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TNH3006-Safety at Horse Shows

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EQUIFACTS

Safety at Horse Shows

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Safety at horse events, such as horse shows, should always be given the highest possible priority. The horse show environment with many different horses and people mixed together in a sometimes hurried and stressful situation is a blueprint for violations of basic safety procedures.

Each year thousands of horse-related injuries occur in the United States. However, many of these accidents could be prevented by observing some basic safety principles. Safety for both riders and horses is a responsibility shared by everyone, including exhibitors, parents, trainers and show management.

Safety Inspections at Home

Obviously one of the first things to be inspected is the tack. Make sure the halter and lead rope are the appropriate size and strength for the horse. A cheaply-made, low-quality halter or lead rope may not be strong enough to restrain a horse during an unexpected jerk or bolt. The snaps and buckles should be inspected for possible breaks or signs of stress or weakness. A heavy-weight snap on the end of a lead rope may prevent a horse from getting away from the handler.

Bridles should also be inspected. The rider should always check the entire bridle for any abnormal wear or weakness. Reins should be well attached to the bit by rivets or screws or secured by leather ties. The head piece of the bridle should be properly attached to the bit to prevent an accident while mounted. All

the leather should be properly conditioned to prevent breakage due to drying and cracking. Frayed or worn places in the leather should be replaced immediately. Metal parts on the bridle and bit such as hinged cheek pieces and buckles should be rust-free and in good working order.

The primary safety inspection site of a saddle is the girth. Make sure the girth is strong and long enough so that undue pressure is not placed on the girth. Additionally, the cinch, whether webbed nylon or leather, should be strong and free from excess wear. Stirrup leathers and stirrups should be routinely checked and replaced at the FIRST sign of weakness or wear. The saddle should be clean, well-conditioned and stored in a clean, dry area when not in use.

Safety inspections of the towing vehicle and horse trailer are critical for a safe journey. Proper health documentation necessary for hauling horses as well as numerous other considerations are addressed in two fact sheets provided by The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service. These fact sheets, TNH-3000 **Traveling With Your Horse** and TNH-3001 **Tips for Trailering Your Horse**, can be obtained from your county Extension agent.

Safety at the Horse Event

Horse shows can be hectic, but there should always be enough time for safety. Upon arrival at the event, inspect the horse and

tack stalls for safety hazards to people and horses. Look for nails, loose boards or other hazardous objects that are potential problems. Check for electrical wires and outlets that are exposed and otherwise unsafe. The tack room and aisle ways should be free from debris and always clear and open. Inspect for fire hazards in and around the stall area.

Closely inspect wash racks before rinsing or bathing the horse. Slick concrete floors, missing or stopped-up drains and loose bricks or concrete can cause severe injury to horses and people. Any of these problems should be reported to the event manager immediately.

Indoor and outdoor arenas, rings or riding areas should be observed prior to riding or exercising the horse.

Unsafe footing, abnormally dark corners or potentially dangerous fence-line objects should be noted and subsequently avoided until corrected by management. Low-hanging lights, rafters or overhead doors may appear to be safe while the rider is on the ground; however, they may cause a safety threat to both horse and rider while the rider is mounted. Elimination of potentially unsafe situations can increase the chances for a fun-filled horse show.

Equestrian safety helmets can significantly reduce head injury to the horseback rider. Each year more than 120,000 horseback riders are treated at hospital emergency rooms in the United States. Approximately 20 percent of these injuries are head injuries, thus emphasizing the need for ALL riders to wear safety helmets. Safety helmets and harness to secure the helmet are too often overlooked as a tool to reduce injury and death to horseback riders.

There is no such thing as a totally safe horse. Horses just have varying degrees of training. Typically, the better trained horse is a safer horse. Allowing youth to ride "green-broke" horses at horse events is a serious safety violation and can result in severe injury. On the other hand, horses ridden for years "on the farm" may be a totally unacceptable mount in a horse show environment. The noise, people, vehicles, trailers and other horses can often cause trained and untrained horses to buck or rear. Horse-back riders should not expose themselves to danger with an unfamiliar horse.

Beware of horses with behavioral problems. Some horses will kick other horses or riders as they approach or pass them. Others horses may kick or bite while tied in an alleyway. Always use precautions while walking near or around all horses. A horse that kicks should have a red ribbon attached to its tail. The red ribbon is a universal sign that the horse tends to kick. Stay well clear of a horse with a red ribbon on its tail.

Exhibitors should always practice show ring courtesy. Riders should maintain a safe distance from other exhibitors and pass with care. Failure to follow show ring instructions promptly can cause unsafe riding conditions, as horses may be executing different gaits and traveling at different speeds.

Although it may be convenient, do not tie horses to an unstable object. Horses should be tied to secure objects such as stall walls, sturdy fences or a horse trailer with appropriate tie hooks or specific hitching rail. Never tie a horse with the reins — remove the bit and bridle and tie with a halter and lead rope. These simple procedures may prevent an injury to the horse or even a spectator.

Tying to horse trailers that are not hooked to a vehicle is a very popular but unsafe practice. Small trailers that are parked on a slope may start to roll with a small amount of pull from a horse. These unattached trailers are generally convenient and safe if properly blocked and secured. Completely close and latch all trailer doors to prevent them from abruptly opening due to wind or other movements and causing injury to the horse.

Do not attach a horse in any way to the exhibitor or rider. It is a serious mistake to wrap a lead rope tightly around a hand or arm. Many serious accidents have resulted from this mistake.

Many injuries occur while exhibitors are grooming their horses. One of the most common injuries to exhibitors is injury to their feet. Leather shoes with hard soles or boots are a must while working around the horse. Tennis shoes are unsafe and should never be worn when working with a horse. The horse may step on an exhibitor as an escape response to grooming or to avoid and dislodge flies. Reducing fly annoyance is a safety precaution and provides more comfort to the horse.

While brushing or grooming the horse, always keep the free hand on the horse as a method to push away from the horse in case of emergency. This practice also keeps you and the horse in direct communication. Never get directly in front or behind the horse. The horse cannot see directly behind it. The closer you are to the horse, the less likely you are to be injured from a kick. You can also keep your hand on the horse as you walk around just to let the horse know everything is all right. Do not try to go in front of the horse in a restricted area and never go underneath a horse regardless of the age or presumed safety of the mount.

One of the most common reasons for an escape of a horse from its handler at a horse show is during the change from a leather or nylon work halter to a show halter. Show halters should be put on horses in the stall or outside with ample help and assistance. The nylon work halter should be unbuckled, taken off the head and buckled around the horse's neck before the show halter is put on the horse. The work halter should not be removed from around the horse's neck until the show halter is completely fastened and secure.

Many horse and rider injuries occur because the rider "surprised" the horse and the horse overreacted, causing an injury. Always approach the horse toward the head and shoulder, giving verbal greetings. Never surprise a horse from behind. Always give the horse a rub on the neck along with kind words after the approach.

Although rarely discussed as a safety problem, family and personal safety against theft and bodily harm should be practiced at all times. Young people should avoid unfamiliar people, places and situations and always stay with their family and friends. Trucks, trailers, purses, tack and equipment could also be easy prey for vandalism or theft. Always secure valuables, not only during non-show hours, but also during the show itself. Exhibitors cannot be too careful.

Safety Considerations for Horse Show Managers

Horse show management should set the stage for SAFETY. An excellent way to establish and enforce safety standards and regulations is to appoint a safety officer. The safety officer is responsible for maintaining safety

standards throughout the show. The officer observes operational procedures around the grounds and evaluates each event or class for potentially dangerous situations. For example, in "over fence" classes, the officer would first make certain the jumps are safe and that the height and orientation of the jumps match the skill level of the competitors. Speed events such as pole bending, barrel racing and the stake race should be held in an arena with adequate wall height and appropriate running surface. A safe, well-lighted arena is a must for safety at night horse shows.

Horse show management should avoid hanging banners, bunting, flags or other items in places that could cause a horse to become startled. Streamers and banners hung across the entrance gate are common safety hazards. Excessive wind can cause these to move or flap, resulting in an injury to horse or rider. In indoor arenas, these flags or banners always should be placed high enough for horse and rider to easily ride under them. Although these forms of advertisement may be financially necessary for show management, precautions should be taken to ensure adequate safety standards.

Personnel trained in handling emergency medical situations should be available throughout the show. Emergency procedures should be prepared in advance of the show and "no parking" lanes strictly enforced to allow for emergency medical transportation. Local hospitals should be on alert and proper authorization for attending physicians documented prior to the show.

Emergency health care should also be available to the horse. It is always good to have an equine veterinarian located on the show grounds. In lieu of this, a list of local veterinarians and their office, mobile and home phone numbers should be posted outside the horse show office. The veterinarians should be notified prior to the show and their consent obtained before posting their phone numbers. A scheduled time for a veterinarian to be on the grounds is also an effective way to provide veterinary care for horses.

Show management should be aware of weather-related safety hazards. When showing in an outside arena, stop the show as soon as lightning is observed. Avoid holding "over fence" or speed events on rain-slick or muddy

surfaces. Hot, humid weather can also be hazardous. When temperatures soar, be prepared to provide plenty of liquids. Encourage exhibitors to seek shade when not competing and relax attire requirements. Show management can also encourage the judge to not overwork horses.

Discourage or prohibit dogs being on the grounds. Dogs make some horses nervous and can be a safety threat. This is particularly true at youth horse shows, where numerous horses and exhibitors who are unfamiliar with one another are brought together. Rules and regulations about dogs should be made available to exhibitors prior to the horse show.

Exhibitors with “problem horses” may be a threat to safety. Horses that cannot be controlled should be dismissed from competition. A “horse-wise” ring steward can assist the judge and show management in averting prob-

lems and can help prevent a potentially bad situation from becoming dangerous.

Security measures should be taken to ensure that participants are not at risk due to fire, vandalism, theft or criminal misconduct. Show management should ALWAYS enforce no-smoking rules at horse shows. Security is a 24-hour concern and must be adequately addressed throughout the show.

Summary

Common sense is the key to safe and successful horse showing. Safety procedures should not only be practiced at horse shows, but also at home every day. Safety precautions must be used daily before they become habit and second nature. Thinking and planning ahead may save the life of an exhibitor or horse. Have fun, but remember, “horse play with real horses” can be dangerous.

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Agricultural Extension Service Charles L. Norman, Dean