



NRHA

NRHA is the governing body of the sport of reining, responsible for the standards of competition, the promotion of the sport and the education of its members and public as to the proper performance of the reining horse. NRHA sanctions over 400 approved events nationally and internationally each year and pays out over 5.6 million dollars in competition purses.

FAQ

Frequently Asked Questions

A Pocket Handbook for Reiners was prepared by Mario Boisjoli, a trainer and competitor in reining competition with over \$80,000 in earnings in the National Reining Horse Association. Having judged NRHA competitions for more than 20 years, Mario has also served on the NRHA Board of Directors. Mario holds many clinics and demonstrations each year and used this experience to produce this brochure for the rider new to reining. Residing in Moorpark, California, Mario is well known for his work on behalf of the NRHA, his leadership with the International Reining Council, his articulate manner, and his keen wit.

According to the *NRHA Handbook*: Rules For Judging, A. General

“To rein a horse is not only to guide him, but also to control his every movement. The best reined horse should be willingly guided or controlled with little or no apparent resistance and dictated to completely. Any movement on his own must be considered a lack of control. All deviations from the exact written pattern must be considered a lack of/or temporary loss of control and therefore a fault that must be marked down according to severity of deviation. After deducting all faults, set here within, against execution of the pattern and the horse’s overall performance, credit should be given for smoothness, finesse, attitude, quickness and authority of performing various maneuvers, while using controlled speed which raises the difficulty level and makes him more exciting and pleasing to watch to an audience.”

1. Are bloodlines important in the reining horse?

A. Very much so. Although there are rare exceptions almost all top reining horses come from specific bloodlines that have been bred for generations for Western performance events.

2. Can any horse be taught to rein?

A. Many of the exercises used to train reining horses will help almost any riding horse with things like flexibility. It is generally a mistake however to try to make horses do difficult maneuvers they are not suited to or capable of doing.

3. Does conformation have an effect on ability?

A. The advantages of breeding are demonstrated in two ways. Correct conformation to perform the required maneuvers, such as quick stops and turns is one advantage. The other is the disposition to accept training and stay calm while doing them.

4. What are some aspects of correct conformation?

A. While there are many, many aspects of correct conformation, some of the obvious ones are as follows:

1. Low head carriage
2. Straight legs for soundness

3. Good pasterns for soundness and way of moving
4. Overall balance
5. Sloping shoulder
6. Strong hindquarters

5. Does the size of the horse matter?

- A. Size is not an important factor in a reining horse as a rule as long as the horse has overall balance. The exception to this might be an extremely small horse not being suited to a large rider.

6. How important is what I am wearing?

- A. The *NRHA Handbook* says, "it is mandatory for all riders to use appropriate western tack and western attire while showing; this would include a long sleeve shirt, western hat or safety helmet, boots, western saddle, and western bridle." Riders should wear whatever their tastes and budgets dictate. Think of it as a job interview. In other words your ability doesn't depend on what you wear, but it never hurts to make a good impression."

7. What about hats?

- A. Straw hats are appropriate in hot weather. Felt hats are always in season. A nicely shaped hat gives the look of a serious competitor.

8. Does it matter if your hat falls off?

- A. There is no rule against your hat falling off; unfortunately hats falling off detract from the overall picture and often the rider's concentration is seriously disrupted when this occurs.

9. How can I keep my hat from falling off?

- A. Felt hats are easier to keep on than straw hats; proper fit is essential. Sometimes riders use bobby pins or apply hair spray or golf club grip cream to the front of the sweat band to make it tacky.

10. What about shirts?

- A. Long sleeves are a must and weather would dictate wool vs. cotton. The shirt should be coordinated with other colors in the outfit, particularly the saddle blanket. Ties or scarves are optional and it is appropriate to show with or without them.

11. What about jeans?

- A. New slacks or jeans always present a much nicer picture than old faded ones.

12. What about chaps?

- A. Chaps are not mandatory but clean well-fitted chaps are traditional and add to the look of a serious competitor.

13. What about boots?

- A. Any western boot is acceptable. Your boots should always be cleaned and polished.

14. What about bridles?

- A. Any western bridle is acceptable. It should be clean and in good repair. Silver is not necessary but adds a nice touch when cleaned and polished.

15. What about bits and hackamores?

- A. Contestants should familiarize themselves with NRHA rules regarding equipment. These can be found in the *NRHA Handbook* under the Rules For Judging, and in the Judges Guide. These rules change from time to time so be sure to use a current handbook. Should any uncertainty remain, ask the judge at the show if your equipment is OK.

16. When using a Snaffle Bit or Hackamore, can you ride with both hands on the reins?

- A. In NRHA competition one hand or two hands may be used on the reins only in the Snaffle Bit or Hackamore and Freestyle classes. In the Snaffle Bit or Hackamore class, two hands are

traditionally used. A Snaffle Bit or Hackamore may be used in any other NRHA class but only with one hand on the reins.

17. What about mechanical hackamores?

A. Mechanical hackamores, such as those containing mechanical leverage, shanks, or curbs, are not legal in reining competition.

18. What about reins?

A. Only split reins or romal reins are acceptable...never closed reins such as the kind used by ropers or barrel racers.

19. What about saddles?

A. Any western saddle is appropriate but those that are designed specifically for reining usually give the rider the best advantage. Your saddle should always be clean and well oiled.

20. What about breast collars?

A. Breast collars may be used if necessary to prevent the saddle from slipping back. Most horsemen agree that not using a breast collar provides more freedom of movement. If using a breast collar be sure it is not rubbing the hair or skin off the horse's chest.

21. What about saddle pads and blankets?

A. There are many types of pads and blankets available. The most important things are to keep them clean and in good repair, making certain they are thick enough to protect the horse's back yet not so thick they cause the saddle to roll from side to side. The shape of the horse's withers is the biggest factor in determining the correct thickness.

22. What about show pads and blankets?

A. Any western pad is acceptable but the Navajo style pads and blankets are the most traditional. Show pads should be clean and bright and never faded or dirty. The colors should be coordinated with the rest of the outfit.

23. When do you need splint boots?

A. Splint boots should be worn at all times. They provide protection to the splint and cannon bones should they be inadvertently struck by the hoof and/or shoe of the opposite foot. Some splint boots provide extra support for the tendons.

24. What about bell boots?

A. Bell boots protect the coronet band from being struck by the hoof or shoe. This is particularly important in the early stages of teaching a horse to spin. Bell boots also protect the bulbs and heels of the front feet from the toe of the hind feet when a horse is sliding. Extra care should be given to keep bell boots clean. Sand accumulating in them will irritate the ankles, which can lead to a serious condition known as scratches.

25. When do you need knee boots?

A. In some cases certain horses will rub one knee against the other while spinning. Knee boots should be used until the horse learns to spin without interfering.

26. What about skid boots?

A. Skid boots should be used when the horse is being worked on sliding stops. Particular attention should be paid to keeping skid boots clean. When using leather boots, keep them well oiled. Stiff or dirty skid boots will quickly rub the hair off the horse's ankles.

27. How do you get the correct lead on departures?

- A. Start by practicing them repeatedly in the same spot. The goal is to have the horse go immediately into the lope from a walk or standstill. If you encounter difficulty consistently picking up the correct lead, more work is needed on developing control of the hips and shoulders.

28. What is cadence?

- A. Cadence is a uniform rhythm or tempo. While performing a maneuver it is particularly important in spins and circles to help create the smooth flowing appearance, which makes them pleasing to watch.

29. Do you have to wear spurs?

- A. In all aspects of riding, common sense should prevail. The level of training and sensitivity of each particular horse will dictate whether or not spurs are necessary or desirable.

30. Do you use steady or alternating pressure when applying cues?

- A. Cues should never be applied so suddenly as to startle an unsuspecting horse. Subtle alternating pressure often achieves a better response. Horses may become oblivious to steady pressure when applied over a long period of time.

31. Do you work your horse equally on both sides?

- A. Very few horses work equally well in both directions. It is important to spend more time on the weaker side so it can “catch-up” with the strong side. It is usually best to begin with the good side to start off on a “good note” at the beginning of a ride.

32. How should you sit in a fast circle?

- A. Sit the way you feel most comfortable. The important thing is to be consistent so that your seat becomes one of the cues that indicate to the horse whether to go fast or slow.

33. How do you come down into a slow circle from a fast circle?

- A. Relax your seat, be sure your legs are off the horse’s sides, use a verbal command such as “easy” and let the size of the circle aid in slowing the horse down. Light contact on the bit is acceptable, but an ongoing “tug of war” shows the judges that the horse is not being willingly controlled.

34. How much difference should there be in the speed of my circles?

- A. As a rule, the greater the contrast in speed, the better the score for the maneuver. Every horse has a maximum and minimum speed at which they look their best. Care should be given not to exceed these maximums and minimums, as this will create a less pleasing picture.

35. How much difference should there be in the size of the circles?

- A. As much contrast as possible, without making the large circle so big that you appear to be using the sides of the arena to steer the horse. Make the small circle as small as the horse’s way of moving allows so that he does not appear as though he is struggling.

36. When should I start to slow down when going from a large circle to a small one?

- A. It is best to begin asking the horse to slow down slightly before reaching the center of the arena. This gives the horse room to slow down so that the entire small circle can be executed at slow speed.

37. When should I speed the horse up?

- A. Whether starting into the first circle or going from a small circle to a large one, start accelerating at the center but do so gradually over the course of several strides or roughly one quarter of the circle. Sudden bursts of speed are liable to interfere with the horse’s steering and do not create a smooth picture.

38. Is collection necessary in a reining horse?

- A. Collection is extremely important in helping the horse move better in the circles and to keep the hind legs underneath him in preparation for stops and lead changes.

39. How do you teach a horse to change leads?

- A. There is more than one method for teaching lead changes. The most important thing is to teach the horse control of the hips and shoulders with pressure from the rider's legs. Time and patience *are* important to teach this calmly at the walk and trot. Never try to frighten or bully a horse into changing leads, this will only result in disaster.

40. How much should you use your reins in the circles?

- A. Light contact on the bit and against the side of the neck is acceptable. Extremely long reins do not receive extra credit. A reasonably loose rein gives the impression that the horse is being willingly guided.

41. How much should I use other cues?

- A. The various cues should be used in conjunction with each other to produce the best overall result. Shifting of the rider's weight and the use of the rider's legs against the horse's sides, but as in all good horsemanship, excessive or harsh cues do not create a pleasing picture.

42. What is the most common mistake people make in circles?

- A. Many beginners forget to start and finish all circles at the center of the arena. The common denominator between all circles regardless of size, speed, or direction is that they start and finish at the center of the arena.

43. How do you teach your horse to spin?

- A. Begin teaching your horse to spin by walking a series of small circles with the head down and the nose tipped slightly to the inside. This will teach him correct body position that he will need to turn without interfering in the front.

44. Which foot should a horse pivot on?

- A. The inside hind leg.

45. How do you get a horse to pivot on the correct foot?

- A. If a horse will not plant the correct foot he is either interfering in the front or is out of balance, meaning his weight is too far to the front, or to one side or the other. If all of these problems are corrected, the pivot foot will normally correct itself.

46. What is more important, speed or correctness?

- A. Correctness always comes before speed. The NRHA Rules for Judging insist that no credit be given for speed when spins are not performed correctly.

47. What is the best way to stop spinning?

- A. Be sure that your horse understands that "Whoa" means stop. Each horse requires a different amount of time to "Shut-Down." Practice at home to find out how far ahead of time you need to say "Whoa" to stop where you want to.

48. What is the best way to keep my horse spinning until I am ready to stop?

- A. When practicing at home be sure to do one or two spins frequently. Otherwise the horse will anticipate quitting the spin. It is best to continue "Clucking" to the horse until you tell him to stop by saying "Whoa."

49. How should I sit when I am spinning?

- A. Avoid leaning or any extreme movement. Sit with your weight shifted slightly to the back and your inside foot forward and away from the horse. This will help insure a secure seat by overcoming the centrifugal force on the rider. Keep the outside leg close to the horse so it can be used to start the spin and maintain the motion.

50. How do you teach a horse to stop?

- A. In the beginning, stop the horse repeatedly in the same spot. Be sure he understands that “Whoa” means stop. Whenever he does not stop on the hindquarters, back him a few steps.

51. How do you get a horse to stop harder?

- A. Use extra speed gradually to encourage him to try harder. Whenever the stop is weak, back him quickly being sure that he is soft in the poll and not leaning on the bit.

52. How do you teach a horse to rollback?

- A. At the end of a stop, back the horse a few steps and then when you are sure his weight is off the front end and over his hindquarters turn him 180 degrees and urge him immediately into the lope. In the beginning, do not be concerned with which lead he comes out on. As he progresses he will come out on the desired lead automatically.

53. Do you straighten out the horse before stopping?

- A. Any horse has to be straight in order to stop well. Be sure to teach the horse to run perfectly straight in rundowns. Practice straightening the horse a stride or two before stopping, where stops are called for at the end of a small circle.

54. How do you keep the horse accelerating smoothly?

- A. When practicing at home alternate fast rundowns with slow ones. If the horse “charges” when asked for a rundown, gradually increase the pressure on the bit until he walks quietly. Never yank or jerk on the horse’s mouth, as this will only make him more nervous.

55. How do you keep a horse from being afraid of the bit?

- A. Horses become afraid of the bit because of “jerking” on the mouth. This usually results from the rider not knowing how to handle some situations or a lack of patience. On the other hand, be sure that you use a bit that the horse will not ignore, so you can get desirable response with a quiet “steady” pull.

56. Are sliding stops hard on a horse’s hind legs?

- A. Not if the horse is shod properly with sliding plates, and the riding surface is level and loose enough, so as not to put undue strain on the hind legs.

57. What is the right surface for reining?

- A. Usually some kind of firm base such as clay that is level, topped with 3-4 inches of sand that should be regularly groomed with a “drag” or shallow harrow.

58. How do you teach a horse to walk in front when he slides behind?

- A. If a horse is stiff legged in front while stopping, it usually indicates they are scared or nervous about stopping. This is probably from the rider pulling hard during stops. Practice stopping with emphasis on the verbal command “Whoa” and light contact on the bit.

59. Is how you say “whoa” important?

- A. It is critical that when you say “Whoa” you say it slowly and calmly in a low-pitched tone. If “Whoa” is hollered out quickly it is impossible to move the rein hand slowly to achieve the smooth contact necessary for the relaxed sliding stop that is desirable.

60. What is scotching?

- A. “Scotching” is used to describe what a horse does when he anticipates stopping before the rider asks for a stop.

61. How do you prevent “scotching”?

- A. “Scotching” is a result of stopping too much in the same spot and/or pulling too hard on the bit during the stop. Alternate stopping with loping end to end in the arena or track without stopping. Be careful not to use harsh punishment when a horse scotches, as it will make him afraid to stop.
- 62. What is the most important thing to remember when showing?**
- A. Stay on pattern.
- 63. What is the best way to stay on pattern?**
- A. Walk the pattern on foot before the class. Picture the pattern in your mind like a little “movie” and verbalize the pattern out loud.
- 64. What is the next most important thing to remember when showing?**
- A. Eliminate penalties. Practice sessions and concentration should be devoted to eliminating penalties in priority to increasing maneuver scores. Mandatory penalties will quickly “eat-up” the 70 points you started out with. The common denominator between all successful competitors is that they acquire very few penalties.
- 65. When does one maneuver start and the other one stop?**
- A. Precise explanations of the various maneuver groups used in reining are available in the Judge’s Guide in the back of the *NRHA Handbook*.
- 66. What creates a pleasing picture to a judge?**
- A. Degree of difficulty along with controlled speed will help achieve a higher score but correctness and smoothness always have the first priority, particularly when beginning maneuvers.
- 67. Do I need to work with a trainer?**
- A. Working with a knowledgeable and reputable trainer is one of the cheapest investments you can make. The cost of training and lessons is a fraction of the cost of horses, trucks, trailers and equipment and will help insure that you get the most out of all of these. Seek out a trainer who specializes in working with Non Pros.
- 68. Is it okay to work with more than one trainer?**
- A. Feel free to shop around for the trainer that suits your needs and to attend clinics given in your area. The most consistent results are usually achieved by getting on a single program.
- 69. Do I need to buy a “finished” horse?**
- A. Training a reining horse from scratch is an extremely demanding undertaking. Only very experienced Non Pros should tackle training their own horse. Beginners should stick to riding a horse that can teach them.
- 70. How can I keep from being dizzy?**
- A. The best way to keep from being dizzy is to concentrate on counting. It is important to practice counting at home so that it is second nature when you get to the show.
- 71. What is the best way to count?**
- A. The best way to count is to pick an object that is easy to spot. Try to keep track of where it is at all times in your mind and be sure to look straight at it as you come around to face it. At the completion of each full spin (360 degrees) count the object. At a show, for instance, the object should be the center cone.
- 72. What is the most important thing about reining?**
- A. Have fun!!