

A Judge's Perspective: Judging the Peruvian Horse

by Cheryl Aldrich



Until the invention of the automobile, the horse was man's primary means of transportation, a decided advantage in warfare, and a convenient way to manage other livestock. Each geographical area of the world created breeds of horses suited to the needs and temperaments of its people. The practical, hardworking American colonist developed the Tennessee Walker and Narragansett Pacer for comfortable travel, and the Quarter horse for working cattle. Nez Perce Indians developed a fast, strong, agile horse to cope with mountainous terrain. The idea of a pleasure or show horse did not develop until the horse was no longer essential to man's everyday existence.

The Spanish breeds; Andalusian, Lusitano, Paso Fino and Peruvian Paso also had their beginnings as work horses. The romantic Spanish mentality did not allow a horse to be merely functional, however, but also required that it be an extension of latin pride; a strong horse, capable of hard work, but at the same time a horse that would call your eye as it passed. It is this proud arrogance coupled with smooth, willing grace that stamps the Peruvian Horse as a Spanish invention. It was a war horse turned into a comfortable yet flamboyant traveling horse; at home whether crossing the barren Peruvian desert or showing off for crowds in the mercados.

Peruvian horses are a breed of conflicting characteristics that are inherited, not created by a clever trainer: a fiery, brave-spirited temperament channeled into a willingness to please (brio); high-stepping front legs coupled with powerful driving rear legs executing a smooth harmonious rhythm (pisos); and forelegs that have a sideways rolling motion of the shoulder, knee and pastern landing the hoof square under the horse (termino). Pisos, brio and termino, trademarks of the Peruvian horse, have no direct English translation and are vital characteristics that require intimate contact with the breed to fully understand.

Horse shows before the 1800's were spontaneous displays of horsemanship in the town plaza during a feria, or even among groups of horsemen as they traveled. Each rider tried to outshine the previous performance. The appreciation and applause of the spectators

and other riders constituted the judging and determination of who won the impromptu competition.

For horse shows of the 1990's, exhibitors and judges have written rules and standards to USC as guidelines which draw a picture of the ideal horse. In the arena, however, there are no perfect horses, as every horse has faults. The judge's job is to place the horses in order of their virtues. Judges have a vision of "ideal" that is expressed by placing horses that fall within a range. This balancing act is an exercise in priorities; super gait and brio with less than average conformation versus average gait, brio and conformation. Who wins? That's the judge's call. Nor will every judge make the same placement.

Most breeds have a variety of classes; Hunt Seat, English Pleasure Saddle Seat, Western Pleasure Show, Hack, etc, each one requiring different clothing and tack. Color coordination, amount of silver and correct appointments can win or lose a class.

Although the judging and showing of the Peruvian horse itself is complex, the tack and attire needed to compete is wonderfully simple. A Peruvian saddle and bridle, white shirt, pants and scarf, with a Peruvian style poncho and straw hat are all that are required for any Championship qualifying class. Other types of saddles and bridles may be used as long as the styles of tack are not mixed. The cost of your saddle or amount of silver adornment is completely unimportant. The focus of the judging is on the rider and horse.

There are two major divisions that qualify for championships. The Breeding Division is so called because the inherited qualities (gait, brio and conformation) of the horse are being judged. Equitation and training are of no importance because a great Peruvian horse is bred, not trained. Proper training is simply the showcase which allows the inherited ability to be seen at it's best, while improper training can hide a horse's ability. Halter, Under Saddle and In Bit are all part of the Breeding Division as is Luxury Gelding. Breeding classes are the only type of class you will see in Peru. Pleasure and Equitation classes are an American creation, as foreign to the Peruvian mind as Breeding classes are to many Americans.

Pleasure Division classes emphasize the performance of the horse and the equitation of the rider. For both exhibitors and judges, these classes are the most difficult. The picture becomes complicated by the effort to balance the equitation of the rider with the maneuverability and quality of the horse. In the Breeding Division, horses are only required~ to move in troth directions around the arena. Pleasure Division classes require that a horse be well trained in making proper balanced circles, figure eights, and stops in a collected, calm manner. The rider should have a balanced, quiet seat and hands that give the appearance of effortless control.

Because the Peruvian's gait is the single most distinctive aspect of this breed, the judging criteria in a Peruvian horse show differ greatly from that used in shows of other breeds. No explanation of Peruvian classes would be complete without the mention of the Gait (Pisos) class which is judged 100% on the horse's gait. The three most important attributes of a Peruvian horse are pisos, pisos, pisos! Without pisos, you do not have a

Peruvian horse. Just as everyone can sing to some extent, but some people have such harmony, tone and quality of voice to be exceptional, all Peruvian horses are naturally gaited (have pisos), but some horses are more harmonious, rhythmic, with extreme termino, while still remaining smooth. As Peruvians become more and more popular in the United States, Americans are striving to grasp this concept created by a foreign way of thinking.

Just as there are no perfect individual horses, the Peruvian breed in general has faults that need improvement. A significant responsibility of the judge is to make breeders aware of needed improvements that will enhance breed characteristics while maintaining the true essence of the Peruvian horse. The Peruvian breed has been successfully transplanted to the United States without a loss of its heritage; a considerable feat considering the American inclination to Americanize.

There are many qualities that make a good judge. Any combination of Peruvian horse owner, breeder, rider, trainer, exhibitor or all-around horseman is paramount to a complete understanding of the breed. Emotionally, a judge is a person who would rather eat, sleep and talk horses above all else. When a judge enters the arena, all friendships and animosities are left at the entry gate. Regardless of rule books, morality cannot be legislated and experienced exhibitors know that they have received an objective opinion. Judges honor their mandate to balance a myriad of attributes fairly and the identities of owner, horse or rider only confuse the issue. Judging is a demanding task; often requiring the judge to stand in the heat, cold or rain for two or three days, withstanding the influence of strong personalities, making one decision after another, weighing each horse against every other. With a sufficient number of horses competing, the final barrida should paint a picture of what is "ideal" to each judge.

The World Book Dictionary defines judging as, "The ability to form opinions". Judging is an art: the giving of a personal opinion, not a science. Ask six people to describe a complex landscape, with all six looking at the same scene, and you will receive six individual descriptions. Most judges have very definite opinions on what makes a good Peruvian horse. Since opinions are like "noses" - everybody has one, it is not surprising that judges do not always agree. This can make for some very heated debates and confusion among novices. For this reason, one show is not a true test of a horse's quality. If, in a series of ten shows, a horse places in the top three and only places lower once or twice, it is among the best. However, if it places in the top three twice and is given Honorable Mention seven times, consider looking for a more serious show ring contender.

Shows are a place to learn new training techniques, show off a new stallion, have passionate discussions about the merits of a particular horse, have fun, and talk to the judge about "why" that horse placed 3rd. Contrary to popular belief, exhibitors may talk to the judge, just not about any horse that has yet to be shown in front of him/her. One should not go to shows only to win, as disappointment is a sure result. There are only a few blue ribbons compared to all the red, yellow, green and pink ribbons. Seasoned, educated exhibitors know when they have won and why they have lost. Newer exhibitors

are smart to use the show ring as a classroom; studying the correct (winning) and incorrect (losing) horses. Over the years, people who do this become winners because of the knowledge they have gained, which makes them competent riders with quality horses. People who choose not to learn, but rather disregard the proceedings in the arena, electing instead to stand aside making disparaging remarks will never progress as competent exhibitors or breeders.

Then there are the losers who lost because: the judge only places chalan /big breeders; discriminates against women/American bred horses/color; was a friend of the winner; had dinner with the winner, etc., etc., etc. To be fair, many of these poor sports are disadvantaged by an unrealistic opinion of their horse's ability based on stories told them by unscrupulous horse sellers. Negative attitudes like these, however, will keep them out of the winner's circle until they begin an education based on real facts. The secret to winning is not knowing the judge, having a male Peruvian chalan or an imported horse. The secret to winning is having the best horse in the class; a horse with natural smooth pinto, true bridle, and strong conformation; a horse trained to show all of its good qualities.

Cheryl Aldrich has been involved with the Peruvian horse for nearly two decades. Besides being an avid breeder, Cheryl rides her Peruvians extensively has been a long time member of the Texas Ladies Aside; a drill team participant; and an accredited judge. She has judged approved Peruvian Paso shows in six different countries.