



*WHICH WAY? Knowledge of ring etiquette and "defensive driving" skills will help keep you and your horse safe and calm in the warm-up*

# The Warm-up Warriors

Compared to the warm-up ring, the show ring is an oasis of calm. Here's how to survive the chaos safely—and maybe even thrive.

BY KAREN BRIGGS

**T**hink the show ring is intimidating? You might have to head up the center line staring into the steely eyes of a judge, but it's the lawless world of the warm-up ring that might just be more death-defying.

It seems that nearly every competitor has a warm-up-ring horror story. Jessica Phoenix, a member of Canada's silver-medal-winning eventing team at the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games, has this one: "It was at one of the first shows I took [current Advanced mount] Exploring to. He was a bit of a wild four-year-old Thoroughbred at the time, so I took pains to find a spot off by myself to warm him up so I wouldn't interfere with anyone." Her efforts were in vain, however: Another rider decided to invade her space "and he basically T-boned us! Exploring lashed out with both back feet, and he broke the man's femur. It was just awful. I couldn't have prevented it, I guess, but I felt terrible about it."

Cyndi Craig, of Alvin, TX, remembers a similar collision at an Arabian breed show, where she was warming up for the dressage division. "My very kind, submissive young horse was slammed into by a pro on a fire-breathing monster," she says. "After that, my horse became totally unridable in company. If a horse came too close, he would kick or bolt, and it took years before I could even venture into a warm-up ring again with him.

"If I knew then what I know now, I would have reported that trainer to the steward and filed a complaint against him," Craig adds.

Then there's Spotsylvania, VA,-based competitor Carol Prudom, who recalls: "I was riding my sweet, gentle mare in the warm-up ring. We were minding our own business when I suddenly had the head and neck of a very large stallion on my lap! I heard loud German curses behind me. I slammed my fist as hard as I could on the stallion's nose, and he backed off, but needless to say my mare was pretty shaken up. The rider never apologized; he just continued on as if nothing had happened."

While warm-up-ring war stories run the gamut from bona fide safety hazards to cases of outrageous rudeness, many such altercations can be prevented by following the rules of equestrian arena etiquette. Let's start with a few simple "rules of the road," and then I'll give you some tips on how to embrace the chaos and coax your best warm-up out of your horse even when conditions aren't ideal.

## 13 Rules for Safe Riding in Company

**1. Leave some space.** Similar to driving, strive to keep at least one horse's length between your mount and the horse in front of you. Leave extra space if your horse has a

tendency to kick or otherwise resents strange equines who come too close.

**2. Yield the rail to faster-moving horses.** If you're walking, stay off the track and leave it for those who are actively schooling at trot or canter. This rule is even more important if you wish to halt and fiddle with your stirrups, girth, or gloves—get off the track and out of traffic!

**3. Pass left stirrup to left stirrup.** In other words, ride the same way you drive: Stay to the right of oncoming traffic.

**4. The passing lane is on the inside—most of the time.** If you're overtaking a slower-moving horse, pass him to the inside whenever possible. Apart from being polite, doing so will reduce your chances of being pinned against a wall or a fence.

**5. If in doubt, call it out.** Not sure whether the rider approaching you knows the rules? Or are you passing someone from behind? Call out "inside" or "outside" or whatever short descriptive phrase will let your fellow competitor know which way you're headed. (Just don't expect everyone to endlessly get out of your way for every call of "circle" or "diagonal." Your competitors need to warm up, too.)

**6. Watch your whip.** Projecting whips might tickle an adjacent horse and send him ballistic. When passing, keep that whip tucked in close beside you or switch it to the opposite hand.

**7. Beware stallions.** Though any stallion competing in a dressage show ought to be well-mannered and focused on his job, you're wise to be extra-cautious around them. Play "spot the stallion" ahead of time and give them lots of room, especially if you're riding a mare. If you're the one riding a stallion, make sure that other competitors are aware of the fact (an unbraided forelock is one commonly used signal) and take responsibility for his manners. If he can't play nicely with others, find another place to school.

**8. Eyes up.** It's easy to zero in on your horse's withers while you're warming up, trying to fight show-ring jitters, and reciting your test in your head; but like the colliding figure skaters in the warm-up at the 2006 winter Olympics, you would do well to look beyond your own little universe. Anticipate trouble by keeping your eyes up and scanning the ring as you school. Keep in mind that upper-level riders are likely to come at you (or up behind you) from various directions as they leave the track to practice extensions or tempi changes or to do lateral work.

**9. Nix the naughtiness.** If your horse is having a Bad Hair Day and is engaging in antisocial behaviors such as bucking, rearing, or bolting, please remove him from the warm-up ring. Don't expect your fellow competitors to just



TRAFFIC CONDUCTOR: *Be polite to the ring steward, who can help you get to your test on time*

the warm-up ring trailing their entourages: coaches, helpers, and family members. Try not to run over these unmounted warm-up-ring denizens, who may be paying attention to nothing except “their” riders. Call “Heads up!”

**11. Wear your number.** It’s required by US Equestrian Federation rules, and it’ll also help the ring steward keep track of any yahoos.

**12. Learn to handle advanced chaos.** Dressage shows are one level of insanity, but occasionally you may find yourself sharing a warm-up ring with those in other disciplines—who may or may not have the same understanding of the rules. If

bear with it; naughtiness is contagious. Today might just not be a good day to show.

**10. Don’t tread on them.** Many competitors enter

there are people schooling over jumps, for example, it helps to know in which direction they will be approaching and landing. Jumpers and eventers both “flag” their fences to

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indicate the route of travel: red flag on the rider's right and white flag on the left. With hunters, there won't be flags, so you'll have to look for the presence of ground lines to indicate which way a fence is to be jumped.

**13. R-e-s-p-e-c-t.** Aretha Franklin will approve if you vow to always treat your fellow competitors as you would like to be treated. Like you, they have paid an entry fee to be there. Check your ego at the door and ride as if you are being scrutinized for a good-sportsmanship award. (Oh, and for safety's sake, leave the cell phone in your truck or the stabling area.)

### Getting the Most out of Your Warm-Up

Going beyond mere survival to making wise use of your warm-up time might seem a daunting prospect, given all of the above cautions, but it can be accomplished.

Determining the right amount of warm-up time is 75 percent of the challenge. To do so, you need to have a handle on your horse's needs and temperament. Is he the lazy type who needs motivating and takes time to fully rise to the occasion? Is he the sort who starts off wound a little tight and gets more tense the longer you school? Does he have a short-lived peak followed closely by fatigue and disinterest? You'll need to factor in his type, as well as the weather

conditions, when you calculate how far in advance of your scheduled test time you should begin your warm-up.

"You should always go in with a game plan, but be prepared to modify it," advises Jessica Phoenix. "If the ring is really manic, I have been known to just warm up at a walk. You'd be surprised how much you can accomplish."

Whatever the atmosphere, keep in mind that the warm-up ring is not the place to correct bad behavior or to introduce new concepts; that work should be done at home, Phoenix says.

As for the other 25 percent of your warm-up strategy, that's relaxation and common sense. Breathe, engage your brain and your connection with your horse; don't sweat the small stuff; and remember, it's a horse show, not a United Nations conference: World peace does not hinge on your results. Vow to rise above the small annoyances, and you and your horse will have your best chance of transforming a productive warm-up into a stellar test. ▲

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