



This Month Featuring:

Kristina
Hedrick
Wilson

The Judge's Card

JUDGING HALTER

When it comes to judging halter I subscribe to American Philosopher Henry David Thoreau's theory of 'Simplicity, Simplicity, Simplify Simplicity'. Halter is easy to judge, merely stick with the basics of conformation. The founders of AQHA recognized the fact that conformation is the backbone of a breeds characteristics and no breed can exist without clearly defined conformation guidelines. Even though the founding forefathers utilized their horses on ranches in a working capacity on a daily basis, they decided that the first Grand Champion in the Halter class at the Ft. Worth Stock Show would be registered as P#1. Thus the entire breed registry was begun by true working ranch horsemen who felt the most important aspect of the breed was its conformation. No matter how modern our horses, technology and veterinary medicine become the theory of "Form to Function" stands unchanged through it all and the study of conformation will always be imperative to the success of our breed.

Form to Function is the key, plain and simple. The phrase 'form to function' has become a popular buzzword in our industry, however, it is essential that exhibitors,

breeders and prospective buyers truly understand 'form to function'. It is imperative to understand how each part of the horse works, its functions and how it affects the performance and movement of the horse. This information establishes a basis for the prioritization of faults. Which conformation defect is truly more severe when it comes to the long term repercussions to the quality of this animal's life. Conformation ties directly

"It is imperative to understand how each part of the horse works, its functions and how it affects the performance and movement of the horse."

to soundness. Conformation determines how a horse moves and withstands impact-related stress and the productive lifespan of that animal. Once you have a true understanding of how each part works in unison with the others, from there you create a visualization of the perfect horse. It is imperative to be able to call upon that image and use it to compare to when you are judging. Once you can visualize perfection in our mind you can judge any horse because you have a standard to compare them to and once you have determined how the conformation defects impact the animals long term quality of life you can prioritize the defects accordingly.



Photo courtesy of Kristina Hedrick Wilson

Let's begin at the top. If the top line is not right, nothing else will hang right. If there are problems with the topline there are inevitably problems underneath. I like a short back and short couple and the back and loin have to be strong. You cannot train a horse's back, it is what it is. A back that is too long is weak & the horse's movement is hard to keep collected. A horse has to be strong over the back to carry itself properly. For a horse to be a good mover, they need to be able to hinge to engage the back.

It goes without saying that the hip, which is tying the back, loins and croup to the gaskin stifle and hocks, is extremely important also. I prefer a long hip. The distance of the hip makes them stronger behind. When they tie in low down into their gaskin from their hip it gives them strength behind.

Next stop is the legs. I want to see correct legs both front and back. The placement of the hocks is key. You should be able to draw an imaginary line from the ball of the hip to the ground and this line should hit 1-1/2" to 2" in front of his hoof. That is a hock that sits underneath the hip in the



proper position. Essentially the hock is a shock absorber and the angle of the hock directly affects the power it has and its length of stride.

If the hock sits in the proper position it enables the horse to be a far better athlete in any discipline you choose to pursue.

Example: When a horse is in a lope his left back and right front are going to hit at the same time. Suppose a horse's hocks sit out behind him so he has to take a longer stride behind than he does in front which means his front

"Every part of the horse is important, even the eye."

feet are going to have to stay in the air until the back foot hits so this horse is going to be a climber. If he takes a shorter stride behind then he does up front then for them to hit at the same time he has to be quick in front making him appear ponified. For a horse to be symmetric underneath and a flat kneed mover he must be taking the same length of stride behind as he does in front so that is why it is so important for the hocks to sit underneath the hip correctly. And we can accurately calculate all this out without even watching the horse move. That is the great thing about structure, physics and form to function.

The shoulder has an important purpose as well. The distance of the slope on the shoulder and the distance from the elbow to the point of shoulder is where the stride comes from. The horse with

a long upright upper arm or humorous is going to have more range of motion. I also look for the V in the front, depth in the heart girth.

Every part of the horse has a function including the throatlatch, which allows the horse to break at the poll and stop balanced. A tight Throatlatch and a neck that comes flat out of the withers for balance are desirable traits that I look for in a horse.

Every part of the horse is important, even the eye. A big, kind eye is desirable not only because it is more aesthetically pleasing, it also gives the horse better peripheral vision thus making the horse more useful with cows, trail and generally a lot less spooky to be around. The bite on a horse is very critical, hence the reason all stallion and mares have to show their bite when being judged. If a horse has a shallow mouth the bit cannot set properly on the bars. Every part has an integral purpose. In regards to "bulk", I like a fit horse. I like muscling; however, I will not give it more importance than balance.

While every individual part is important, how they all tie together and work in unison to bring a balanced appearance is the final result.

***Editor Note** – Kristina has been showing competitively since the age of 9 and has accumulated points in 8 different events with an AQHA National Title and several AQHA World and Congress honors to her credit. She has been successful in the Halter arena as well as receiving National honors with All-Around horses and Hunters alike. She holds several breed cards and frequently judges premier events.