

JUDGES CONFERENCE HITS THE HIGH NOTES

More than 80 members of the BSPA judging panel attended the 2010 judges' conference last week, where they were welcomed by chairman Lynda Lodge.

She told the audience that modern times demand modern thinking – but that it was also important to hold on to principles and standards.

For the benefit of members, here are keynotes from the day's speakers.

Speaker: Jane Nixon MRCVS, Conformation in the Show Horse

Good conformation has far more importance than enabling riders to present a pretty picture in the show ring, as vet Jane Nixon of Nixon Equine Vets explained.

“Conformation is the essence of performance in all horses, no matter whether they are race horse, Pony Club ponies or show horses,” said Jane, a consultant vet to the BEF Futurity Young Horse Evaluation Scheme who has competed working hunters at top level.

Key points from Jane's presentation include:

There is no truth in the belief that fat can hide a multitude of sins. The points of a horse are landmarks set at protruding points of bone.

This means that conformation is based on an underlying skeletal framework that is unalterable after maturity. The only three variables that can be 'managed' are condition, hoof balance and the balance of the dental arcade.

Condition in the furnished animal relates to muscle development between the bones – which comes through fittening – and fat deposition, through nutrition. Show horses should not be fat.

When fat is laid down on an obese horse in the crest, shoulder and tail-head areas, it can be a precursor to that horse developing laminitis.

'No foot, no horse' holds a lot of truth. Many horses are medio/laterally imbalanced, which means that as the horse walks towards you, you will see the outside of the foot touch the floor first. This sends a whiplash action through the joints.

The hoof should be balanced from front to back and from side to side to give a level foot fall and be trimmed to the conformation of the individual limb, not in isolation.

If a horse has weak feet, the most important thing is not to feed supplements but to ensure that the feet are correctly balanced.

The dental arcade must be in three-point balance to give the correct function of the incisors, the molars and the mandibular (jaw) joint. This means more than simply removing hooks; it

also necessitates removing any sharp points on the outside of the upper premolars and molars and on the inside of the lower ones, as well as adjusting the line of the incisors. If the balance is incorrect, the horse will suffer pain in the Temporal Mandibular Joint (TMJ) which may have knock-on effects. An unbalanced jaw can lead to lameness – for instance, if the horse habitually turns his head to the left, the whole of his right hand side can become tighter.

A good hindleg is paramount. A straight hindleg predisposes a horse to changes in the hock and, most important, the stifle. The stifle has various joints and is multi-functionary. If the stifle is straight, it will often lead to upward fixation of the patella.

If a horse is working in a nice outline but with its tongue habitually out to one side, he might be trying to make his mouth more comfortable – but Jane has often known this to be associated with sub-chronic lameness on the hindleg on the opposite side.

Different conformational faults can predispose a horse to different problems. Jane's experience as a vet shows:

Overloaded shoulders – make saddle fitting difficult. Even if both shoulders are overloaded, the saddle slips back.

Jumper's bump or long back – a horse with one or both of these faults will be predisposed to sacro-iliac problems. The sacro-iliac joint is very small, no matter how big the horse, and poor conformation puts intense strain on it.

Roach back – this is unattractive, but doesn't often cause problems.

Sway back – the horse often stands with front feet slightly forwards, so may develop pain in the back third of the foot.

Curbs – "I am desperately against curbs in all horses, especially those who have to work hard," said Jane, adding that it was important to differentiate between a curb and a 'false curb.' A false curb is a natural enlargement of the outside head of the splint bone and she said she did not believe horses who had them should be penalised in any way.

As judges are not allowed to palpate horses' hocks, Jane recommended that if necessary, they requested the exhibitor to move the horse until a clear view was possible.

Splints - Jane believes that 95 per cent of splints are due to foot imbalance.

Rotational and angular limb deformities – in Jane's experience, by the time the horse is eight years old it will be likely to be sub-clinically lame.

Back at the knee – often goes with check ligament problems in horses that are working hard.

Speaker: Celia Clarke, The Coloured Sports Horse and How to Judge It

Judging a two or three-year-old's potential as a dressage horse, show jumper or event horse came under the spotlight with advice from Celia Clarke, warmblood and sports horse specialist and grader:

It is very difficult to judge a fat horse as a sports horse. If a horse has an over-padded ribcage, the elbow, no matter how loose it may be, becomes tight – so when the leg goes forwards, the knee doesn't flex. You need knee flexion for all the disciplines, for extension and jumping.

If you get a three-year-old sports horse that looks mature, warning bells should sound. One that looks mature at three will be coarse when it matures.

Many warmbloods are narrow across the chest until they are four, especially Holsteins and Holstein cross TBs. Warmbloods are not mature until they are six or seven years old.

Offset cannon bones are a particular problem and can never be corrected. They put a huge amount of tension on the tendons.

If a horse is stiff at the poll at two or three, it is going to be stiffer still as it goes on.

When shown on the triangle, a lot of young horses can get tense. If they do not show a walk first time round, Celia advises letting them trot, then seeing them at the walk. "What you are interested in is seeing their paces," she pointed out.

You aren't judging one horse against another, but against a standard.

Don't be bullied by exhibitors who try and tell you that judging on the triangle is always done in a particular way. Different societies have different methods.

Speaker: Sandra Lawrence, Introducing the Mini Traditional Pony and Colour and Markings

In response to members' demands, a new class for mini traditional ponies has been introduced at the national championships.

Sandra Lawrence, BSPA general secretary, said that these ponies stand from around 10.2hh-12.2hh. They should have a 'pint pot' head, excellent bone, a good shoulder, a short back and well-rounded rump and profuse feather.

Judges do not need to worry whether or not horses and ponies competing in BSPA classes fulfil the criteria on colour. This will have been checked and approved before BSPA registration is completed.

The battle of the historical coloured horse or pony has been won, said Sandra. Judges now accept that even if the coat colour has faded to grey, a registered animal fulfils the criteria and should not be penalised.

The most commonly seen coat patterns are Tobiano and minimal Tobiano; Overo and minimal Overo; splashed white; historical; Tovero and Sabino.

If one or both parents are homozygous, then the offspring must be coloured no matter how minimal the markings. More and more minimally marked animals are being registered and seen in the show ring.

Speaker: Emma Sadler, What Goes On Behind The Laboratory Doors

Random drug testing is part of all equestrian disciplines. Emma Sadler of HFL Sport Science – which holds the FEI contract for analysing equine samples – said testing was necessary for several reasons, including:

Health and Safety – even with ‘normal’ medication, there can be side effects.

Prevention of cheating – everyone wants to compete on a level playing field.

Of 24,716 equine samples analysed in 2009, there were 135 positive samples. The top five drugs found were:

Dexamethasone (injected into joints)

Stanozolol (anabolic steroid)

Carbazochrome (anti-bleeding agent)

Phenylbutazone (anti-inflammatory)

Morphine.

When morphine is discovered, it is usually related to poppy seeds being found in feed. A new test has been introduced to identify whether its presence related to diet or drugs.

