



A discussion on equitation at a variety of levels, from novice to medals, from the judge's perspective. Form vs function, major and minor faults, and how a rider can leave the best impression on the judge.

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Since most all other types of equestrian competition involve only the performance of the horse, Equitation is rather unique in that it is the rider whose performance is to be evaluated by the judge.

What is Equitation?

Although the Equitation division began as an event for Junior riders, today some areas have very strong sections for Amateur riders as well. Within the general category 'Equitation' we may find classes for riders of varying ages, both over fences and on the flat, as well as a variety of

special, more advanced, classes that are usually referred to as Medal Classes.

Equitation classes on the flat (i.e. without jumping) are scored primarily on the rider's position and style of riding. Generally flat classes look for good basic position - a deep leg showing a lowered heel directly under the rider's center of balance and in quiet contact with the horse's barrel; a light and centered seat; a straight and tall upper body with a flat back and an inclination forward commensurate with the pace being ridden; and most especially arms and hands that are consistently soft and sympathetic in their connection with the horse's mouth.

Over fences the introductory level age-group classes are judged over basic hunter-type courses. These simpler courses give less experienced riders the chance to hone their basic skills. As the classes become more demanding, the technical questions posed by the course increase. In the more difficult Medals riders may be asked to demonstrate their ability to adjust their horse's stride, negotiate more difficult turns or approaches to jumps, and deal with a variety of different types of jumps.

What Do I Look For in an Equitation Rider?

As a judge I like to prioritize the skills a rider must display on course:

- First of all is security. No rider will go far without riding enough to establish balance and a stable base.
- Second in order of importance is the rider's ability to steer their mount around the course in an organized and effective fashion.
- Next comes a position that permits the rider to accommodate the horse's jumping effort and in no way interferes.
- Also weighing heavily in my evaluation is the ability of the rider to form and execute a clear plan as they navigate the course.
- The final thing that I consider is the rider's style as they accomplish it all.

These priorities remain the same regardless of the type of Equitation class I am judging. I am loathe to see a Pony Equitation rider on the verge of a tumble, but I am also very hard on a more experienced rider who is jumped even a little bit 'loose' when his horse makes a good effort over an oxer. Watching a round where I am wondering if the rider knows where they are going, won't impress me no matter how 'elegant the picture.' And, in an advanced class, if the rider cannot give his horse direction in time for him to land on the correct lead for a difficult turn, I will penalize the rider for failing to ride the track accurately. Even the prettiest leg and elegant upper body is useless if the horse is being bothered by the rider's stiff arm and unforgiving hand over or between the jumps. Not surprisingly, a rider who can maintain their position over the center of their horse - off the ground, in the air, and on landing - almost by definition has a

correct lower leg that is making it all possible. Riders who have reached the winners' level never wander into the ring (or out), they make an instant impression by their professional and cool demeanor in the arena, whether that particular round is their best or their worst. When two riders have answered all the questions posed by the course - the jumps and everything in between - and have shown equal skill in the areas I've enumerated above, this is when I will use style and how they look doing it as the tie breaker.

What about errors on course?

It is harder than it looks sometimes to achieve that error-free round, even over a fairly simple course. As a judge, errors in Equitation classes are evaluated just a bit differently than they are when the horse is being judged. When the horse makes an obvious error such as a refusal, an extra stride in an in-and-out, or a rail down the judge must immediately make a subjective judgment as to how great a role the rider played in the commission of the error. Refusals, extra strides in combinations, and failing to maintain the canter (unless the course or test called for something else), are major faults since these are some of the most basic elements of jumping any course. It is the rider's first job to get the course done without these errors. Generally it will only be in the case of a small class, where such large errors might still earn a ribbon, when the judge must differentiate between these rounds.

How a rail down is evaluated can sometimes be the most questioned decision a judge makes. If the rider got ahead of his horse or 'chipped in' a stride to produce the rail, it is obviously a symptom of a greater problem and the score will reflect it. However, occasionally a rider might be restricting his horse with a stiff hand or no release or landing heavily on the horse's back throughout the round. Even if the error is subtle, when it is repeated over most every fence and the horse eventually has a rail down behind, I will credit that rail to the rider too. A rolled rail, however, when the fence was ridden without error otherwise by a rider who is quiet and well-balanced I tend to overlook or penalize only slightly,

Lead changes also create lots of controversy. While the ideal round shows accurate and relaxed lead changes whenever necessary on course, in the real world this isn't always the case. There are many of degrees of this error: from no change at all, to a cross-canter all the way to the next jump, to a trot or 'skip' change, or simply a rough or late change of lead. These are penalized but when I judge I consider strongly the rider's part in the problem. Were they out of balance, throwing their upper body to the side, or otherwise making it difficult for the horse to do their job? Or was the rider accurate and correct and the horse simply lazy or resistant?

The other major faults are jumping 'ahead' of the horse and getting 'left behind.' Neither are desirable but I consider the former worse than the later unless the rider is left so badly that their hands fly up and jerk on the horse's mouth.

The style faults most commonly seen at all levels are 'ducking,' 'sitting to drive,' 'falling on the neck,' and various unattractive and non-functional habits with the arms, head or upper body.

I believe the whole point of Equitation is to show how the rider rides without thinking about it. Lots of practice should have produced a natural and automatic way of riding that will function for that rider no matter the situation. A stiff rider who is obviously 'working at' how they look instead of riding their horse is, in my opinion, as bad as major basic position faults.

How Does a Rider Become a Top Competitor in the Equitation Division?

The Right Horse. Especially at the higher levels of Equitation there is no doubt that the horse becomes very important. Horses that are not only steady, amenable jumpers but that also have a soft and rather flat jump and are well schooled in all the various tests that may be asked at the Medal level make it far easier to produce winning performances.

Sufficient Experience. This is not a sport that many can take up one day and excel at the next. Time in the saddle is essential, preferably not solely in the competition ring. Equitation riders need to be sufficiently secure and fit to ride for an indeterminate amount of time without their irons. Riders do need enough time in the show ring to feel comfortable and confident; up to handling all the situations that can arise during a jumping course. At the advanced level experience on a variety of horses and in both Hunters and Jumpers is essential. I also believe that it helps if a rider's experience goes beyond just the 'finished' horses that make the winningest partners.

The Build for It. While riding ability is what is being judged, there is no doubt that most judges will appreciate an equitation rider with the desirable tall, willowy build that makes for an especially elegant appearance on a horse. Some judges take this more seriously than others, but regardless the shorter, stockier rider will normally have to out-ride their tall, skinny rival.

'Horsemanship' Winning consistently at the highest levels of equitation takes more than the horse, the mileage, and the build. It is no surprise that a high percentage of today's top international and national competitors had above average careers in Equitation during their junior days. Equitation appeals to those individuals who relish a challenge, find pleasure in working hard, and who set their sights on lofty goals. What is learned in the process of ascending the ranks in Equitation serves a rider in good stead not only throughout their riding careers but in life in general. It is not simply learning to jump a course that must be learned; it's also necessary to learn much about one's self. Setting goals, working hard, maintaining the

motivation to learn and progress are part of it, as are dealing with sometimes acute disappointment and with occasional intense pressure - this is what it takes to do well in Equitation. What makes it special and worthwhile for so many is that every step along the way is done as part of a partnership with a horse. Becoming a true horseman is the secret, and the ultimate reward, for so many who reach the top, as well as those who just love the road on the way there.