

AQHA eBooks



Showmanship Basics

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In “Showmanship Basics,” Brad Kearns teaches you the fundamentals of showmanship so your next pattern is perfect.

AQHA Professional Horseman Brad Kearns is from Grayslake, Illinois. Brad has had more than 25 years’ worth of experience in the American Quarter Horse industry. He has coached riders and trained horses specializing in all-around events and pattern classes. He enjoys watching horses he has trained and riders he has coached come together to create a successful pair that goes into the show arena confident and ready for their class. Brad is an accomplished trainer and horseman, winning multiple AQHA world championships, as well as instructing exhibitors through successful all-around careers.

Showmanship is all about poise. In fact, according to the AQHA Official Handbook of Rules and

Regulations, “showmanship is designed to evaluate the exhibitor’s ability to execute, in concert with a well groomed and conditioned horse, a set of maneuvers prescribed by the judge with precision and smoothness while exhibiting poise and confidence, and maintaining a balanced, functional and fundamentally correct body position.”

Brad knows a thing or two about the key ingredients to make a winning showmanship performance. Even top-flight teams start with basics and refer back to them whenever a hitch comes up in their training program. Here’s Brad’s recipe for a foundation that can help you turn in a perfect pattern.



AQHA Professional Horseman Brad Kearns works with Nicole Barnes and Zippos Ace Of Spades to demonstrate the correct distance an exhibitor should stand from the judge. The key is to leave yourself at least an arm to arm-and-a-half length from the judge when you stop and set up to him. You’ll need to gauge how much room your horse needs to stop and plan accordingly to get the right distance.

Presentation

Because showmanship is judged on the performance of the exhibitor, you don't have to have an expensive horse. Showmanship is a class where you can be on a limited budget, work hard and be competitive even at the national level.

While the class isn't judged on who has the most expensive outfit or fanciest halter, the rulebook does call for you to be neatly attired and your horse to be well-groomed. There are some minimums you should meet to compete in showmanship.

First, your horse should be healthy and well-fit for his conformation. Check with your local county extension agent or American Association of Equine Practitioners-member veterinarian to develop a nutrition plan for your horse.

Proper nutrition will help your horse shine and will make his hair coat that much easier to clean before show day. On the day of the show, your horse should be as clean as possible. The mane should be banded, and make sure you clean and detangle your horse's tail. Hooves should be clean, and some sort of polish is preferable. If your horse has white on his legs, use

baby powder or a commercial product to make the legs really white. Finally, apply a small amount of face grease to your horse's muzzle, eyes and ears for a captivating shine.

Before you go to the show, clip your horse's muzzle, ears, legs, bridle path and under his jaw.

Because your only equipment for the class is your show halter, it should be clean, and it's important that it fits properly. The noseband should fit right below your horse's cheekbone, halfway between his eye and his muzzle. The cheek pieces should be snug, without extra space between them and the horse's jaw.

Run the lead shank through the left ring of the halter, under the horse's jaw, through the lower right ring and snap to the upper right ring of the halter (see photos on Page 4). There should be two to three links of the shank outside of the left halter ring. For safety, never hold onto the chain portion of a lead shank. Also, instead of doubling the shank over on the right side, you will have a much neater presentation and professional look if you have your shank cut down to the correct size. Any

halter manufacturer or machine shop should be able to cut it down for you.

Now that your horse is properly turned out, it's time for you to get ready.

The first thing a judge will notice is your hat. It should be clean and well-shaped. Most western stores or trade show vendors at a horse show will charge you \$10 to \$20 to clean and reshape your hat. It's money well-spent. If you're not sure what shape complements your face, check with an AQHA Professional Horseman for advice on getting your hat shaped correctly and where you can get it shaped.

Hair should be controlled, whether you're male or female, and it should be in a ponytail or a bun if it's too long to tuck under your hat.

Your clothing should be flattering and, most importantly, fit well. It's more important and cost-effective to buy one quality outfit than to have a different outfit for every day of the show. Find a color that flatters you and your horse and reflects your personal style. Your pants should be long enough to come just above the heels of your boots when you run.

Finally, shine your boots, and clean your hands and nails.

Remember that your placing isn't dependent on how fancy your clothes are, but I think you should go into every class like you would a job interview. If you are going to an interview, you're going to dress well,

and be clean and groomed. If you're male, you need to be clean shaven.

If you're female, you wear makeup.

One point on makeup: It shouldn't look like you are trying out for the part of a Las Vegas showgirl. I recommend our youths and amateurs go to a high-end department or cosmetics

store and have a makeover. You don't have to purchase makeup there; you can buy it in a discount store. But it will give you an idea of what colors look good with your complexion.

The overall look should be professional and reflect your confidence in yourself and your horse.



A poor-fitting halter takes away from the overall appearance of your horse. The lowered nose band and cheek pieces make your horse's head seem larger, and the excessive amount of chain distracts from your performance.

Your horse's halter should fit snugly with the nose band right below your horse's cheekbone. Make sure you only have two to three links of chain outside of the left ring of the halter without having to double the chain on the other side.

Execution

Showmanship exhibitors should have confidence and poise, be able to move smoothly, and their performances should be attractive to watch.

To begin, work on displaying good, natural posture. Your arms should hang naturally from your shoulders and form an “L.” Imagine you’re a waiter holding a towel with your left arm. To keep the towel in place, your arm should be level and not cross your body. Keep your wrists straight and hold your hands straight with the thumbs on top and

your fingers closed. Your elbows should be closed against your sides but not rigid. In most positions, your right hand will point slightly toward the left ring of your horse’s halter.

It’s important to keep your hands, arms and elbows in the correct positions; just remember that your movements should be more like a ballet than a military maneuver. Your right arm should stay in the same place, with a soft bend to your elbow, in relation to your horse and remain

there no matter whether you’re leading, backing or turning.

You gain points by being smooth and maintaining an even pace. You lose points by being artificial or mechanical and being inconsistent with your pace and movements.

Some novices work so hard to keep their upper bodies upright and rigid that they wind up squatting and running unnaturally. Keep yourself loose enough to run naturally, while maintaining the correct positions.

GETTING STARTED

Before you compete in showmanship, your horse should lead quietly beside you with little or no tension in the lead shank, back quietly without having to push excessively on the lead and perform a pivot while keeping his inside hind foot stationary.

The Quarter System

Once you have walked or jogged to the judge, the quarter system is the established method for inspecting and showing horses at halter. The system is based on controlling your horse's hindquarters and keeping you and the judge safe at all times in case the horse misbehaves. You will cross over in front of your horse depending on which quadrant the judge enters as she inspects your horse.

The quarter method divides the horse into four sections. An imaginary line bisects the horse from front to back down the center line of the horse's body and extends outward. A second line extends outward in both directions from behind the horse's front feet.

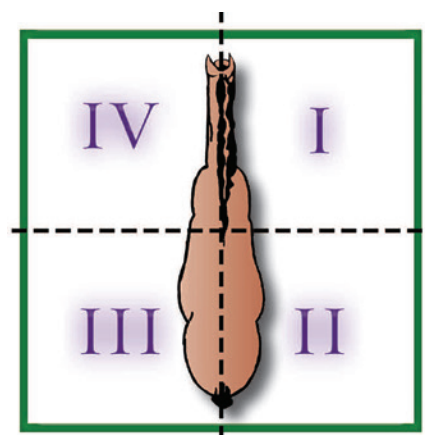
An exhibitor should always be in the quadrant adjacent to the judge to be able to see the judge at all times and swing the horse's hindquarters away from the judge in case of danger. You should cross the line to the appropriate quadrant once the judge crosses the line. However, do not cross the line until the judge commits to a quadrant.

Some judges will stop on a quadrant line. Hold your ground and don't cross over until the judge commits to the next quadrant.

When you cross over, move naturally. Your goal is to be smooth and efficient in crossing to the other side of your horse. Think of the horse as a clock, with 12 o'clock at his nose. When you set up your horse for inspection, you'll be at the 11 o'clock position. To move to the 1 o'clock position, you have to move around the edge of the clock and around your horse's nose. It takes most people three steps to move to the other side, and a fourth step to close their feet together.

Start with your outside leg for your first step. It helps you take a step forward around your horse's nose. When you've reached 1 o'clock, close your feet and stand with your toes pointed in the general direction of the horse's opposite shoulder.

Practice the quarter system as much as possible. If you work with a trainer, have him serve as the judge. Otherwise, enlist a friend or family member to walk around and inspect your horse. Make a game of it and have them stop on the center lines while you work on holding your ground and gauging when to move.



Proper placement for judge and exhibitor:

| Judge | Exhibitor |
|-------|-----------|
| I | IV |
| II | I |
| III | IV |
| IV | I |



Have your trainer, family member or friend act as the judge to allow you to practice at home and get comfortable with the quarter system.

Polishing Your Pattern

With the basics covered, now it's time to learn how to add points to your pattern.

A perfect showmanship pattern is a lot like a great figure-skating performance. The gold medal (or buckle) goes to the exhibitor who not only fulfills the technical requirements of the maneuvers but also makes it look easy. In AQHA competition, the score reflects both the exhibitor and horse's presentation, as well as the performance of the pattern. The AQHA Handbook states that in an excellent performance, the exhibitor and horse complete the "pattern accurately, quickly, smoothly and precisely" and demonstrate "a high level of professionalism."





You should be able to maintain a comfortable arm position when you're leading your horse. Position yourself halfway between your horse's eye and shoulder. A good lead position gives you the most control of your horse and presents a judge-pleasing picture. Being too far forward (Photo A) or too far back (Photo B) takes away from the overall look of your performance and could be unsafe.

Patterns

Patterns can consist of any number of elements. The judge might ask you to walk, trot or back in straight lines or curved lines. In addition, most patterns include a stop and a turn to the right with the horse pivoting around its right hind foot, while keeping that foot planted in the ground. Pull turns, or turns to the left, can't exceed 90 degrees. Each judge determines his own pattern and must post the pattern at least an hour before the class.

You and your horse should master all of the maneuvers at home before attempting them at a show. Ideally, your horse should walk, trot and back by reading your body language without any pressure on the lead shank.

To perform these maneuvers correctly and give a judge-pleasing performance, your horse should keep his body straight and maintain a level head carriage throughout the pattern.

Once you've mastered the maneuvers and you're at the show, try to look at your pattern early. Some shows provide photocopies of the pattern for free or for a small charge.

Carry a notebook with you, just in case the show doesn't supply copies of the pattern. Copy the pattern down exactly as it is drawn and include the written description. A lot of exhibitors make mistakes because they excluded one simple word or phrase.

I'm a firm believer in practicing the pattern as many times as you can

before you go. It isn't unusual for our youth competitors to practice for two hours the morning of the show, just working the pattern. It's like any other sport: A professional baseball player makes catching a fly ball look easy because he has done it a thousand times.

Some people worry about practicing the pattern too much and the horse starting to anticipate the next maneuver. We want the horse to anticipate. With a novice competitor, your horse might help you through an area where you might have made a mistake.

Bottom line: You put the ease and confidence in your pattern through practice.



Your back position should be the reverse of lead position, with your arm softly positioned toward the left ring of the halter. You should be slightly to your horse's left and in front of his nose. Never stand or back from directly in front of your horse.

Speed

I am all about speed. Speed increases the level of difficulty, as long as you maintain control. It's like reining: If you go wide open and maintain control, it's a plus for your performance score. However, the minute you get behind your horse or lose control, it becomes a negative. Your pace should allow you to maintain your balance and complete all of the maneuvers correctly.

Every pattern should have a consistent flow and pace. For instance,

you don't want to turn around at 100 mph and then jog at 10 mph. Try to maintain an even cadence throughout the go. Your pattern should flow from one maneuver to the next, and that overall picture will stick out in the judge's mind.

It's also important to complete each maneuver before starting the next. Novices tend to hurry and wind up with penalties because they didn't finish each maneuver. As an example, if you're doing a 360-degree turn

to the right, make sure you turn all of the way around, complete the turn and have your horse straight before returning to the lead position and walking or trotting into the next portion of the pattern.

You should show at a speed that is comfortable for you and your horse. Don't try to match the speed of another competitor if you and your horse haven't reached that level yet. You're better off ensuring that you perform to the best of your ability.

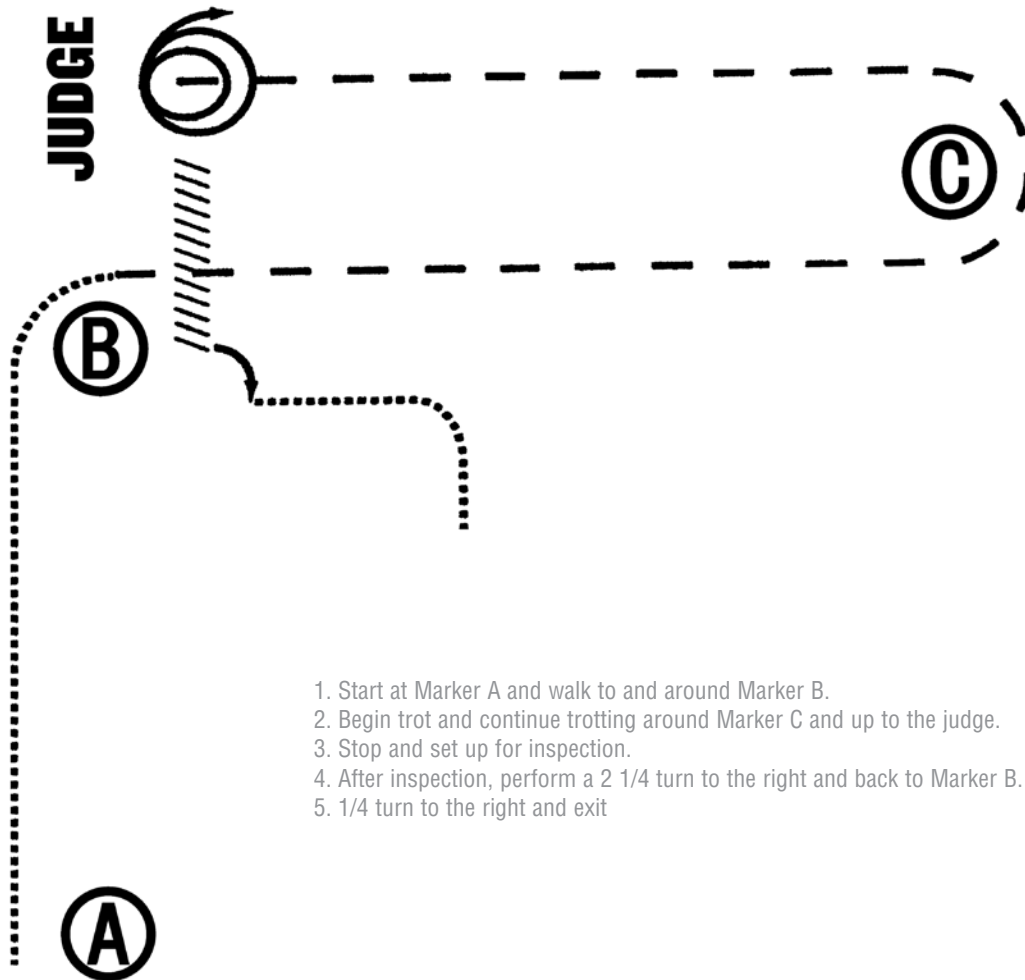
A Total Picture

To win in showmanship requires practice at home. You can't win if you and your horse can't complete every maneuver with precision. Think of the show as a job interview, where you and your horse should look your best. In the end, it isn't the competitor with the most expensive horse or outfit that wins. The gold buckle or trophy goes to the person who was the most effectively prepared on any given day.

Your perfect pattern will come when you master all of the basics and turn in a go with poise, precision and speed.



Practice Pattern



1. Start at Marker A and walk to and around Marker B.
2. Begin trot and continue trotting around Marker C and up to the judge.
3. Stop and set up for inspection.
4. After inspection, perform a 2 1/4 turn to the right and back to Marker B.
5. 1/4 turn to the right and exit

1. Start at Marker A with your horse set up and wait for the judge's signal to begin. In most patterns, you should set up with your horse's shoulder even with the cone. Use the quarter method to determine which side of the horse to be on after you've set up. As this pattern is drawn, you would start on the left side. But patterns aren't always set up exactly as they're drawn. Make adjustments when needed.

2. Walk to and around Marker B. Lead from the left side, and stay even with your horse's throatlatch. Your right arm should be relaxed and held loosely at your side. If it is straight, it's too far in front of you. If your elbow gets behind your mid-section, you're too far forward in relation to your horse or your horse is pushing on the lead shank. In either case, you'll need to practice getting your horse to lead lightly.

Maintain a good rhythm and walk in a straight line from A to B. Keep the same rhythm and distance as you round B. Don't slow down! You'll get credit for a good pace, straightness and style.

3. Begin to trot and trot around C and up to the judge. The transition from the walk to the trot should be smooth. The horse's head should remain in the same natural, relaxed

position throughout the transition. Maintain the same distance from the cone all the way around, and line up and trot squarely to the judge. Stop and set up an arm's length away from the judge.

4. After the inspection and the judge indicates you can proceed, turn your horse two and a quarter turns to the right and back to Marker B. Watch your horse's plant foot during the turn to ensure that your horse keeps it stationary. You'll incur a penalty if your horse lifts his pivot foot or

switches to the other foot. If you feel like your horse is going to lift his foot, a slight tug on the lead shank can tell him to keep his body straight and avoid disaster. Just remember that any correction should be subtle.

5. As you complete the turns, stop square, hesitate slightly, then move into the back position. To back, maintain the same position to the side of your horse as you would leading. You'll be just in front of your horse's nose, with your right arm pointed toward the left ring of the

halter. For safety, never be directly in front of your horse.

Your horse should back straight with his head, neck and body in alignment. Stop with your horse's hip even with the marker.

The final maneuver is the quarter turn to the right and walk out. Many exhibitors tend to get too anxious about completing the pattern and make a mistake at this point. Plan ahead to where you're going to stop, watch that pivot foot and complete the maneuver.

Glance at the judge over your left shoulder to finish the pattern.



In most patterns, you should set up with your horse's shoulder even with the cone. However, make sure you follow the instructions of the posted pattern. Ask show management before your class if you need any clarification.