Judging Hunters & Equitation-Inside Information!
By Julie B. Winkel

Introduction – Insights from the Judge

Ever wonder why you got that score in the hunter show arena, or why competitors were placed ahead of you when they made mistakes?

As a competitor and judge of hunter and equitation classes for many years, I can share some inside information and tips, helpful to those who wish to compete successfully.

History of Hunter Divisions

First of all, it's important to understand the rules and history of each hunter division. The hunter divisions originated from the hunt field, and many of the rules and judging criteria are based on the tradition of fox hunting. As a result, both the horse and rider are judged individually and as a team in the show arena. Horses are judged on several points, including hunting pace, movement, style of jumping and manners. Riders are judged on their position (equitation), ability to communicate and control of their mount with invisible aids, and ability to execute the questions posed on course.
The Scoring System Used by Judges

Hunter classes are judged using the numerical scoring system, much like grade school. Scores can range from in the 90s down into the 60s. The following are some of the possible reasons for the different scores and how it plays out on the judge’s score card.

Scores in the 90s - A score in the 90’s is an A. This score is not commonly given, as the round would require that it be beautifully executed by a top quality horse or very accomplished rider.

Scores in the 80s - A score in the 80’s is a B. This score could indicate a special horse or top rider having a good round with some subtle discrepancies.

Scores in the 70s - A score in the 70’s is a C. This score could reflect an acceptable round produced by an average horse or intermediate rider. It could be an excellent performance by a horse of less quality, or a more novice rider. This score could also reflect a trip by an exceptional horse or rider that had some notable problems.

Scores in the 60s - A score in the 60’s is a D. This score could reflect that either there was a significant error by a quality horse or good rider, or there were serious flaws with the style of the horse or rider. A ‘65’ is generally the range of scores for missing a lead change, a lot of cross cantering, skipping a change, adding a stride in a line (except in short stirrup or lower level classes). A ‘60’ is often given for bucking, bolting, kicking out, leaving a stride out of a line and/or use of the whip.

Scores in the 50s - A score of 59 and below is an F! Such a low score usually means that major problem(s) occurred during the round such as a dangerous jump, e.g. scrambling as the horse leaves the ground due to a bad distance or poor communication, excessive speed, out of control, etc. A score of 55 is given automatically for breaking stride (trotting on course). A score of 50 is given for adding a stride in a combination. Also, a score of 50 is given for loss of an iron or rein in an equitation class.
Scores in the 40s – This score indicates a first refusal or extra circle on course. A score of 45 is given for a rail down in the hunters division. A rail down in equitation classes constitutes a 4 point deduction of the original score.

Scores in the 30s – This score indicates a second refusal or extra circle on course.

Elimination or no score – Horse and rider are eliminated and/or not given a score if there is a third refusal, the rider goes off course, leaves the arena before finishing the round, or if there is a fall of horse and/or rider.

Comparison of Competitors - Additionally, if there are identical scores amongst competitors (horse and rider teams) in the same class, the judge will compare them to each other to decide which was better and adjust the scores accordingly, so there are no identical scores in the same competition. Ultimately, the judge must decide which horse or rider was better if the scores are similar.

When does the judging begin?

Once you understand how the scoring works, it is very important to know that you are being judged from the time you enter the arena until the time you leave. The old adage that you never get a second chance to make a first impression is all-important. This is case, because as the rider enters the ring, the judge writes the rider’s number on the score card, the color of the horse and a quick first impression of quality and movement. Overall expectations are formed (upon initially entering the arena) in the judge’s mind, and the judge subconsciously gets an idea of the level of scoring that might be achieved. As the round finishes, the judge has a score in mind and is now deciding, if there is another competitor with a similar score, which one is higher or lower.
Show Turnout of Horse and Rider

Although attire and tack don't have to be the most expensive on the market, they must be traditional, well-fitted, and clean! There is no excuse for dirty tack, ill-fitting jackets or muddy boots! Unsightly braids and sloppy turnout is a red flag to the judge that the rider is not a contender and has little respect for his or herself and/or the judge.

Overall impression of the horse includes weight and condition of the animal, as well as conformation, expression, and type. Overall impression of the rider for the equitation division includes suitability of the horse to the rider, not only in size, but also in compatibility.

Protocol for Questioning the Judge’s Decision

A major point to consider when questioning a judge's decision is: Did you watch the entire class? You may have had the best trip of your life, but maybe everyone else did too. Know the rules regarding approaching a judge about their placing of you in a class. You must have a steward get permission to speak with the judge, and it is up to the judge to agree to discuss this with you. Judges are not paid to give a clinic, only to judge the show and make a decision to the best of their ability. It can be a very mentally draining job. The level of concentration, organizational skills with the paperwork and nonstop focus is taxing. Judges try to do the best job possible under the circumstances without being biased or negative.

United States Equestrian Federation Rules - Every competitor, should become familiar with the rules for the divisions he or she is competing in. The USEF rule book is available to the general public at www.USEF.org.

Final Round

Judges consider many factors when scoring competitors in hunter and equitation classes. I hope this article gives insight on the criteria for judging, a better understanding of what judges are looking for and how to be more competitive by making a great first and lasting impression!
About Julie B. Winkel

Julie Winkel has dedicated her life to showing champion hunters, jumpers and hunt seat equitation at all levels. Julie has trained and shown hunters and jumpers to the highest levels, nationally and internationally. She has won multiple Grand Prix competitions and many Hunter championships during her career.

Since 1984, Julie Winkel has been a licensed Hunter, Equitation, Hunter Breeding and Jumper judge at prestigious shows such as Devon Horse Show, Harrisburg, Washington International Horse Show, the Capital Challenge, The Hampton Classic, Upperville Horse Show, and World Cup Finals. She has designed courses and judged the ASPCA Maclay Finals, the USEF Medal Finals and the New England Equitation Finals.

Julie continues to give riding clinics, Trainer Certification Clinics and judges throughout the USA. She is a clinician for the USEF Hunter, Equitation and Hunter Breeding Judges Continuing Education, as well as the Young Horse Trainers’ School. Julie also writes a monthly column for Practical Horseman Magazine called Conformation Clinic.

Ms. Winkel is a past member of the Board of Directors for USHJA, serves as Chair of Continuing Education Committee for the USEF, is the Co-Chair of the Licensed Officials Committee, Chair of the Judges Committee for the USHJA, and serves on the Trainer Certification Program for the USHJA, Zone 10 Jumper Committee, and the Emerging Athlete Program Committee.

Julie owns and operates Maplewood, Inc. in Reno, Nevada. Maplewood Stables is a 150 acre training, sales and breeding facility, standing her two Grand Prix jumpers, Osilvis and Cartouche Z.

The next Young Horse Trainers’ School is hosted by Julie at Maplewood Stables in Reno, NV on September 2 through 7, 2015. For more information about Julie Winkel and Maplewood Stables, visit www.mwstables.com.

*Photos and images courtesy of Julie Winkel.*