

Dear John Henry,

I am a lovely 6 year old Hunter-type mule. I am dark bay, and move very correctly. However, in the last open Hunter show I was at, the judge seemed to be mule-prejudiced, and said I didn't have an arched neck so I couldn't be collected and on the bit. Well, I was upset since I was as collected as a mule can get. (I guess he had not seen non-hunter breeds like some stock horses!) We just have straighter necks, that's all! But can you tell me if you know of a way to make my neck curve better? If not, how do we explain to these judges about our lovely but NOT-SWAN necks?

Miss Irish Rose

Hi Miss Irish Rose,

Let's talk about judges preferences first..... you know when you go to a pleasure show most of the time you are accepting the opinion of the judge who is a complete stranger to you and who's background is also a mystery. When I put it like that I wonder why anyone goes to a pleasure show! I hear my person, Kathleen, talking about this all the time. We do a lot of open hunter pleasure shows. Kathleen says that she has a standard of performance the we strive to attain. Even in a show you should only consider if your performance is better than your performance at the last show...not if you have gotten a ribbon from a judge you don't know or beaten the horse next to you. Your opinion of yourself is more important. It is fun to show and I love going because everyone makes much of me and has to touch my ears and feed me star mints. In the northeast mules are very rare and although people are getting used to seeing me I still am the center of attention after 4 years but that doesn't mean that all judges can overcome their prejudices and pin us over horses. We pay to show to get the judges opinion but don't take those opinions too seriously. Ask the judge [after the show] for their opinion on how you can improve your performance. It might be something simple that you can practice like bending or canter departs. On the other hand that judge might be hard pressed to say just what you did wrong and in that case I would not show under him again because he just didn't like you. Judges are entitled to their opinions and we can also choose not to show under them too.

There is a way to avoid all of these "opinions" and show in classes that don't involve them. That is classes that are judged strictly on performance like...jumpers [not hunters], dressage, combined training, combined driving, endurance, and all the western classes like trail, barrels, reining and any other class where each individual movement is scored and not left to the judge to score as an opinion. In these type classes/shows if you do the prescribed movement correctly you get the high score for that movement and then you go on to the next movement. I'll give you an example.... the very first time the combined driving world saw me was at last years Garden State CDE [combined driving event] and our first class was training level driven dressage. As I said each movement is scored separately and at this show there were 3 different dressage judges scoring each of the 10 movements from different places along the rail. The fact that there were 3 judges further diluted any one judges opinion because all the scores were then averaged for the total score. At the end of the training level dressage test section the judges went to lunch together along with their scribes [people who volunteer to write down all comments so that the judge can keep watching your test]. One of the scribes came up to me after the scores were posted and Kathleen and I found out that we

were leading to say that we were the talk of the judges lunch. Each judge had scored our individual movements and the combined score had placed us first against all the horses and one judge commented that “now we have to live with the fact that a mule was leading”. You see that judge couldn’t do anything about the fact that we had won that section. Each movement was judged against an ideal training level movement and was scored accordingly.

There will be pleasure judges that like you and are inclined to pin you against horses and there will be some that won’t like you and won’t pin you just like every other horse there. The question is “are you having a good time”?

The next part of your question is a conformation one....”But can you tell me if you know of a way to make my neck curve better? If not, how do we explain to these judges about our lovely but NOT-SWAN necks?”

I don’t think it is the place of an individual to try and educate a judge during a show but afterwards you might have your person talk to the judge and explain about Mule conformation. If, as you say you were on the bit and collected I don’t know if there is any real answer to your mule’s conformation. We aren’t horses - we look like ourselves and are a product of our breeding - and we should be proud of it! If you like to compete you might try some of the events that I suggested where the judge’s opinion isn’t a factor... do things where your strengths will help you. I know that my strength is in my consistent gaits and unflappable nature. Sometimes I get a ribbon because everyone else has misbehaved and this is the case in most dressage tests. I am very, very consistent. I make round circles, have an even trot and a nice extension. Sometimes I back a little crooked in a carriage but that is only a small part of the test. We should build on our strengths and not try to be something we aren’t. For one, I will never be a show hunter or jumper because I am really suspicious of jumps in a show ring. I have to jump things in a ring quite a few times before I will just canter up and over them alone. Now, if I am out fox hunting and the horses in front of me jump I will, of course, follow them and jump beautifully. Kathleen knows that I would never make a Hunt Masters equine because then I would have to be in front and do everything first. You know that jumps could harbor trolls and I’m constantly on the look-out for trolls when I go first in new country! Kathleen tells everyone that I test her sense of humor on a daily basis!

Above all you should be having a good time! Your person should understand that most judges wouldn’t pin an Arab at a hunter show either because of their conformational differences when compared with the traditional TB hunter type. We mules have to work at being accepted on our own terms. Don’t be discouraged..... there will be judges that like you and some that won’t ... just remember that it is only one person’s opinion on one day of the year and whatever that opinion is your person will love you anyway and that is the most important thing in your life!