

LESSON THREE

THE JUDGING SYSTEMS

AND HOW TO SCORE POINTS

JUDGING IS SUBJECTIVE

Judges are just informed people who love the sport they are judging.

They generally stand at the same station the entire day, holding a clip board with score sheet and work to give their undivided attention to each participant's pattern "run" or "go".

Most judges come from a competition background and are frequently devoted trainers and competitors themselves. They do not get paid a lot of money for a very long day, but they appreciate observing a well-honed working unit of horse and rider achieving an impressive pattern run. The judge wants to give you a notable score. You just have to earn it!

Most judges come to the table trying to leave their biases about riding disciplines and breeds at home, where the biases belong. Judges understand that a really nice horse is exceptional, regardless of breed.

Because Competitive Mountain Trail is in its infancy, along with the AQHA sanctioned events and the IMTCA and other competitive trail events, not all judges will be "certified" to judge competitive trail. Currently there are no exact requirements for the certification. So, expect judges to miss something exceptional your horse performed on your pattern run and miss the big flub of the last exhibitor; it's going to happen, even as those judging become more experienced and knowledgeable.

Participants do not approach or speak directly to a judge, unless the judge has addressed them directly. Should you need to speak to a judge, during the competition, it is recommended you request permission from the judge's scribe. Frequently the scribe is a volunteer or someone who is apprenticing to become a judge. The scribe functions as the judge's handyman.

DIFFERENT SCORING SYSTEMS

Pictured are the three gals who host the annual "Wild Cowgirl Enterprises", Cowboy Mountain Trail Challenge in Walla Walla, Washington. They have adopted a terrific theme motto for the goal of their competition; "Providing a venue to help equine enthusiasts create a balanced and versatile trail horse".

Wild Cowgirl Enterprises LLC
“COWBOY” Mountain Trail Challenge

Walla Walla, WA



Their definition of a Trail Challenge Competition is: “An event where the horse is being judged on its ability to handle natural or man-made obstacles and given tasks; and the rider is judged on horsemanship and showmanship skills. The horse and rider are judged as a pair”.

Quoted from the WCE judging guidelines is an in-depth description of what the judges are scrutinizing, this is what the judge ideally wants to observe; “A **competition trail** horse traveling through and between obstacles exhibiting confidence and purpose. He should have an inquisitive, intent look that shows awareness of his surroundings and enjoyment of the job he is performing. He should have his head low enough to maintain the ability to see his path, but not lose the awareness of the rest of his surroundings.

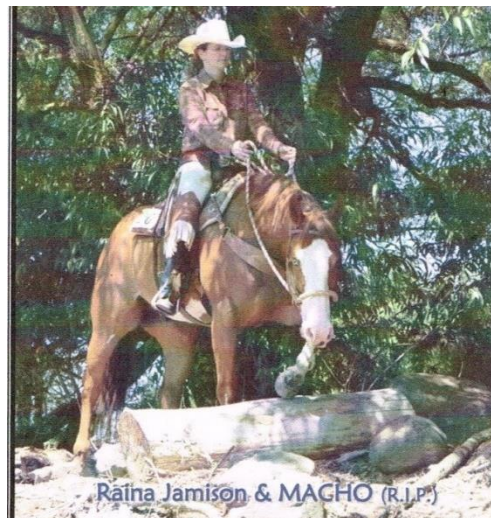
Once over the obstacle, he should raise his head enough to be noting what is around him while not being distracted to the extent that he loses focus of what is under his feet and in his immediate surroundings. He should be able to accept guidance and instruction from his rider softly and willingly with no signs of resistance or loss of focus on the task at hand. **The rider should be able to guide his horse with both rein and leg aids.** The horse should be showing instant and willing response to the smallest signal from the rider between and within obstacles and within any gait changes. He should show curiosity and a willingness to be guided, having confidence in placement of his feet at all times. He should not only show the ability to

take care of himself, but should also have an ability and awareness of taking care of his rider.

The horse should maintain his headset and body frame in his natural way of movement, according to his breed and conformation, yet will lower his head as necessary to look where he is going and be drawn into and over obstacles in a quiet safe manner”.

After reading this quote from Wild Cowgirl Enterprises judging requirements you can understand how technical correctly riding an obstacle can be. However, never fear, no one ever gets every obstacle perfect in every pattern, the fun is in the practice, training and PREPARATION!

A Talented Example:



The scoring guidelines shown below are taken directly from the WCE website; they are also very similar to the guidelines given on the Oregon Horse Center website for Mountain Trail Competitions.

Scoring Guidelines

All Competition Trail classes should be scored with the same set of criteria and/or standard level of performance expectations. No allowances shall be made for lower level classes nor shall higher expectations given to higher level classes, as far as actual scoring. Rather, obstacles and/or pattern design for lower level classes should have less degree of difficulty, while obstacles and/or pattern design should increase in degree of difficulty as the level advances towards the upper level classes.

Scoring will be done on a scale that is the same and fair to all contestants. The system is a scale of 0 to 10 points for each obstacle or task. A score of 5 will be considered average. Scoring can be given in half point increments.

10 is a perfect score
6 – 9 being above average
5 indicates an average performance
1 - 4 being below average
0 being an obstacle that is refused or missed

There is no exact, precise dictation of scoring on this scale due to the tremendous variation of classes, obstacles and tasks on different courses. However, there are certain expectations of horse and rider that can be used as judging criteria regardless of the obstacle or situation that is presented to them.

When a rider appears lost between obstacles or takes an incorrect path between obstacles, but then fixes it to the correct path, this incorrectness should be reflected in the score of the next obstacle.

A tie breaker obstacle, per class level, will be used if needed.

Cowpoke HI POINT TIE BREAKER will be the horse/rider team with most first place finishes, most second place finishes, etc...

Scoring of 6 – 10 points

Above Average performances should include (the more they are exhibited the higher the score):

- ❖ Rider should follow exact path and perform only obstacles indicated on the class pattern and/or set during walk-through.
- ❖ Where possible, all obstacles should be entered and exited straight and precise in the middle. Many obstacles such as log and rock piles require a meandering line and that should be taken in consideration, as should the horse that shows a degree of difficulty in handling a straight line well.
- ❖ Unless otherwise required by the pattern the horse should travel on a straight path through an obstacle with the least amount of guidance from rider to maintain that line.
- ❖ Horse should carry his head low enough that he can see his path but not down so low as to lose sight of his surroundings. Once the obstacle under his feet is accomplished, the horse should naturally pick his head up to check out his surroundings and track to the next obstacle with curiosity and intent.
- ❖ The rider should allow the horse enough rein to have the ability to get his head down so he may perform a task. But not so much rein that the rider loses the ability to control or help horse if needed or the reins become in danger of getting entangled on obstacles or horse's legs.
- ❖ Once the horse is set on his path by the rider he should maintain that path with little or no further guidance until asked for a change of direction or gait.
- ❖ The horse should maintain a smooth, even cadence of gait where possible with little or no rider assistance. Rider should allow horse to adjust his own gait in an obstacle where it is necessary but rider should not have to continually make adjustments themselves.
- ❖ The horse should be allowed to travel at his natural speed within each gait while showing the ability to take care of both himself and his rider. *(Keep in mind the natural travel speed in gaited horses, as well as natural speed due to various conformations throughout other breeds, i.e.: short strides vs. long strides, short legs on a tall log vs. long legs on a tall log.)*
- ❖ When a change of direction is required in an obstacle the horse should show a willing attitude to accept rider's instruction and have the ability to readjust his focus and feet to the new path.
- ❖ The horse places his feet clearly and confidently between obstacles such as rocks, logs, etc.
- ❖ The horse acknowledges and adjusts to various terrain quickly and clearly; mud, water, sand, inclines, declines, ditches, etc.
- ❖ The horse shows the ability to acknowledge a scary obstacle but proceeds with willing caution and curiosity without compromising it's calm, relaxed attitude and way of going (forward motion).

Here is a video of a five year old Appaloosa gelding, “Hotroddin at Sundown”, ridden by his owner who has done all of his training. <https://youtu.be/mkUCIt7-MDs>

No one else has ever ridden this horse and he is shown here at the first day of competition at Oregon Horse Center's National Event in November of 2010.

On the first day of the 3- day competition the course patterns are made easier for the equine team. The loud and wet waterfall is not yet turned on; hence the manmade creek beds and ponds are not yet full of water. This is also the Novice horse class. Generally, a Novice horse can be entered if they have not yet won 3 or more blue ribbons (first place) at a similar event. This horse and rider team won the National Championship for their Novice Class and the Novice Division Highpoint award. This was the second time they had entered this event.

Without getting overly complicated, if you were judging the video clip on the Appaloosa gelding your scoring mechanism would work like the following:

There is the potential of 2 points for the entrance and another 2 points for the exit of the obstacle with another 5 available points for the execution of the obstacle

itself. If the judge thought your ride really shined on that obstacle he could plus you 1 point for a grand total of 10 points, which would be the ultimate perfect score.

Please see more detailed criteria below;

Judging for Mountain Trail

Criteria

Each obstacle counts for 10 points

The judging is as follows

- 1- Entry into the obstacle -2 points*
- 2- Navigating through the obstacle- 5 points*
- 3- Exit from the obstacle – 2 points*
- 4- ½ points are recommended to be used where it is needed to difference ate between riders.*
- 5- Some obstacles at the shows to be determined by the head show judge will be valued at times two.*

1- Entry: Two points are given if the horse enters the obstacle straight, acknowledges the obstacle and maintains forward motion in an alert and willing manner. A horse has up to 3 seconds to examine the obstacle before entry. After 3 seconds it will be counted as a refusal and lack of forward motion.

2- Navigating: Five points are given if the horse picks his way through in a willing safe manner without stumbles, ticks, or breaks in gate.

3- Exit: Two points are given if the horse exits at the same speed that it entered and is straight and on course.

If 1, 2 and 3 are all smooth, safe and enjoyable to watch then the judge has the option of granting an extra point which brings the total possible points to 10. Ten is the best.

It is recognized that each breed may have a different head set, speed of forward motion or gait – however all must move in a safe manner with a willing attitude.

This system applies to each obstacle whether it is a bridge, gate, trench, water and or logs rocks etc.

Points

A horse that receives a 0 for any obstacle for a complete refusal may ***NOT*** place higher than a horse with a score for each obstacle.

Entry

-1 point - Horse does not enter an obstacle straight, willing and or breaks forward motion with a pause longer than 3 seconds. (“stop” is a break of forward motion longer than 3 seconds)

-2 point - Horse refuses twice (the horse backs up twice) Horse has, two refusals and not straight and or will not enter obstacle.

After three refusals the horse and rider must move on – a show is not a place to train – this will result in a 0 for obstacle.

Navigating:

-1 point – Horse and rider lose forward motion

-2 point – Horse stumbles, ticks, in a hurry

-3 point – Horse is not listening to the rider

-4 point – Horse does all three above

-5 point – All the above and or rider and horses safety is at risk.

Exit:

-1 point – Hurries and not straight

-2 point – Not straight and all the above and not safe

All penalties apply to each obstacle.

This system will allow the spectators and competitors to understand how the judging takes place. It will also be fun for everyone to score along and see how they do.

In 2013, the American Quarter Horse Association, always inviting new members and searching for new activities to promote and strengthen their membership, got on board with Competitive Trail Riding. The AQHA sanctioned events are referred to as, “Trail Challenges”, which is certainly a fitting description.

With the sanctioning of a new event, where you can win Quarter Horse points also comes a new set of judging rules. Understand that you do not have to ride a

Quarter Horse to ride in one of their sanctioned events, but if you do, you can accumulate AQHA points. If you don't ride a quarter horse, you can still win the event, by accumulating the most competition points. Once AQHA receives the placing results from a competition's host, they will post the Trail Challenge Merits (points) on the registered quarter horse's permanent record.

THE SCORING CRITERIA FOR AQHA TRAIL CHALLENGES

The following Trail Challenge Merits are accumulated as:

First place – 3 merits, Second place- 2.5 merits, Third place – 2 merits, Fourth place – 1.5 merits and Fifth place equals – 1 merit.

Your goal for achieving merits (points) is to demonstrate to the judge the partnership of rider and horse. You are also allowed an automatic 5 points from each judge for your horsemanship skills. If you yank on your horse's face, spur where you should not, rush a young horse into an obstacle that he is unsure of, use two hands on the reins when you were riding with only one, talk in the "hold" area, wear a dirty shirt, etc., your judge can deduct horsemanship points from your score.

In addition to the opportunity to earn AQHA merit points, AQHA has stipulated three different "levels" for participants.

LEVEL 1- Training Level: this is considered a new partnership. The rider and horse may not have established trust or are unsure about each team member's ability to negotiate simple obstacles. Obstacles should be easy to explain to the riding team with basic maneuvering or technique needed to complete the obstacles. (This is a terrific level for beginners, either horse or rider or the combination of both).

LEVEL 2 – Intermediate Level: this is considered an established partnership. The rider and horse are familiar with one another, exhibit trust when negotiating obstacles and are conditioned to ride a longer course. (If you are feeling confident, you can enter level 1 and level 2 at the same event).

LEVEL 3 – Master Level: is considered a partnership where the horse and rider have established trust, can negotiate difficult obstacles and are conditioned to traverse a longer course. (Level 1 will only have a singular gait of the walk for all patterns, Level 2 will have a jog into, through or between an obstacle and Level 3 will call for a lope.) You can combine Levels 1 and 2 or 2 and 3, but you cannot combine Level 1 and 3.

The AQHA sanctioned Trail Challenges are currently in their initial development stage.

For current information you can access www.aqha.com . Even if you are not a member, the website is open to you; check the home page tab under "riding". There is also an AQHA ride Hotline 1-888-414-RIDE (7433). If you are interested in the

requirements for holding a sanctioned Trail Challenge you can contact the AQHA Manager of Recreational Activities and Ranching Programs at 1-806-376-4811 X 4387.

Even if you don't ride a registered quarter horse, when you enter an AQHA sanctioned Trail Challenge a token fee taken from your entry monies provides AQHA accident and medical insurance coverage for you at each individual event. There are also special judging considerations given to riders with disabilities and opportunities for everyone to participate, even the youth.

Please review the page taken from AQHA General Trail Ride Rules which are applicable to Trail Challenges.

It's my objective to help you accomplish your trail riding goals; at the same time, I don't want to overload you with cumbersome judging information and create a head ache. So, I'll again refer you to the AQHA website. A few inches down from the top of their home page you will see several tabs; click on "riding" tab; from there you can click on "Trail Challenges", arrow down and find, "learn all the rules".

At some point you will be interested in this particular set of rules as it is the judging/scoring system utilized by the AQHA Trail Challenges and the newly formed International Mountain Trail Challenge Association. It is a bit more complicated than the fairly standard system of "Judging for Mountain Trail" criteria that you've already studied.

At this juncture, don't fret about understanding the entire judge's scoring system; instead concentrate on the proper way to finesse an obstacle. You won't have time to be calculating your score as you are riding an obstacle; you need to concentrate on your balance, cues, response of your horse and the next obstacle coming at you in your pattern.

Appendix D

AQHA GENERAL TRAIL RIDE RULES [Post at Event]

1. Each Participant must sign a Registration/Release Form before they can participate.
2. Youth under 18 must have a parent or guardian sign a Registration/Release Form.
3. No consumption of alcohol beverages by Participants riding horses at the Trail Ride within a reasonable period of time prior to commencement of or during the Trail Ride; Anyone found under the influence of alcohol, drugs, etc. will be immediately removed from participation and accompanied back to the place the Trail Ride originated;
4. Any type of inhumane treatment to a horse, including, but not limited to, excessive spurring or whipping or excessive jerking of the reins is prohibited;
5. Unsportsmanlike conduct or any other form of misconduct that is irresponsible, illegal, indecent, profane, intimidating, threatening or abusive is prohibited;
6. No unsound horses will be allowed to participate on the Trail Ride;
7. No dogs allowed on the actual Trail Ride;
8. Participants must stay on designated trail;
9. No firearms, fireworks or noisemakers allowed;
10. No smoking on the trail;
11. An adult must accompany children under the age of 15;
12. Minimum age of a Trail Ride Participant riding a horse is 6 years;
13. No Participants should be allowed to pass the trail boss;
14. Participants should ride in an orderly and safe manner;
15. Participants may not ride double or without saddles;
15. A red ribbon should be attached to the tail of a kicking horse to warn other participants of potential danger;
16. No littering;
17. No loose horses;
18. No horses within 60 feet of registration and meal/entertainment area;
19. General public should not be allowed to mingle with horses
20. Stallions are permitted to participate in AQHA Trail Challenges but not in AQHA Trail Rides. Only adults may ride a stallion in AQHA Trail Challenges. If an AQHA Trail Challenge is held in conjunction with an AQHA Trail Ride, stallions are not permitted to attend; and
21. Horses must be 3 years of age to participate in AQHA Trail Challenges.

Remember the better the partnership, the higher the score.

Here are some things to consider: your horse's cadence or flow through the obstacle should be based on the necessary obstacle navigation. You do not want to hurry or rush the obstacle; it doesn't just look bad, it is not safe and indicates that the horse is not being careful of his foot placement, nor is he solid in his task at hand.

Of course refusing an obstacle is more detrimental than rushing it. A refusal is generally considered the loss of forward motion, such as stepping to the side or backing away from the obstacle. Given this type of situation, a competition is not the place for training, so when a horse balks or turns away from an obstacle it is the rider's responsibility to move onto the next obstacle, after the third refusal. The judge also has the right to ask the rider to pass an obstacle if the judge feels it will be unsafe

to the riding team. (Based on the judge's opinion of the rider's ability to control the horse).

Here we have a 44 second video clip of professional western pleasure trainer Ty Elrod, riding a four year old junior western pleasure horse, "Riley".

<https://youtu.be/aK5oQrdIqwo>

Riley is always ridden inside the arena and he is very good at his job. On our way to the outdoor course, Elrod commented that Riley had a very good mind and would probably go through anything! We also know that Riley has never, ever been on the course.

This video is of Riley's first attempt to take two slight steps down from solid ground into some loose gravel. We use this as an example of refusals. A Judge using the Mountain Trail Judging criteria may only count this as 3 refusals, basically, every time the horse backs up, where the Judge applying the AQHA judging criteria, if he counts fast enough, would find almost a dozen refusals.

The AQHA criterion considers just one front foot stepping singularly backward or sideways as a refusal. So, when you have several backward steps in a row, the refusals add up fast.

The Judge may also be applying a time allowance. There used to be a 3 minute rule-- you had up to 3 minutes or 3 attempts. That rule now is a 3 second rule in an effort to keep the patterns running in a timely fashion. Either way, Riley was racking up deducts, not extra points. We thank Riley and Ty Elrod for being such gracious sports and superb photo models.

Since rider's scores are posted throughout the day or at the end of each event day, you can take the opportunity to check your scores on each individual obstacle while your pattern runs are fresh in your mind. You might want to take one of your printed pattern forms and mark your scores on each one of your obstacles for later reference.

You'll also be able to view everyone else's scores. So if you note a particular row of high scores, check for the rider's entry number (sometimes the names are not posted, just the entry numbers). Make a mental note of these entries and when your schedule allows, watch them; you can learn a lot.

HOW TO READ A PATTERN AND THE JUDGE'S WALK-THROUGH

Simply follow the green line through the maze on our sample pattern (you'll find the pattern below) to get the gist of the pattern. Note that the green line indicates a "walk" and the black star symbol is your "hold". The "hold" area is where you will switch from one judge's quadrant or sector to the next judge's sector.

You do this by completely halting at the designated "hold" area and wait patiently with a quiet horse until your judge dismisses you with a nod of the head or tip of the hat. It is a slight acknowledgement, so you need to be paying attention. However, you will remain in your hold area, until the next judge is ready and

acknowledges you to move forward into the new quadrant, again with a slight nod or tip of the hat.

Sometimes there will already be a horse in the designated hold position right in front of you, which means you will have to wait for your turn and expect your horse to stand quietly. This is not a place to sit and visit with another rider.

The pattern copies or photos will always have written instructions. The written instructions may look good on paper, but not make technical sense to you when you are actually walking on the course. Sometimes, you may think you understand exactly what is intended, and then you attend the “Judge’s Walk-Through” and find out you had it wrong.

All competitive trail events will have a judge’s walk-through at a given time prior to the actual start of the event. Don’t miss it! This is your opportunity to make certain you understand your patterns and your only chance to ask questions.

Keep your questions brief and to the point. Speak up so everyone can hear the question so the other competitors will understand the judge’s answer.

The walk-through is not a mini meet and greet or the place to tell jokes, giggle or gossip with your friends. Please be quiet and respectful of everyone else who is trying to pay attention. There will be dozens of people attending, and the walk-through needs to move promptly so the competition can start in a timely fashion.

Judges are happy to answer any questions or demonstrate each obstacle. Because this is considered an educational experience, each competing rider should have the opportunity to understand what is being asked of them.

MEMORIZING YOUR PATTERN

Ride your pattern in your mind.

As you study your pattern and walk through the course you will not have your horse with you, so ride the pattern, perfectly in your mind. Think about how your horse is going to react to each obstacle and strategize how best to anticipate his reactions. Imagine how your horse is going to see the obstacles, anticipate where he might lose focus, where he might be insecure and stop in mid-stride, or where he might want to rush. Plan for how your horse thinks. See the obstacles through his eyes.

We probably all deserve trophies for working hard at just memorizing all those patterns; it is a great mental exercise and takes us out of our comfort zone. It is also a lot of information to retain when under the stress of competition. There are going to be times you go off course. It will cost you points, but that is alright; it happens to all of us.

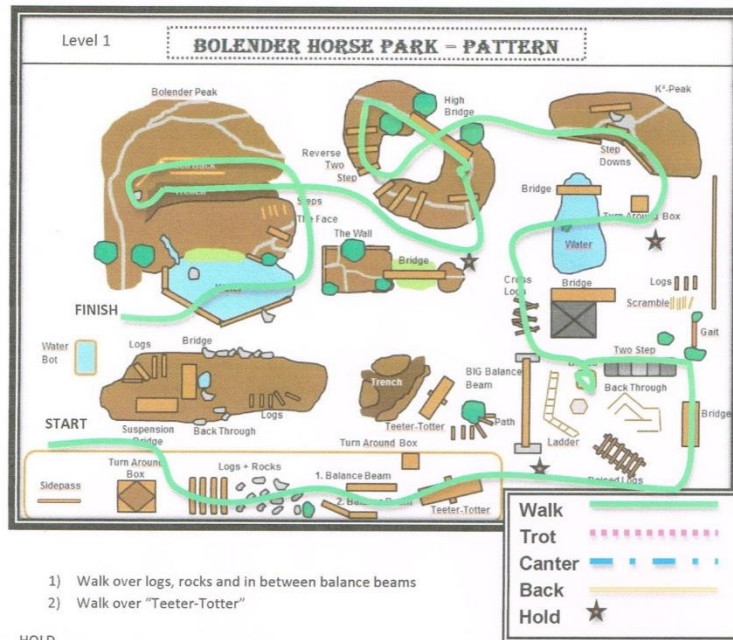
One way to be certain you have your course pattern well memorized is to walk it as many times as possible. Yes, you generally get more physical exercise at a competition than your horse does, but you need to make perceptual notations about

obstacles as you are walking through them. When the judge's eye is upon you and you are out there solo, the intersection in the trail will manage to appear slightly different than it did when you were walking horseless on the ground.

Don't make the mistake of depending on other riders to know your pattern. If you are unsure, you may be watching someone else who is off course.

Remember the second copy of your pattern you printed earlier?

A great place to stash your pattern is under the pommel of your saddle. It won't be visible, it is readily accessible immediately prior to your run, and you can handily stuff it back just before you start your competition. You might want to check it after your run, to make certain you did stay on course, as you may have to ride that same pattern again in another class.



- 1) Walk over logs, rocks and in between balance beams
- 2) Walk over "Teeter-Totter"

HOLD

- 3) Walk past "Raised Logs" left and over "Bridge"
- 4) Left and over "Two Step"
- 5) Left and step into box, 180 to left and step out, turn left
- 6) Walk over "Cross Logs"
- 7) Walk through water, turn right

HOLD

- 8) Left around box, walk up K² Peak lower level, walk under "High Bridge"
- 9) Turn right and walk up "Reverse Two Step"
- 10) Right and over "High Bridge," walk over exit log

HOLD

- 11) Walk through "Trench" and around stump
- 12) Walk over "Switch Back"
- 13) Walk through water, out middle section, stop and acknowledge judge

REQUIRED OBSTACLES AND NOT SO TYPICAL OBSTACLES



The AQHA Trail Challenges require at least 6-16 obstacles. Some could be as ordinary as opening, passing through and closing a gate or removing a rain slicker from a tree branch.

The AQHA Trail Challenges require the obstacles to be in numerical order with a number “posted” at each obstacle.

Each obstacle should have a different degree of difficulty. You’ll recognize this if you study different pattern levels. There are many ways to set up an obstacle, raising or lowering the degree of difficulty.

Practice at home with four ground poles. See how many ways you can practice different maneuvers... forward, backward and sideways.

DRESS REHEARSAL AND A FRESH PAIR OF SOCKS

If you purchased a new saddle blanket, new girth, new pair of spurs, new “chink” chaps, new hat or new reins, do not make the mistake of waiting to use them the first time at your competition. Any type of new tack or riding apparel will have a different fit or feel to it. Try them and ride in them several times before your competition. You will almost always find that you will need some type of adjustment and it can’t always be made at the show.

The last thing you need is not feeling able to adequately move your legs because your new chinks are bunching, the new cinch came loose and the new reins are too stiff. And don’t sacrifice your own feet. A competition is not the place to break in a new pair of boots. If at all possible, take a second pair of boots and fresh socks; your feet will thank you!

You are considering a new sport that we guarantee will benefit you and your horse. It is also easier on your pocket book than many other events and always a ton of fun.

Assignment:

1. Review the YouTube video of the Appaloosa gelding, and utilizing the Judging for Mountain Trail criteria, please judge and score the bridge crossing. Remember the entrance and exits are also scored. Give me your thoughts and details for assembling the score.
2. Build or find 3 different mountain trail obstacles. The obstacles can be out on a trail if that works for you. Submit a video of you riding each one of the three obstacles as if you were in a competition. Please make each video as a separate file. When you email me the individual links, tell me which obstacle you believe you would have scored the highest on and why.
3. Then score that obstacle and yourself the same way you scored the Appaloosa gelding. Considerable detail and full explanations are expected.

Please submit your assignment to Vickie Zapel
Vikevon7@gmail.com Please be certain that you include your full name and email address on your assignment. Thank you.