class fees and payouts as awards, necessitates a secure online payment platform. PayPal has been around since 1998 and is still a preferred method for payment. Venmo, which happens to be owned by PayPal, offers a mobile payment app that is very convenient and now boasts 40 million active

accounts. There are numerous online payment options to choose from. Focus on choosing one that provides security and convenience for users. For an authentic virtual show experience, payments can be handled through a website, mobile app, or on social media, such as Facebook.

Class Fees

When considering class fees, it is hard to know whether you should raise or lower them. When a contestant participates in an online horse show, they are avoiding a large number of expenses related to hauling and lodging. They may be willing to pay a little more in class fees if it means they can still be evaluated by credible judges without the travel costs. Consider that there are some things outside the control of show management in an online setting, which might deteriorate the value of the show in some contestant's minds. Therefore, keeping reasonable class fees is probably best. For many, these types of shows offer a meaningful opportunity to practice before a major, in-person show, and it opens the doors to new participation for those who might not otherwise compete in a show. Consequently, class fees would be expected to be affordable.

Patterns

Patterns can be a tricky component of an online horse show. For example, if an exhibitor chose to make the pattern large, they would have an unfair advantage over someone executing a tight pattern. Management would be well served to provide pattern measurements for contestants, including measurements for camera placement. Enforcement of pattern sizes is almost impossible, short of requiring the contestant to measure the pattern in front of the camera, which no one wants to do. If the camera is placed at the same location for each pattern, the judge could get some perspective of the pattern size from contestant to contestant. A tighter pattern is going to increase the degree of difficulty, and when done well, should be credit-earning. However, it all returns to the fact that,

to some degree, you will have to rely on your exhibitor to do the right thing.

If you decide to offer classes that require more equipment than cones, you may want to develop some clever strategies to help out exhibitors who might not have access to 20 poles or a gate or a bridge. For example, try splitting a trail pattern into two parts so that exhibitors can video one section, then move poles and video the second part—essentially cutting in half the number of poles they would need to complete the pattern. Also, design patterns that reuse obstacles but in different ways. For example, a box for a turn could be used as a lope- or trot-over and sidepass obstacle.

Video

The skills required to capture a quality video range far and wide across horse people—okay, all people, really. Do yourself a favor and give clear and concise instructions to exhibitors on best practices for producing a good video. Here are some considerations:

Camera placement – Designate exactly where you want the camera placed in a pattern or in relation to the horse and the rider or handler. Do not forget to dictate at what view you want the camera placed, such as at withers or waist height. Otherwise, you are bound to get a video shot from a crow's nest or on the ground. Also, consider how the judge would like to view the horse and pattern, such as up close and following the horse's movement or zoomed out to capture the whole pattern or arena. This comes down to the personal preference of the judge, so check with them first before setting these guidelines.

Format – Video format is vital. Not every video format is compatible with every digital platform when it comes to production and playback. Make sure you understand the specifications of your platform before giving out instructions on video format. If using a

platform such as YouTube, accepted video formats include .mov, .mpeg, .mp4, .avi, .wmv, .mpegps, .flv, webM, and 3GPP. Drop-box is also a popular file hosting service and offers privacy for submitted videos. If you use social media platforms for video submission, such as Facebook, remember that all videos are available for public viewing.

Lighting – This crucial aspect of video quality is often overlooked. The best time of day to capture video outside is shortly after sunrise and right before sunset when the sun is not too high. Also, a cloudy day is better than a sunny day. If shooting in a covered or indoor arena, be sure to consider backlighting, as it can distort what the viewer sees (Fig. 2). For the judge to make an accurate assessment, he or she needs to be able to see the entire horse and rider well at all times.

Quality – Encourage exhibitors to use a device that can capture a high-quality video. Nowadays, newer iPads and iPhones have exceptional video capabilities when used in ideal settings. Do not forget to have them stabilize the camera for a solid video. We do not need the judges to get motion sickness while watching the videos.

Disclaimers for use – If you would like to use submitted videos as promotional material

later on, or if you plan to utilize social media as your submission platform, be sure to have a disclaimer in place to inform your exhibitors that their video may be used for such purposes.

Classes

Choose classes that can be best performed for video and objectively judged. Pattern classes and classes that require individual runs are ideal. Rail classes could be executed by having each contestant video each gait for a set amount of time, along with a stop and back. Be sure to provide guidance on how far the camera should be set up from the horse and rider and that it is set up at a profile view. Note that these classes will place the most burden on your judges, as it will be more difficult to sort out and place because they are viewed one by one.

Judges

The online horse show is a novel experience for many judges, as well. Finding judges that are open to this new format of showing and are savvy with technology is your best bet. Outline expectations from the beginning of this new experience to ensure a professional encounter. Be sure to discuss payment; decide whether this will be a pay-per-run instead of day-wage event



Figure 2. A video that is captured with extreme backlighting can be difficult to judge (left). Encourage exhibitors to take footage toward a solid wall or area with less backlighting for the best view of horse and rider (right).

since the judge is evaluating the videos on his or her own time. Also, think about how you will handle scorecards and making them available to exhibitors for feedback on their performance. Assigning exhibitor numbers to each video upon submission and then providing exhibitors with a link to the scorecards is one option. Additionally, several online horse shows are offering critiques from the judge for an additional fee, which is a great revenue generator and a more specialized experience for the competitor.

Awards

Shipping is a significant consideration when it comes to awards. Ideally, you want to avoid having to ship anything, as this can be a considerable burden and expense for management. Work with suppliers to see if they are willing to dropship awards straight to the winner. Also, consider awards that are easily distributed, such as gift cards to online tack stores, which can be emailed. If you do end up shipping awards, remember to keep it small and light to reduce costs—in this sense, belt buckles are a good option. For ease of transactions, many online horse shows are opting for monetary paybacks as awards, which is often based on the number of entries. This is when using an online payment platform like PayPal will save you time and effort.

What about those other traditional horse show things?

Other online horse show considerations you might want to contemplate:

Show program – You could distribute an online flipbook that is interactive and mobile-friendly.

Sponsors – Your online platform is key. Sponsors can be recognized throughout the entire registration process with logos and shout-outs.

Show clothes – You will have to decide whether or not to require show clothing. Keep in mind that exhibitors will be showing their horse from all types of climates and conditions. Wearing a full-on show outfit is probably not ideal for most. However, do mandate a minimum dress code, especially if you would like your online horse show to reflect professionalism.

Divisions – Do consider still offering divisions to ensure exhibitors are competing against those who are most suitable for comparison, such as age or experience level.

Be realistic about how you can offer a fair show. Not everything with an online horse show can be controlled, and it should not be—it is what makes it both unique and exciting. Keep it fun; after all, many are joining in because of the novel, low-key alternative to enjoy horse showing. This is also an opportunity for horse enthusiasts to try new things, and you may bring more new faces to your organization, which is a big benefit for you and the horse industry as a whole. Keep your correspondence with contestants welcoming and encouraging to build a fantastic experience for your users that will keep them coming back for more!

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