

The Game within the Game

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I have a loud voice. I can't help it. On the bright side, my students can usually hear my instruction. On the negative side, sometimes judges three arenas away can too. At the Tampa Fairgrounds, the new covered arena houses two side-by-side dressage rings which can be used at the same time. I was slated to read for a student in one ring while an adult "smart-guy" chick (pardon the expression) whom I teach occasionally in clinics was due to read for a mutual friend in the adjacent ring. The woman reading was of a competitive bent herself, so when I conspired to hold my words and project them loudly only when she also began to read, a contest ensued to see who could drown out the other. An inevitable escalation followed till the rides ended. The judges might have been slightly bemused. The farmers over at the milking pavilion--against their will--learned a lot about dressage tests.

Another time, while showing at the same venue, I noticed that the schedule put me in Arena 1 riding the Prix St. George while a student of mine was simultaneously to perform a first level test in Arena 2. I asked the technical delegate if there was a rule that would keep me from reading my student's test for her while I rode my own. She couldn't exactly produce a reason why not but suggested that if I did, the rulebook would have to grow yet again.

We instructors have learned to take advantage of intra-familial rivalries when they promote our cause. Case in point: I used to teach a mother and her daughter, a young teenager. They were fairly cheerful with one another as far as those chemistries go, but they were very competitive. At the time neither was very experienced and their lessons usually followed on the same day, one after the other. The mom was practicing her sitting trot one day, and to make her aware of her unsteady hands, I took my empty McDonald's soda cup, filled it three quarters full of water and handed to her to carry around as she trotted. Predictably, it sloshed all over, and her lap was soon getting pretty damp.

"I bet Sally (the daughter then warming up) can do this," I ventured.

Refilling the cup, I approached the kid with my back to the mom, my body shielding my actions from her. Previously I had palmed the plastic lid, and as the daughter watched, I handed her the now-sealed cup and invited her to ride. Of course by then she could have turned the cup upside down and stayed dry, but

mom couldn't see any of this. Sally, devious little monster that she was, made a great show of trotting round and round and even cantering—much to her mother's chagrin—not once spilling a drop.

Again with my back to the mom, I took the cup from Sally, reversing the procedure and tucking the lid discreetly back into my pocket as I returned the cup to mama to try again. To the mother I said with as straight a face as I could muster, "Gee, looks like Sally's getting ahead of you with her quiet hands, don't you think?"

The mom vowed to redouble her efforts to catch up to her daughter's skill level, and neither I nor child ever revealed our ruse. I think there's a pretty good chance that if the mom reads this in print 15 years later, it'll be the first time she'll be in on our secret.