

Thoughts and Techniques on Warming-up Horses at Shows

by Beth-Sproule Hansen

Spring is here and it's time to start showing. Every horse and rider combination is a little different but I think nearly all riders ponder how best to warm up their mount so the test can go well. The first few ideas are on getting your horse acclimatized to the show environment.

One option used extensively by professionals is to take inexperienced or nervous horses to shows without entering them in classes. Without the pressure of actually having to show makes the whole experience easier for both horse and rider. You can take your time; ride the horse in the warm up at a steady pace without feeling like you have to put him through his paces. Often you can, with the show management's permission, take the horse around and even into the show ring just letting him relax and get use to the environment. Horses, even ones that are relaxed at home, can become tense when they feel under pressure and a tense horse never performs well.

The idea is to train your horse to be a good show horse by preparing him for showing. Some horses get wise to the show ring and, especially if their rider gets a little nervous, he will get behind the leg. This frustrating situation can be helped with the above method. Especially taking advantage of schooling shows where the atmosphere is more relaxed and management will allow you to use the show ring at lunch time or after the last class. This can be your chance to take the horse in and work through issues. Let him feel you stay in charge as you change rein and let him feel you keep him on your aids. No matter how determined a rider is, it's easier to ride effectively when a judge is not sitting there watching you and you're not having to ride certain figures or movements with a horse that's ignoring you!

Of course, not to be underestimated is getting to the grounds early so your horse can be hand walked, grazed and/or allowed to chill out in a stall. Longing can be really helpful if your horse is excited or tense. The idea is to lung a horse to relax him and warm up his muscles. If at all possible, try to prevent the horse running around like a mad man; it won't bring him to a good place under saddle.

The amount of time you need to warm up your horse is something all riders need to constantly be aware of. Two or three weeks before your show (especially the first one) start keeping an eye on the time while you work your horse. Be aware of when you feel you would be ready to "ride a test" and make note of the time. If you do this a few times you'll get an average amount of time. Also, try riding through a test once in awhile and see if how you feel about it. You may realize you did a few too many lengthenings, horse went flat or perhaps you still needed to ride a few more transitions before he would perform that canter right at the letter without being surprised.

Let's say you've come up with needing thirty minutes warm up. When you get to your show keep an eye on his behavior, you might want to add an extra ten minutes even if its walk to give him a better chance at relaxing. Horses will also get tired at shows. If you have a steady guy/gal and you're doing two classes you might want to try twenty minutes warm up and then test. Or, after all the excitement of the first class and a few hours at the show go by, your second class may only need twenty minutes or so.

Optimum warm up time for a horse can change as he gets older, get out to several shows, the weather get hot etc. If he changes, change your warm up minutes to suite him.

When it comes to what exercises to use during your warm-up I find keeping it basic helps the most and this goes for all the levels. When I'm riding for a training or first level test I'll think about how fluid the horse feels. I'm looking to feel his back swing with that nice big marching stride at the walk feeling. At the trot and canter I'm trying to feel for a regular working gait. This focus helps me decide as I ride

around, more leg, quieter seat, and steadier contact? What will help my horse produce the right amount of gait to correctly be working at this level? Especially in a huge warm up ring I'll practice (in an imaginary dressage arena) riding long sides, corners, diagonals and put the transitions where they should be in my imaginary arena. This keeps me from "wondering around" and prepares my horse for the feeling of going from figure to figure and transition to transition that's coming up in the test. As the horse goes up the levels little higher, it's not so much about changing how you warm him up as it is about adding. For second level you add more. More collection, more bend, more thrust off the hind legs, more carriage. Your warm up will simply incorporate his higher abilities after his walk and a shorter time in working gaits. We can learn a lot from showing our horses but we want to maximize how well it goes so the horse experiences as much success as possible. So thinking things through and staying aware and open to warm up needs and ideas should be a constant activity for a good show rider.

See you at the shows! Beth Sproule-Hansen

Beth Sproule-Hansen owns and operates Bellvale Dressage LLC , a dressage training and breeding facility in Warwick NY. Beth received her USDF bronze, silver and gold rider awards on Pierre, her first horse trained through Grand Prix and the Gold Bar on DiVinci her second horse trained through Grand Prix. Beth has also trained numerous horses from the lower levels through PSG. All of these wonderful horses went on to be fabulous school masters and show horses for their new owners. Beth continues to school exceptional prospects. Beth is certified through 4th level with the USDF and is an L dressage judge graduate. More info on www.bellvaldressage.com