

From Your Side of C

Golf seems to be the only sport with a deeply ingrained code of honor. Even tour professionals will call a two stroke penalty on themselves for some nearly invisible infraction, sometimes costing themselves hundreds of thousands of dollars in the process. That doesn't happen in tennis (line calls), football (holding), baseball (the phantom tag at second base), or soccer (the Stanislavski-esque flop of an un-touched defender).

Of course, dressage judges can't be fooled . . . but it never hurts to try!

We used to run into a judge who had a desperate aversion to a flash or a dropped noseband, even though their use was perfectly within the rules. Scribes would report that she'd rant and rail all throughout a test whenever she saw one. If I was showing a horse who wore a flash, I'd warm up normally, and right before I circled the arena for my ride, I'd unfasten and pocket that wretched little strip of leather. More than once as my ride concluded, this judge would stand and proclaim how it warmed her heart to see a horse showing "without his mouth tied shut."

[NB: the appropriate response, intoned shyly: "Thank you, Ma'am."]

This same well known judge (who for obvious reasons shall remain anonymous) often wrote her own rules of decorum for her arena. She was a senior judge who gave pretty good numbers but could get a little full of herself from time to time. I once saw her interrupt a Training Level class, march herself out into the center of the arena, histrionically shift her gaze around the ring like a sea captain searching the horizon for land, and announce loudly, "No, this area IS the right shape. There's NO REASON for the kind of circles I'm seeing!"

She was also known, contrary to the rules, to initiate long critiques of the riders as they stood at G at their tests' end. One obvious by-product of this behavior was that her ring would fall farther and farther behind schedule as the day wore on. It got so extreme that once we riders awaiting our turns began timing how long she took before signaling the next rider to start. Soon it became a contest to see who could make her talk the longest. After my final halt and salute, I nodded appreciatively throughout her recap of my ride, then innocently dreamed up as many questions as I could, running up the minutes and seconds to win the bet.

Another time up in Vermont, I was showing an especially obnoxious young horse in front of her at the old Doornhof Farm. I was congratulating myself at having thwarted his attempt to exit over the boards near M and head for the barn during the ride, but as I saluted, she removed her glasses, stared through me and began portentously, "Young man . . . you have a very nice horse, BUT . . ."
[Note to self: nothing good ever follows that phrase]

Instead of sticking with commentary on my ride, Judge in Question continued, ". . . BUT you really need help with this horse. . . Who do you ride with?"

After some polite mumbling wherein I indicated I worked mostly alone, she asked, "Where do you live?" and launched into a list of people from whom I could have lessons. Generally people I wouldn't have been caught dead with anywhere near my horses. Upon each suggestion, I responded, "Ah ha, thank you," or words to that effect, hoping to beat a retreat at my first opportunity.

The interview mercifully wound down, and after a few more "Thank you, Ma'am"s, I hiked back to the stable area, passing (later-to-be Olympian) Sue Blinks and Sue Steinhof, another recognized judge, who were hanging out by their stalls. I recounted my head-numbing grilling to them, and a Sue suggested, "Well, why didn't you just tell her you rode with Bill Woods?"

"What?" I replied, "and ruin HIS reputation?"