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the scribes, our unsung heroes

Every experienced dressage judge realizes how important the person next to you in the judge's box is, but not many competitors understand the value of a competent scribe. Except, of course, when they cannot read his or her writing.

There are so many ways a scribe can make or break you as a judge. The longer I officiate, the more grateful I am for a good scribe, and the more frantic when I end up with a "lemon." Admittedly that rarely happens in this country any more, but I am aware of situations that made the judge look like an idiot, when in fact the scribe was incompetent. And I am sure many of our (for the most part) fabulous American scribes can easily recall incidents when the judge was not on the ball and the scribe saved his or her skin.

Avoiding the Hitchcockian Scene

One of the horror scenarios is being partway through a test, especially when judging on a panel, and having the scribe turn to you and say, "It does not say pirouette, it says changes." You try not to take your eyes off the horse while asking the unthinkable question: "Do you have the correct test?" Backtracking is awful when you judge alone because it holds up the whole schedule; doing it while the rest of the jury is waiting is pure torture. A good scribe always checks on the accuracy of the test, since the wrong one can slip in by mistake, and also makes sure that the number the competitor carries is the one printed on the test.

In America we are blessed with show management who realizes that scribes must have a certain amount of experience before you can let them help a judge working the FEI levels. As a matter of fact, some of our new national tests are quite demanding on the scribes, since we now give many more separate scores in rapid succession. Judges are required to give a comment for any movement receiving a "6" or less, and encouraged to comment on higher scores as well. Sometimes competitors deserve to get some good news, or to know why we gave an eight instead of a nine. Since I am guilty of being one of those judges who run off at the mouth, I realize that it is more difficult to keep up with the judges who are more verbal, and that three or four days of nonstop writing and checking is tiresome and rather repetitious. Although nobody, save the judge, is better informed about the action in the ring than the scribe, this person is the one who never gets to see the test. That is certainly a frustrating situation, which was made very clear to me at one of the North America Young Rider Championships, when my scribe would mournfully sigh every time I opened my mouth, as if to say, "Not again!"

After an hour of this lament, I started to feel guilty about not allowing the woman to watch in peace, and had her replaced.

One of my colleagues told me a cute story of a judge who was given a “new” scribe. The judge started the test, gave a six for the entry and halt, a seven for the extended trot, and a five for the shoulder-in. At that point, the scribe threw her pen down in disgust, turned to the judge, and said, “Why don’t you make up your mind?”

Our country is, I believe, the only one that offers a group of scribes I would not hesitate to call “professional,” although a lot of their work is a labor of love and not particularly well paid. There are such “secretaries” being flown all over to important events, and they are like a club of sages in their field. When you arrive at the show and find that your scribe is a familiar face who knows his or her stuff, it is with a warm fuzzy feeling you crawl into your box. These are the people who will never comment on your scores, whatever their opinion, and never show that they are tired or bored; they will share their blankets when it is cold and their ice when it is hot. They will give you a nudge when a horse enters the ring and you are still busy with the previous sheet, and they will remind you of a transition score when you are slow. They keep track of errors, and even take time to write down the scores as announced. It is a wonderful support to have, and when you also get to keep the same scribe throughout the entire show, life is good!

European “Thrillers”

Let me tell you how it can be even in “perfect Europe,” for example, where I have had some of my best “thrillers” in the shape of scribes.

Often it is assumed that just because a person is a judge, it goes with the territory that he or she is also a competent scribe. This could not be farther from the truth. On many occasions, especially in Germany, I have had to insist that the judge-scribe stop viewing the test, start writing down the comments, and refrain from voicing his or her opinion about every score. At this point it is not unusual that the computer operator

starts in to protect her buddy, and things can become very intense for a short while, until the rank order is established. Scribing is not a good way for a judge to learn anything but vocabulary and how difficult it can be to be a scribe. To learn more about judging, it is better that the judge “sit in” on the test, observing the performance and listening to the scores. This way the competitor never has to pay for any disturbances in the concentration of the scribe.

Overseas, the tendency is also to replace scribes for every test. At a recent show, I judged six classes with six different scribes, five different computer people, and sometimes a journalist sitting in to listen. This revolving door of personnel does not give any opportunity to establish a rhythm for the work, and I am so glad we do not usually live with that system at our shows.

At one memorable show in Hamburg, Germany, I was introduced to “Mrs. Miller,” my scribe, who I was told had been working in that capacity at this particular show for the last thirty years. Great, I thought, she should be able to do this without a judge! We started the class, and I gave a score and the comment. No reaction from Mrs. Miller. I repeated my drill. Nada. I touched her on the arm, whereupon she turned to me, cupped her ear, and said, “What?” Mrs. Miller was extremely hard of hearing, and as I bellowed my scores in her ear, the competitors would go by and throw me a glance that said, “Well, thanks a whole lot!” In the freestyle I roared louder than the music, and ruined many a beautiful and well-edited program.

As a competitor, I do appreciate when the scribe writes legibly—that is, not like the judges, whose writing, if they do their own general impressions, is normally indecipherable. After a while, the competitor learns some of the most common abbreviations, and when we review our sheets we “get in the groove” with the scribes, who try to give us as much information about the performance as they can without getting

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judging and being judged

behind the judge and making mistakes. In that respect there is a unique relationship between the rider and the scribe, because the rider can only receive as much input as the scribe is willing to transfer, even if the judge is generous with comments.

In closing, I would like to give credit to all show managers who check on the capability of each scribe before giving him or her the job, and who know the limits of what is a comfortable level to work with for each individual. In the case of a new scribe, it helps to ask the judges about the performance of their scribe during and after the show. Sometimes judges are hesitant to let show management know when things are not going well, but it is the competitors who suffer when a scribe interferes with the judge's operation. For sure, scribes can get better only if they are being told the truth. And, as I said before, once you have a good team in the box, don't break it up; let the show go on with them united to the end.

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