

Second Try

My competitive spirit drives me past superstitions to my next horse show.

By Pamela Britton-Baer



I RECENTLY DECIDED TO SHOW AMERICAN QUARTER HORSES.

This was not, I should warn you, a decision I made lightly. I'd come from the open hunter/jumper circuit, and so the transition to Quarter Horse shows was difficult. But because I'm hypercompetitive, I wanted to give it a try.

That's my downfall: that lure of winning. Let's be honest. It's why we all do it. We don't enter shows thinking, "Whoohoo. I hope to be second today!!" No, no, no, we do it because we want the blue. It's a sickness. We can't resist the urge to don wool coats or heavy leather chaps in 100-degree weather, tug on boots so tight that our feet throb midway through our warm-up, and mount an animal that looks upon anything mobile as an equine-eating monster – such as children, baby strollers or that golf cart with the horse blanket on the back – all so we can win.

Hello, my name is Pamela Britton-Baer, and I'm a horse show junkie.

So, armed with the AQHA rule book, I aimed my horse toward his very first AQHA show. That meant practicing when I was sick. When I was tired. After work. Before work. Uphill, barefoot and in 3 feet of snow. OK, so not really. But I did work my tail off, literally, because I lost weight. (Not enough to go down a size in breeches, but I remain hopeful.) I counted the days, both dreading and anticipating that fateful day when we were due to depart. And then, when that day finally did arrive, we...

...didn't go.

Can you believe it? My husband called me up and said, "Hello, you hot, sexy woman, you."

I lie. What he really said was more like, "We're not going."

Picture me holding the cell phone away from my face and staring at it as if it'd just reached out and punched me. In the nose. Or the ear.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"We're not going."

"Um..." trying not to panic, "...why not?"

"I have a feeling."

Let me explain something. My husband is superstitious. If there was a way to ward off all the bad juju in the world, he'd do it. Even if it involved a tube of lipstick, panty hose

and high heels. For him. Not me. He used to wear the same socks back in his bull riding days. Purple. And all because he'd won money in them. Word to the aspiring rodeo wife: Never, ever wash smelly rodeo socks. Apparently, it displeases the rodeo gods.

I was really truly hoping this wasn't along the lines of purple socks.

"Um...what kind of feeling?" I asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "Just a feeling. We're not going."

My husband and I have been together for years, long enough for me to know when to argue with him and when my teeth should hold my tongue hostage. I kept quiet. But I remained hopeful for the rest of the day. I kept my fingers crossed that his bad feeling had more to do with constipation than any real concerns about my attending a horse show.

I was wrong.

I broached the subject the moment I got home, but he still had his "feeling." I let a couple of hours pass. Still no go. I began to pout – a sure means of getting my way. Didn't work. I shed tears. He remained unfazed. Well, that's not true. I could tell my husband hated disappointing me, but if there's a single universal trait shared by cowboys the world over, it's this: They're as stubborn as the cattle they rope.

The morning of the show came and went. So did the next morning, and still I pouted. By Saturday, I'd begun to accept the truth. I wasn't going – not even for a day. Dejected, I wondered if there was another show.

Eureka!

There was one up in Oregon, a seven-hour drive north, but that was OK. Even better, I could tell the moment I mentioned it to Mr. Superstitious that we were green for take-off. But I remained pessimistic right up until the moment our trailer pulled off the tarmac. Do you blame me?

I was proud of myself, though. It'd been a few years since I'd gone to a "big" show, but I remembered everything I needed to take.

- Hose – because it makes perfect sense to wash your horse when it's 40 degrees outside.
- Jacket – because Newton's Law of Horse Show Baths

is that water flows directly to owner, most often down said owner's arm.

- Warm underwear – because no matter how many layers you're wearing, water will penetrate them all.
- Wool cooler for wet horse – because said clean, wet horse will roll the moment you turn him loose.
- Water bucket, muck bucket, clippers, spare bridle and girth, and most importantly, spare clothing for when you fall off and land in the one puddle gracing the horse show grounds.

I don't know what made me want to head north when everything, including the ducks, was fleeing south. But there you have it. I was right to expect the cold, but the drive up Interstate 5 ended with a surprise: a very warm greeting from members of the Oregon Quarter Horse Association.

Everyone seemed genuinely glad to see me, if a bit shell-shocked by my excitement to be amongst them. I'm one of those people who greet everyone with a cheek-splitting grin. I've come to the conclusion that there are three ways to interpret this smile: 1) I'm some kind of equestrian psycho bent on abducting show horses. 2) Ignore me and hope I go away. 3) Recognize that I'm just super-friendly and that I mean Earthlings no harm.



Since by the end of my first day most everyone was smiling back, I assume they recognized that I fell into the third category. And so my excitement grew. All right, so maybe it wasn't really excitement. Maybe it was terror mixed in with a healthy dose of anticipation. This was it. This was what we'd prepared for. We'd practiced. I'd watched "Selecting and Showing Your Hunter Under Saddle Horse." My horse looked just like the ones in the video....

Or not.

Because, my friends, we got our rear end kicked. Again.

Some of you might remember I'd competed at a Quarter Horse show once before, one of the more humiliating experiences in my life similar to the time I forgot the words to the national anthem in front of a packed audience. Sure, I'd learned some things over the years. Heck, at least I had the

Get Help

If you're like Pamela and want some help getting started at your first AQHA show, log onto www.aqha.com and click on "Find a Professional" to get a list of AQHA's Professional Horsemen in your area.

You can also download a "Guide to Showing" from the Web site for all kinds of advice on trying your first show.

right kind of saddle pad this time out. And I knew enough about the Quarter Horse circuit to know that I needed to stick to the novice classes. But I was still doing something wrong. Just what, exactly, I didn't know.

It wasn't until I caught one of the amateur classes that I figured it all out, and it was simple. We just weren't good enough. That's it. The horses were amazing. They were polished, well-broke, shining examples of the Quarter Horse breed. My horse was new to this game – heck, new to having a human on his back. We had a lot to learn.

The next day, one of the judges took pity on me and confirmed everything I suspected. Polish! she said. Practice. It appears as if we resemble the Energizer Bunny when out on the rail. And I can't get my rear end to stick to the saddle,

a throwback to my open hunter/jumper days and years of riding in half-seat. Worse, the judge informed me that my horse appears to be stuck in fourth gear.

But I wasn't put off. Remember what I said above? Competitive, that's my middle name. It was challenging to learn a whole new way of riding. It reminded me of when I first started riding 30-odd years ago. But the horse show made me realize something else, too: I needed help. A trainer. Someone on the rail who could put to words what it was that I was doing wrong. The question was, who?

I don't know the answer to that question, but I know it'll be an adventure to find out. In the meantime, I'm

going to practice. I'm going to pull the batteries out of the bunny. Maybe invest in some duct tape. And who knows? Maybe with a trainer's help and guidance, I just might be ready to show again. Maybe.

Or maybe not, because you know what? I won a second at that Oregon Quarter Horse show, and that red ribbon means more to me than many of the blues I've won. And when you get right down to it, that's what it's really all about – improving on your personal best. That's why I'll go back, this time with a secret weapon: a trainer.

I just wish I knew which one. Any takers out there? 🐾

Pamela Britton-Baer is a special contributor to The American Quarter Horse Journal. Her thoughts on showing will appear periodically throughout the year. To comment, write to aqhajrnl@aqha.org.