

Ready, set, show!

Coaches – the Ontario horse trial season is nearly upon us. Here is a checklist for coaches and riders to ensure that everyone is as ready as possible for that first early morning start time.

Paperwork – This is the boring stuff. Best to get it out of the way first. Make sure your riders have all memberships updated for the year. If they have a new horse or are moving a horse up to Training level –they will need to get him a passport or change ownership on his passport. Vaccinations and coggins tests should be attended to. FEI passports should have vaccination records up-to-date.

Equipment – Have your riders check all of their gear. Make sure show attire still fits (especially if they are growing youngsters), safety vests have working zippers, arm-bands are up-to-date, riding boots and helmets are well-fitting and in good repair. Make or revise your horse show packing list.

Behind the scenes – Make sure any shoeing adjustments (shoes tapped for studs, back shoes on, etc.) are planned ahead so your horses are ready for spring conditions. Less experienced horses and riders may need to practice loading and unloading to prevent delays on a show morning. Manes will need to be pulled, fetlocks trimmed well before show day. Rookies who will be doing their own braiding should practice ahead.

Plan your season – If your riders are trying to qualify for a major event or move up a level this year, set the main goal, then work backwards in the season to ensure they can meet qualifying criteria or to build a progressive program.

Fitness is key – Horses in regular work are generally fit enough to canter around an entry or pre-training course. Coaches need to ensure that any student's horse going Training or above is on an appropriate fitness program that includes trot sets and some gallops. Set a calendar outlining a fitness work plan up to the first horse trial, and then on through the season. Armed with a stop-watch and some distance markers this is a chance to work with your riders to develop a sense of pace and speed.

Learn your dressage tests - Winter is a great time to improve skills, to work on technique. As show season approaches coaches need to shift the program to strategies related to the requirements of the show ring. Have your riders “play horse show”. Have them ride a warm up in one ring, then go to a marked dressage ring, trot around the outside and ride a test. It may have a few rough spots, but that will help you focus on areas to improve. Make sure riders run through each of the tests they will ride during the season.

Ride the whole course - Work some of your jumping schools to imitate the show ring. Include the kinds of combinations and related distances that your rider will encounter in a show (e.g. if she is riding preliminary or above, the course should include a triple

combination). Try setting a course at your competitive height. Work a warm up over an “X”, a vertical and an oxer, as we do in the show warm up. Then have your students ride through a course. With less experienced competitors, have them practice entering the ring, saluting and awaiting the whistle. Make sure they understand the start / finish lines. As well, run through with them how to handle a refusal in the show ring.

Get your feet wet – literally. You will need to get your riders out for some cross-country schooling. Even seasoned competitors need to rehearse banks, ditches and water. Everyone needs to get their stirrups shortened and practice their galloping position.

Plan for success, plan ahead !