

THE ART OF RINGCRAFT

FOUR TOP SHOW PRODUCERS DISCUSS HOW TO CATCH THE JUDGE'S EYE



India Bishop riding GLEN CREE MATCHWOOD

MENDIP FARM PHOTOGRAPHY

Words: JENNIFER BOYES

Ringcraft is a skill that separates the professionals at the top of their game from the rest of the pack. Although people interpret the phrase in slightly different ways, most agree that it is the art of presenting and showing off your horse optimally in the ring to ensure the best possible chance of impressing the Judge.

Twenty-three year old Kelly Sheely started competing in the show ring when she was just nine years old and has been perfecting her ringcraft techniques ever since. She believes that her ongoing success, which includes winning the Sue Yearbury Memorial Equestrienne event at the NZ Easter Show twice, is largely down to knowing what each Judge is looking for and making the most of her time in the ring.

'Get in the ring and show off your horse's best paces before the class has even started,' advises Kelly. 'Your horse might have a great trot or a beautiful collected canter. Whatever it is, make the most of those valuable few minutes before the judging starts. If you can catch the Judge's eye at the beginning, you will stick in their mind throughout the rest of the class.'

There are a number of mistakes that novice competitors make when they first hit the show ring. However, according to Kelly, the errors made in the individual show are often the most damaging, as that is the one moment when you have the Judge's full attention.

'The biggest mistake I see is riders not using the ring properly,' says Kelly. 'If you have the whole ring for your workout, use it. It is always disappointing to see an individual show that could have been quite special only achieve average marks because the combination didn't really go for it and use all the space available to them.'

'I think some riders, especially if they're new to the sport, feel a little nervous and reserved which is why they hold back a bit,' adds Kelly. 'However, if you have made the effort to bring your horse

out and you have paid your entry fees, you might as well give it everything. Even if it doesn't go perfectly, at least you will know that you have done your best.'

Turnout and preparation can also affect how well you do in the ring. Many showing specific grooming secrets take years to pick up and are jealously guarded by some competitors. However, Kelly is more than happy to share her own tips and tricks:

'There's a lot you can do to make your horse look sharper and more professionally turned out,' explains Kelly. 'This in turn will have a positive impact on the Judge as they will assume, before you even get going, that you know what you are doing.'

'Firstly, never shampoo the night before a show as you will strip out all those oils that make the coat shiny. Shampoo at least a couple of days before the show. If you have to give them a wash the day before a competition, just rinse them with warm water but do not use any product. Clip out any white socks and wash them and paint them with white cover cream the night before. The next day, brush the socks out and they will come up brilliantly white.'

Kelly is also an advocate of using equestrian make-up to enhance a horse's features as long as it is used sparingly.

'Soften any big, knobbly chestnuts on the legs and peel them off before blacking them out with make-up,' says Kelly. 'Black the sides of the horse's tail and make any other black points really dark with make-up. Just remember not to overdo the face. No-one wants to see a panda in the ring.'

Finally, Kelly believes that the sign of a true showman or woman is to receive your placing graciously whether you come first or are placed sixth to a half-lame donkey.

'Showing is all about having fun and getting out there,' smiles Kelly. 'Whether you win or not comes down to one person's opinion. Don't take it too much to heart.'

'And remember, if you are new to the scene and are unsure about something; don't be afraid to ask a more seasoned competitor. We love seeing new people in the ring and will do whatever we can to point you in the right direction.'

Sixteen-year-old India Bishop, a successful competitor who took out the Saddle Hunter Pony of the Year title class in 2008 at the NZ Horse of the Year Show with Glen Cree Matchwood, is another rider who is very conscious of first impressions.

'The most important thing that you have to remember is that from the moment you enter the ring and for every moment you are in it, you and your pony are on show,' India points out. 'You should also bear in mind that, even though there is only one Judge in the ring, there are usually a few more looking on from the ringside. There might even be someone watching who will be judging your pony next time out. So, make sure you are striding out well and showing your pony off as soon as you get into the ring.'

On the go round, India believes there are a few key things that can be done to put pony and rider at an advantage.

'Do not place your pony between other ponies of the same colour as they will tend to blend together,' says India. If you have a grey pony, put yourself between two bays or dark browns. Other than that, just make sure you are paying attention at all times. This includes allowing

plenty of space between your pony and the one in front so that you are not forced to check yours behind a slow-moving one and so that you don't get kicked.'

'Also, make sure you are keeping an ear out for the Steward,' adds India. 'Sometimes they can be hard to hear and you don't want to be trotting while everyone else has started cantering.'

Of course, in the Saddle Hunter classes, there is an additional requirement to the rest of the flat classes as the ponies are judged on their gallop.

'The gallop can make or break your chances of winning,' explains India. 'You have to really go for it. Simply leaning forward and cantering slightly faster just won't cut it. Just make sure your pony is well trained enough to pull up easily and smoothly afterwards!'

In-hand showing is a completely different kettle of fish and can be just as difficult to get right as the ridden classes. At only eighteen years of age Ryan Teece, who breeds and shows riding ponies and show hacks under his own Burleighville Stud prefix, is younger than most handlers on the circuit. However, after years of dedicated research and observation, he is now one of the most skilled and successful out there as well. The fact that he won the Senior Handler class at the New Zealand Grand Nationals when he was just seventeen is testament to this.

'I took my first pony to an in-hand competition when I was twelve. We didn't do that well and it was then that I realised the amount of preparation and expertise that goes into showing a young animal,' explains Ryan. 'I went away and watched as many people as I could, looked at a lot of photos and tried to find out as much about in-hand showing as I could. When I came back with the foal I had bred out of the previous pony, I started to do really well.'



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Kelly Sheely on POEME.

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Over time, Ryan has developed his own techniques for catching the judge's eye once he is in the ring:

'One of my favourite tactics is to make sure we're not the first pair to walk into the ring,' explains Ryan. 'I let two or three ponies go ahead of me. Then, while the Judge is talking to the Steward, I will pinpoint a space on the other side of the ring and I will trot across to that other spot. This catches the Judge's eye and means that they will remember you.'

'I am also very careful about where I place myself in the ring. Never put yourself between what you think are the two best horses in the ring and when you're lining up, always stand yours a couple of steps ahead of everyone else.'

The biggest mistakes that Ryan sees in the ring all boil down to a lack of preparation.

'Too many people simply pull their youngsters out of the paddock and expect them to do well when they go to a show,' says Ryan. 'The horses are jittering around and can't deal with the whole environment. This is usually because they haven't had enough of the right handling at home.'

'Turnout also puts many handlers at a disadvantage,' adds Ryan. 'Lots of competitors really overdo it and wear over the top, uncomfortable looking clothing. You want the Judge to be looking at the horse, not at you. It's also important that your clothes complement the horse. For example, you don't want to wear black trousers when leading a horse with black legs. All the judge will see is a big black blur!'

Richard Ramsey, based in the United Kingdom, has been breeding, producing and training show horses for over thirty years. A combination of top quality animals, correct preparation at home and perfected ringcraft has seen Richard win at Britain's most prestigious horse shows, including the Horse of the Year Show, the Royal International Horse Show and Royal Windsor. He is also a highly respected Judge and earlier this year was invited to judge at the New Zealand Horse of the Year Show.

'In my opinion, good ringcraft is being aware of everything that is going on around you. You need to have eyes in the back of your head,' says Richard. 'Pay attention to any potentially distracting things outside the ring as well as inside. Keep an eye on the Judge and also on the steward who you should be looking to for your next instructions.'

'How you use the ring is also very important. Use every inch of space and avoid bunching up with other competitors. You always need to be thinking ahead. If the horse ahead of you looks like it might start playing up, cut across to avoid it.'

What to do when things go wrong is something that flummoxes many competitors but the mark of a true showman is to retain a professional exterior, even when everything is falling apart. According to Richard, the key is to remain calm and try to make the best of the situation.

'As the old saying goes - sometimes you have the luck, sometimes you don't,' laughs Richard. 'Hopefully, your horse won't have misbehaved in front of the Judge but occasionally they will and it's just one of those things.'

'If you feel like your horse is going to do something silly, stay relaxed and try to give them the confidence to get back on an even keel. There is no point getting too worried about it as the more tense you become, the more wound up the horse will get. It is also important to know when to retire gracefully. If things get really bad, it is often best to leave the ring. There is always another show and another Judge.'

Something that doesn't make a good impression on Richard, from a Judge's perspective, is a competitor over-riding their horse.

'You often see people trying a little too hard and pushing their horses out of their natural rhythm.' This can make the horse appear unlevel. I like to see something very rhythmic at walk, trot and canter and I don't like to see forced paces. If your horse is a good mover naturally, don't interfere with it too much.

'Over-bending is also quite common on both sides of the ocean. This is often to do with the tack that is being used. Riders need to be careful not to overbit their horses to get an 'outline' as you can end up with the animal evading the contact altogether. It is worth taking the time to find the right combination.'

For those wanting to learn more about how to show their horse off to the best of their ability, Richard recommends observing riders who are at the top of their game.

'If you're new to showing, get out to a large event and watch the people at the top end of the line-up. Watch what they do, how their horses go and what their turnout is like. Don't throw yourself in at the deep-end without a lifeboat!'