

# Showjumping Equitation: What's Next

by Peter Ibrahim Abisheganaden and Lorna Fisher

17 August 2001

Showjumping Equitation classes were first introduced in Malaysia in August 1999. In the two years that Malaysia has been staging these classes, quite a lot has changed. Last year Lorna and I co-wrote an article, "Improving Your Showjumping Equitation Scores." This article was well received, not only by our Malaysian riders but we have also had positive comments from overseas.

If you are interested in learning more about showjumping equitation but have not read this article yet then it might be a good starting point, regardless if you are interested to compete in, or are already a competitor in showjumping equitation classes, or are hoping to become a judge in this relatively new discipline in this part of the world.

Another point of reference in the MEM published Showjumping Equitation manual that Lorna and I developed, based on the Australian Showjumping Equitation Manual.

In February 2001, we held a judges clinic at the Selangor Turf Club. Lorna Fisher and myself were course presenters. We believe it was a very successful clinic, not only for those who we recommended to be placed on the judge's list but also for all who attended, course participants and riders alike. We were very happy that we were able to add 6 more judges to our current list.

I also conducted a clinic for riders in Singapore in March this year and I am happy to say that Showjumping Equitation was introduced at the 21st Rolex International Polo & Equestrian Championships in Singapore this year.

We have seen showjumping equitation classes held at almost all the big shows this year, and while it has been progressing well, we felt the need to publish another article to keep up the good momentum.

To start, we would like to reiterate the objectives that were stated:

Showjumping Equitation is about how well you ride on the flat and over fences and consequently how well your horse jumps. Some horses naturally have better paces and jumping technique than others and will generally score higher than others. This article is intended to help riders understand what the judges are looking for and thus be able to maximise the points they score in these classes.

If you are able to ride well in showjumping equitation classes, you have a sound basis for showjumping as well. With showjumping in South East Asia still in its relative infancy, it is important that we develop riders who are able to ride their horses well. How your horses jump depends very much on how [well] you ride. Showjumping Equitation classes were started because this need is obvious.

Showjumping Equitation is not only a way to seek objective evaluation of your skills but also a discipline in itself.

There have been some changes made to how Showjumping Equitation is judged. The major changes are in the collective marks.

The collective section is now broken up into the sections of:

Presentation

(a) Rider

(b) Horse

Rider Position

(c) Legs

(d) Eye Contact

(e) Hands

(f) Seat/Upper Body

Control of:

(g) Pace/Rhythm/Tempo

(g) Lines

Horse Technique

(h) Neatness

(i) Bascule

As you can see there are 4 sections with 10 sub-sections for a total possible of 100 marks in the collective section.

In most showjumping equitation courses there are usually 8 or 9 fences with one double. Doubles are currently judged as two fences (e.g. 6a + 6b = 20 marks.) This means the collective section is worth at least as many points, if not more, than what you can earn from jumping the fences. It is only recently we have had slightly longer courses with 10 fences and even two doubles.

In the event of a tie in total points, the collective marks are used to break the tie. The rider with the higher collective marks is placed higher.

Therefore to place well in Showjumping Equitation classes, it is essential to score well in the collective marks.

Let's look at each individual section of the collective marks:

## 1. Presentation

This is perhaps the easiest section to score good marks, not just because it does not actually involve any riding.

Rider:

A new rule has been introduced in showjumping equitation that all riders must compete in a helmet that has a three-point harness. Showjumping caps without a three-point harness are no longer acceptable. Riders will not be allowed to start if they turn up in a cap or hat without a three-point harness. (Even if you get past the stewards you may find that the judge does not allow you to start.)

We are not particular about what colour jackets you wear providing that it is dark. A red jacket should be worn only for Grand Prix or international duty. It is inappropriate to wear it for a showjumping equitation class. If you choose to wear a tie as opposed to a stock or a "rat catcher" then remember that the convention is to wear a white tie, unless the tie (and colour) is part of a uniform. (Example: a green tie is part of DBKL's Mounted Unit uniform.) White or beige breeches only.

Mini Chaps, as long as they are matched with your jodhpur boots are allowed. The idea here is that they should look as much like a tall boot as possible. There are many types of mini-chaps available. Not all are appropriate and some may lose you marks in this section.

If you currently use rubber riding boots you may wish to invest in a pair of leather boots or in a mini-chap & jodhpur boot combination. I have found that in addition to being hot, rubber boots do not allow you to drop your heels sufficiently. They are also thicker than most leather boots so you do not have as much sensitivity between your calf and the horse.

You are expected to walk the course in proper dress. Carry or wear your helmet and either wear your jacket or carry it folded over your arm as you walk the course. Remember once you are in the arena you are on display and the judge already starts to take note of you. I, for one, certainly mark a rider down in his presentation marks if he even attempts to walk into the arena half-dressed. It simply means he has no respect for the judge. If the rider chooses to insult the judge even before he starts his class, whether knowingly or not, he will naturally get marked down. Now that this has been stated in this article, there can be no excuse whatsoever; not that not knowing was ever an acceptable excuse.

Horse:

The horse should be well groomed. You will score higher marks if the mane is plaited and the tail at least clean, well groomed or plaited. Using clean saddlery and accessories is just good sense. It does not need to be new, just well maintained. Of course, using the correct gear and fitting it correctly will stop you from losing marks. The most common mistake we find is a horse with a running martingale that is fitted far too short.

There are many ways to enhance the looks of your horse. Using the correct type of plaits (depending on the shape of your horse's neck) or chequerboards can bring out features in your horse that attracts the eye.

A rider that comes in on a horse that is mangy, with an ill-fitting saddle that hasn't been cleaned, wearing a plastic bridle of many different colours is not only going to lose marks in this section. He will probably lose marks all through the course as the judge has already formed an impression of how this person approaches the sport and looks after his horse.

## 2. Rider Position

Not to rehash our comments in the earlier article "Improving Your Showjumping Equitation Scores," we recommend that you pay close attention to what was discussed in that article.

Showjumping Equitation is all about riding well. The best riders always make it look easy. This what you should be trying to achieve. If you have to ride with a lot of extravagant movement it probably means your aids are not working and/or the training of your horse is not up to standard.

The only difference is that this section has been shortened with seat and upper body being counted as one mark.

Every rider has faults in their riding style. There is no "perfect" rider no matter how much we might like to think we are good. To get rid of your faults or at least to make them less obvious, first you have to start with recognizing them as faults. Then decide if you actually want to do anything about it. It is pointless if you keep coming into showjumping equitation classes with the same faults, the same attitude and consequently keep getting the same comments and the same poor results. It's boring for the judges too.

If you need help, and almost everyone does, try to get good help. A qualified instructor is a good place to start. Our MEM/EAM Showjumping Equitation manual is based on the Showjumping Equitation Manual that was produced by the Equestrian Federation of Australia (EFA). Using an EFA/MEM NCAS accredited instructor will probably increase your chances of getting good help. At least they would (should!) understand the comments and what it means. They will be better placed to help you correct these faults.

Why persevere with an instructor who (a) can't help you improve (b) doesn't want to improve himself (c) is a bullshit artist? If your riding instructor falls into any of these categories, please ask yourself why you still pay good money to take lessons from him.

Legs:

There has been some improvement in this area in that we don't see as many interesting leg positions as before. Judges will always notice a loose leg or a raised heel because it is so obvious.

One area that I always feel can be improved is that riders need to have more of an inside leg to outside rein connection, especially when they are riding turns. So often we see a rider trying to turn by simply pulling on the inside rein without doing anything with their legs. It not only affects the turn but also the engagement, rhythm and pace.

Eye Contact:

It is a common fault that riders simply do not look early enough to the next fence. Once you have jumped fence No. 1, you should turn your head to look at No 2. That means **TURN YOUR HEAD AND KEEP LOOKING AT No. 2 TILL YOU GET THERE**. It does not mean glancing at it once while you concentrate on that fixed spot on your horse's neck, nor does it mean looking at it from the corners of your eye. Judges can't tell how wonderful your peripheral vision is. It is simply correct equitation to turn your head to the next fence and then ride to the fence till you are straight at it. Therefore your horse straightens your head again for you.

It is NOT correct to turn your head to fence No. 3 before you have jumped No. 2. In fact, this could be quite a dangerous little habit. Therefore you may find yourself marked down quite heavily for this.

Hands: This section covers not only your hand position while you ride on the flat and between jumps, but also your releases over the fences. Riders that can keep their hands still will generally score higher than riders whose hands can't be kept still or worse still pull or yank at their horse's mouths.

We would like to reiterate that there are only three types of acceptable releases:

1. The short crest release used over small fences and verticals,
2. The long crest release that is used over oxers or large fences and
3. The automatic release where the rider gives the rein towards the horse's mouth.

It is perfectly permissible, and is in fact considered good riding if you use an opening rein at some fences.

We would prefer to see riders showing us that they know how to give a clearly defined crest release over the fences. If you are going to give crest releases, do it at every fence rather than giving crest releases at some fences and automatic releases at others. That way you are telling the judges that you know what you are doing by your consistency.

If you don't understand these terms please ask your instructor. Any EFA/MEM Level 1 instructor should be able to explain these terms to you (and teach them.) If your instructor doesn't know what these terms are, please wonder about the quality of your instructor. There are many self-styled instructors who say they are "qualified by experience." Many have less experience than you realise.

All this has been said before. What we are saying now is that it needs a lot more work.

If you look at the top riders in the world, almost all of them use crest releases, not just the North American riders. Look at photos of World Cup and Olympic Champions like Rodrigo Pessoa, Ludger Beerbaum, Franke Sloothaak, Hugo Simon, Jeroen Dubbeldam and you'll find that they all use crest releases. Even the British, who for years taught that a release should be made towards the horse's mouth (automatic release in our lingo) have genius riders like John and Michael Whitaker who give crest releases.

Seat/Upper Body:

This is now one section in the new collective marks system.

Please choose to ride in either 2-point or 3-point seat. If you don't understand these terms please ask your instructor. Any EFA/MEM Level 1 instructor should be able to explain these terms to you (and teach them.)

Try to ride the whole course in one type of seat, either 3-point all the way, or 2-point. If you choose 2-point, it is permissible and indeed good riding if your seat gets closer to the horse a few strides before take-off, either just brushing the saddle or lightly in it.

We see too many riders with rounded shoulders and hunched backs. This is simply sloppy riding and will lose you marks. The upper body position tends to lose riders marks especially over fences when riders either throw themselves forward over the fences, take off before the fence - jumping before their horse does, or get left behind.

If you are left behind, it is essential that you slip the reins. You are going to lose marks for being left behind anyway, but if you hang on to their mouths or worse still give them a good yank, you are going to lose even more marks.

### 3. Control of:

#### Pace/Rhythm/Tempo:

It is so essential to start off at the right pace for your horse. A big horse may have a stride that covers a lot of ground and consequently the rider keeps the stride limited to what is needed to jump the related lines and combinations well. That is good riding.

In most of our showjumping equitation courses we do not stipulate how many strides a line should be ridden in. A younger person on a cob with a shorter than normal stride may choose to add strides in a related line. As long as the judge feels that the rider set it up properly and then added the stride well, you will not lose marks. If anything, you will score better.

But if the rider of the cob does not make any adjustments (either to cover the extra distance by increasing or decreasing the length of the stride) and gets there on a half stride will be judged as having either a deep spot or a long spot. You lose marks not only at the fence but in this section of control as well.

Setting the correct pace for your horse and maintaining the rhythm and tempo throughout is essential to control and making it all look easy.

If you like to go racing around the course like it is speed class or a jump-off, please ask yourself why you even bother to enter. The judge won't have enough time between fences to make a whole lot of nasty comments because you are going so fast, so you won't even get much feedback.

You should be aware that if you are riding in a medal class or a championship, you should check the course plans because there is an accommodation within our rules to have a test such as to jump a certain line in a required number of strides.

#### Lines:

We would reiterate that this sub-section refers not only to actual related lines that the course designer has built but also to the turns that you ride. We quote from our previous article:

Use the arena to your benefit. A Showjumping Equitation course is usually made up of a series of nice wide turns. We are looking to see that you can make the turns that allow you to ride smoothly to the next fence. Try not to take an overly wide turn - you want to show that you are able to ride a normal turn, not have to go excessively wide. There is no need to cut corners. In fact it will only lose you marks. And remember to look early.

In riding a related line, we do not really mind if you ride the line in more or less strides than the distance would normally require. i.e. if it walks as a 5-stride line and you ride it is 6 strides, we don't mind AS LONG AS (a) you look like you had planned to ride it in 6 strides, (b) you ride it well. However if there is a related line of 4 or especially 3 strides, we would not recommend that you try to ride it in fewer strides.

Do not take strides out of combinations. Not only will it lose you marks but also it could be detrimental to your health.

Generally we have seen a big improvement in how riders ride turns and lines. Most showjumping equitation riders now have realised that making jump-off turns is only going to lose them marks.

It is only once in a while now (the recent Rolex show in Singapore was an example) that we get a rider come up to the judges to say, "How is it I didn't win? I jumped a clear round in the fastest time!"

#### 4. Horse Technique

##### Neatness and Bascule:

The only thing you can do while you are out riding the course to encourage your horse to be neat with his legs and to bascule well over the fences is to ride it well. Your approach, your line, your pace, rhythm and tempo all contribute to encouraging your horse to jump well.

If your horse still is loose in front or dangles on leg as a habit, there is not much else you can do in the arena other than ride as best you can.

If your horse lowers the undercarriage well before landing or jumps flat and hollow because you are in the habit of giving it a good pull in the mouth, then there is something you can do about it - WORK AT YOUR RIDING.

We have just a few other general comments about the sport in general. Try to impress the judges with your organization as a horseperson. If you and your horse are well presented, it does make a difference. Make sure you turn up with enough time to walk the course and warm-up before it is your turn in the arena. In Penang we had a rider who wanted to come in a different starting order (we usually allow this only if there are other dressage or jumping classes going on at the same time that these riders are entered for) because he had simply come late, had not walked the course and had not warmed up sufficiently. If the judges can be there an hour before the start of the class to inspect the course (and frequently there are 7 am starting times!) we are generally not likely to be predisposed towards a rider who can't get his act together for 9 or 10 am start.

Still on the subject of starting times, there are some organisers who insist on publishing a starting time for each and every rider. We would prefer to work with a starting time for the class and a starting order. This way we can get the class finished faster if there are scratchings. There is nothing more boring for a judge than sitting around in the middle of a hot day with a jacket and tie on waiting 45 minutes or more for a rider who insists on his published starting time of 12:48 pm.

If the article has sounded a little like a bit of a moan, we do apologise. Please let us say again, we are generally very happy with the development of showjumping equitation here.

Keep up the good work.

Hopefully this article will help you understand what judges look for, and will help you score better the next time you take part in a Showjumping Equitation class.

We believe that Showjumping Equitation will contribute to better rider skills and a foundation for riders to go on to higher levels of jumping. While it is a sport in itself, we do not see it as the be-all and end-all. We intend for it to be a practical, functional sport that prepares riders for bigger and better things, if they so wish. We have no desire to see it being won by the most expensive horse with the newest saddlery on it. Any rider on any horse that enters the arena has a chance to win the class.

It all depends on you.