

## After 'While, Crocodile

I was judging a big show in Virginia—six arenas—one spring weekend. On Saturday, I presided over a most unusual occurrence. The test in question was a Fourth Level One. It began beautifully. By the midpoint the rider had racked up a pile of 7s as well as a pair of 8s and a 9 (the latter for the Collected Walk)! There were a couple of blips as well, but this was a GOOD test in progress.

Five movements into the canter the test calls for a medium canter from H to K. It began boldly but soon became a flat-out, bolting runaway. The horse stayed in the arena but came careening back towards us in a heart-stopping gallop. Something seriously bad was on the verge of happening.

Miraculously, the rider got him stopped on the circle in front of me. I jumped out of my truck(booth) to offer aid as the woman caught her breath. After a few moments I said, "You can try to continue if you want, or you can be excused."

Somewhat shakily, she decided to continue.

"Don't do the medium again," I suggested. "I think we saw that!"

She picked up the canter again in the far end and rode a very conservative but civil half pass and flying change—both 6s. She avoided the next extended canter and transition—both 4s. But by then the horse was as settled as he'd begun the test. The two short diagonals and their flying changes were 7s, and the test finished pleasantly, obediently, and expressively.

I dismounted from my vehicle to offer a few last words of commiseration and encouragement—some goofy young Thoroughbred had tried to do me in just a few weeks before that. I knew the feeling well.

"Can this not count?" the rider asked.

"Sorry. Too late for that," was my answer. "You DID finish the test, remember."

She proceeded on her way, and I returned to the test sheet to finish up my remarks. For the medium canter-misadventure I gave a 1. And an Error—minus 2—off course. For Submission in the Collective Marks, I gave a 2—while most of the test was commendable, running off is an egregious fault that deserves a very low score. But in the Rider block I gave a 7—everything was handled about as well as it could have been, and, aside from the disaster, she rode elegantly and effectively.

I was very curious to see how the score and the placing would come out. I really didn't want her to win under the circumstances, but we judge block-by-block and try to remain Spock-like and emotionally unattached from the result the scorer produces. Nonetheless, when she wound up with a 62 percent and a fourth place, I knew

someone with a 56 must be standing at the scoreboard moaning, "My horse didn't do *anything* wrong and That Horse beat me!" So it goes. My numbers were honest. Every one, whether high or low, had been earned by the performance.

Much was made at the Beijing Olympics of prominent riders who appeared to have been under-penalized for their horses' misbehaviors in the arena, but you can bet that Anky and Isabel didn't get 2s for Submission! Then the punishment had not fit the crime.

My little episode, however, illustrates how judges deal with what transpires in front of us.

Occasionally a student comes back with her test sheet and observes, "Boy, she really killed me on my walk pirouettes" (or whatever), I try to explain that—barring some emotional turmoil that isn't supposed to figure in—the judge wasn't the executioner. The horse and the rider were. Truly we are a bit more than just the messenger, but we also aren't making this stuff up as we go along! It's like in tennis: if the linesman calls the ball "out," (and replay confirms it) then "out" becomes an objective fact for which that official shoulders no blame.

This wasn't always so. I remember back in the '70s when a lot of the older judges used to keep running tallies of all the riders' scores. Some held all the tests until the end of the class and jimmied the scores up or down to produce the result they "felt" was desirable. Much more standardized judges' training and the new age of transparency—each individual score made public—has put a damper on most of these strange habits. Judges may give out the numbers but the scorer is the one who determines the winners and losers!

Getting back to my runaway, about a week after the show I was pleased and surprised to receive an e-mail from her. The rider had gone to the trouble of searching out my address in the Judges Roster and wrote to thank me for how I had dealt with her in the arena. "I haven't been to many recognized shows and when you got out of your truck," she wrote, "I thought you were going to tell me never to ride dressage again or at least not to come back the next day. Instead you made me feel better, and on Sunday (in front of a different judge) I won my class."

This was an outcome that would make any judge happy.