

Backyard Success!

Making it happen from your own barn to the show ring

By Shane Ledyard

It can be a difficult task to successfully compete your horse out of a small stable or backyard without the constant supervision of a trainer or the motivation of other riders. That being said, with the right mind set and plan, a “backyarder” can be just as competitive as the riders from the big barns. It just takes a little different recipe. The following are some of the ingredients that you will need to make it happen.

- Cooperation. If you decide to have the horses at home, the last thing you want is for your passion to be a source of stress. All of the family members in the household need to understand the demand and dedication that good horsemanship takes, which includes things like mucking out on holidays and treating colic instead of going to a sibling’s baseball game or dance recital.
- Horse selection. Often overlooked, selecting the appropriate mount for the job that you want to do is mission critical for success. Be sure to consider who will be handling the horse as well, if it is a non-horsey spouse or a child that will be leading the horse to and from the turn out paddock you will want to be double sure that your horse is quiet and easy to handle.
- Trainer selection. You will need a qualified trainer who will meet *your* needs. Whether you ship out for lessons or if he/she comes to you, be sure that your goals are aligned and be certain that you stay on the program that he gives you. Without him there every day to stay on top of you, it is really easy to go off your program. You should believe in the program that he gives you and stick with it. You pay a trainer for their expertise, and often times they see things that you do not. Through his experience, a good trainer knows that what you do in a given week is part of a long term plan for both the horse and rider.
- Ring footing and arena size. There are many factors to consider here and size is definitely one of them. When you practice with your horse you want the setting to be as close to competition standards as possible. If, for

example, the ring size is so small that the horse can't jump a line and canter on for his lead change, that's a problem. He will learn bad habits from a small ring—like shortening his step too much or perhaps getting nervous about the end of the ring--anticipating an abrupt stop or rough change. This could defeat your entire purpose and leave you very frustrated in the process. When it comes to footing, my rule of thumb is that it should be soft enough that you wouldn't mind falling in it, but not so deep that your horse has to labor. You need to look after your footing as part of a weekly routine. That means regular dragging and watering if necessary. This will keep your horse comfortable and help prevent tripping in lumpy conditions. Good footing also encourages horses to jump and move their best and will keep them sound much longer than if they are hitting a hard surface like sun-dried screenings.

- **Training program.** Keep your training program fresh for your horse. The key to a happy horse is variety. Use a combination of flat work, trail riding, trot sets in an open field, galloping, cavaletti, gymnastics and whatever else seems logical that will make your horse better prepared. Keeping your horse fit and changing his training routine will give you a big advantage over the horse that never sees the outside of a ring, and you will be a better rider for it as well. You can do a lot of your flat work out in the country—and this will make your horse brave for the show ring while keeping his mind fresh.
- **Turnout and feeding program.** Be sure that you maintain a consistent schedule every day with your feed and turn out schedule. Staying within the same hour is fine, but your horse does not understand that it is Saturday and that you wanted to sleep in. Irregularities in a program can cause a horse to stress, which can lead to things like ulcers and colic. With your feeding program it is essential to remember that horses are grazers and are in search of food the majority of the day. Because of this, horses should have good quality hay or grass available 24/7. (Provided there is not a certain diet restriction to that horse). Clean water should also be in constant supply, along with a mineral block in the field and the stall for the horse to supplement on. Trying to achieve an ideal body condition with grain alone is extremely dangerous. Grain can be very useful for delivering the right nutrients to your horse, but it is better to maintain the horse's ideal weight through quality roughage, as that is the easiest and most natural thing for the horse to digest. Re-evaluate your horse's weight on a monthly basis and adjust your grain amounts

accordingly. Any adjustments made should be slight and gradual. Supplements are OK, but should be carefully evaluated and cross referenced with your hay and your grain for nutritional content. A conversation with your veterinarian about nutrition is always a good idea to help stay on track. Turn out is also very important for the competition horse. While it may be difficult to keep the horse in good flesh with constant turn-out, a healthy mix of stable and paddock time is my choice for most competition horses. Again, a regular schedule is key here, with an “in during the day and out at night” program for the summer, along with an “out during the day and in at night” schedule for the winter months as a good rule to live by.

It is so easy to let the little things slide at home when there is no one around. However, you must remember that good horses are made and maintained through good horsemanship and nothing else, so be sure never to cheat on your horsemanship. Here are some more tips that come from my list of pet peeves to help keep you sharp and safe at home:

- ~Make a horse turn and face you before letting him go at turn-out time, just as you should do when you put him in his stall. This will help prevent you from being kicked by a horse running from the gate or pinched by a horse rushing through the doorway to his stall.
- ~Keep your horse groomed well—rubbing on him for a shine instead of relying on sprays and tricks to get a coat to gleam. This is both healthier and less expensive.
- ~Always buckle the halter when leading a horse—not only is it lazy and tacky but it is really dangerous as well.
- ~**Always** use a lead rope when handling a horse. No exceptions. Never wrap the lead around your hand or lay it across your shoulder while you walk. This can get you hurt or killed.
- ~Dry a horse’s legs after he is hosed off. It will help prevent fungus and rubs.
- ~ Grease his feet before a bath to help his feet to avoid drying out.
- ~ Rub a sweaty horse with a towel in front of a fan rather than watering and bathing him several times a week. This technique is much better for his coat.

As a judge, trainer and competitor I can assure you that good horsemanship is the only answer to long term success. If you choose to keep your show horse at home rather than a public barn, you must be prepared to discipline yourself and make personal sacrifices while doing it, if you want to truly do

it right. Once you make that commitment you better be tough. I can assure you that when it comes time to horse show, no one likes to get beat by a backyard horse.

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