



T R A V E L I N G C O M P A N I O N S

JOHN O'HARA

Based on personal experience, Jennifer Bishop says the NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity exemplifies a great show. Pictured here on Paddys Stolen Heart, she strives for that level of professionalism at the events she works at as a show secretary.



W E L C O M E to the Office

Some people think managing a horse show is a thankless job. Not so, says this enthusiastic show secretary. She'd do it – even if exhibitors didn't bring her brownies.

By Jennifer Bishop

TWO YEARS AGO, I SPENT AN EVENING REMINISCING WITH MY friend, Rhoda Rein, about all the horse shows we've helped manage and secretary over the years. We laughed about the amount of time and energy we had expended trying to create "perfect" performance horse events. As our bottle of wine dwindled, we mused about the possibility of creating that all over again – but this time, as paid professionals, not just as volunteers.

It's true that a lot of things discussed in the glow of such a get-together are no more than blissful thinking. But when we talked about it again during the cold light of day, it didn't sound like such a hair-brained idea. It seemed realistic, doable – possibly, even fun!

Lord knows, we had both had years of experience in front of and behind the scenes as exhibitors, board members, volunteer "staff" – and even as professional trainers' wives. Why not start our own show management business? Why the heck not?

Dragon Ladies, Not

AS THE IDEA BEGAN TO TAKE SHAPE, THE ONE THING THAT RHODA and I were in 100 percent agreement on is that we never wanted to be the "dreaded dragon lady" in the show office. Longtime exhibitors have probably met at least one. We wanted to be the kind of manager and secretary who make people feel welcome at the event and in the show office.

It's Personal

MY FAMILY HAS ALWAYS BEEN INVOLVED WITH HORSES. MY MOM had endurance horses when she was a teenager and then learned to ride English. She passed that knowledge on to my sister and

me and we expanded from there. I won a couple of 4-H classes at the county fair when I was 10.

At 17, I went to work for a reining horse trainer – and married him at 19. We trained horses together for some time. Then I went through the process of getting my non-pro card back. I showed my own horses in the open for five years during that time, waiting to become an amateur in AQHA. It paid off. I won a couple of year-end high-point awards in working cow horse and made the finals at the AQHA World Show twice.

Rhoda and I met because we were both showing in the same classes and helping out with the Colorado Reined Cowhorse Association. I don't think it was ever formal. Also, our husbands were both horse trainers and friends, and they spent time riding together. (For the record, mine is now a former spouse.) Rhoda ran the office at the first couple of CRCA futurities in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and I volunteered to help however I could. She put me to work! Our friendship has evolved over 20-some years.

The time that we spent volunteering educated us for our most recent venture. Our focus was to help create venues that welcomed great equine athletes to one location and united the cultures of reining and reined cow horse. Over a period of several years, we saw social cohesion and success at events like the Sagebrush Slide & Cowhorse Classic, and many other cow horse events as well.

In the past year, Rhoda and I have had the opportunity to manage and secretary four National Reining Horse Association-approved events, three of which offered AQHA reining and one show with AQHA ranch riding.

Rhoda and I have different strengths in our show management partnership. She's the outgoing one, not afraid to talk to anyone, so she's the one who attends meetings, calls people on the phone and makes most arrangements. I am very clerical. I hide behind my desk and do data entry. But Rhoda has had a great effect on me! Over the summer, I learned to get away from my desk and interact with people – and they appreciate it. I came out of my shell a bit (thus eliminating any *perception* of an office dragon lady).

It's a pleasure to be a part of something so specialized. We've been entrusted with the outcome of events that are the livelihood of some and the hobby of others. Rhoda and I agree that our No. 1 goal is to provide an atmosphere that is open, relaxed and inviting.

Call of Duty

IN 2015, THREE OF THE EVENTS WE MANAGED WERE PREVIOUSLY in the capable hands of Sandy Proctor, who after 40 years, officially retired in 2015. I have known Sandy as a show secretary for 20-plus years, but I started to know her as a person in the spring of 2016. Thinking of her as we talked on the phone, I pictured her starched blouses and ornate Navajo squash blos-

som necklace as she stood behind the counter taking entries and conversing with contestants.

When Rhoda and I arrived at Sandy's home for our first lesson and data download, we were welcomed into a home filled with indigenous treasures of the Southwest. Sandy and I had a common interest. It was easy to break the ice talking culture and art. Then we got down to business.

Sandy offered advice about each show and what we needed to prepare for, went through the essential software programs and shared whom would be our best consultants in times of stress or disorder. Most importantly, she said that she was only a phone call away. Not only that, Sandy volunteered to help at our first show.

But none of us realized the misfortune that lay in Sandy's path.

Just weeks prior to the first show, Miss Sandy was violently mugged in the grocery store parking lot where she had shopped for many years. Her ribs were broken, her teeth damaged, and she suffered extensive bruising. Despite her injuries, Sandy still made herself available to point us in the right direction when we needed it most.

Rhoda was confident in her management duties outside of

COURTESY OF JENNIFER BISHOP



Jennifer spent five years showing her own horse in the open so she could earn back her non-pro and amateur status. The show experience should be fun, she insists.

BETSY UNICH



Rhoda Rein partners with Jennifer Bishop to manage performance horse events in the Rocky Mountain region. They have complementary skills and a shared interest in cow horses.

the office, but my skills with the horse show software were still developing. Sandy answered my questions and came to our show to help take entries, ensuring that we kept up the first day. It was heartwarming to see the response from exhibitors, who were surprised to see her there. It was an occasion for hugs and good wishes. The respect and loyalty that she had earned from these people showed us the big shoes that we had to fill in the coming months.

Best Memory Files

SO MANY OF THE LESSONS WE LEARN, THE ONES THAT REALLY stick with us, are through the people we meet and the events that we experience firsthand. By far, the best show I ever attended was the NRCHA Snaffle Bit Futurity – every year that I ever went.

That event exudes tradition. It's where the legends in cow horse were created, and they're still there today.

Of course, the Snaffle Bit Futurity has changed and evolved over many years, but Reno is where I started to feel a connection to the cow horse culture. I'm not enamored by Hollywood stars, but when Teddy Robinson said "Hi" to me – and called me by my name – that meant something!

Thinking back on that, it reminds me how important it is to build relationships with exhibitors. I try to get out of the office on a regular basis. Interacting is not only fun, it's informative, and it works toward that goal of creating an open, relaxed and inviting environment.

When I said "Hello" to one non-pro, she took time to thank me for a great show and to comment that we provide a different vibe.

"Everyone on our team has shown horses," I told her. "We have all been the customer."

"The customer is always right!" she quipped with a laugh.

I light-heartedly responded by saying, "I've been a customer a lot. And I've been wrong a lot! But truthfully, my best experiences came when the person helping me was able to show me the correct answer in a respectful way."

We want exhibitors to be happy and to enjoy the show. I've learned what respect and kindness look like in practice through some great leadership examples.

One year at the Sandhills Slide in Broken Bow, Nebraska, show manager Connie Henrichs stalled us a long way from the arena – like, at the other end of the fairgrounds. We didn't complain, we just moved in. The next thing I knew, Connie and her husband, Dave, delivered to us full use of a donated Gator for the entire weekend. It's one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me at a horse show.

I also understand that putting on events is a big responsibility. That hit me hard some years ago when one of the exhibitors had a heart attack. He was in the middle of his reining pattern when he fell from his horse during a set of spins. I had to call his wife. I had to relay his medical information to the paramedics. I then went to the hospital along with three other people and waited. It wasn't long before they let us know that he didn't make it. I was involved in running the show and I was an officer of the board. I had met his wife and kids on a few occasions. It was so sad.

Along that same line, it's amazing to me how dedicated horse show staff can be. Before our biggest show, as Sandy was healing from the mugging incident, she tidied up the details that she had graciously agreed to take care of before the melee ensued. Then she went through with a "routine" surgery she had pre-scheduled.

When I called to check in with her a couple of days following surgery, I did not hear back. I was getting concerned – then Sandy called back. As I suspected, she'd had surgical complications. But from her bed at home, Sandy was once again offering to help in any way possible.

Sandy and I had one good conversation the day before the start of the show, and she sounded much stronger. And I was ready. What a relief, Sandy was healing and our team was able to handle the show with competency and skill.

Attitudes of Gratitude

WHETHER PAID OR VOLUNTEER, KNOWLEDGEABLE SHOW TEAMS are an integral piece to a successful event. We are thankful that modern technology allows exhibitors to enter and make stall reservations online. That way, we can handle the details of running a show more efficiently. But Rhoda and I realize that a personal touch is still what satisfies those who spend their time and money showing horses.

Exhibitors want a staff that is responsive and attentive. More than anything, they want to be heard. We try to listen to their views, not judge their opinions, and recognize the importance of their position. Ultimately, we try to communicate their concerns to the parties who can effectively manage an outcome. Acting as a facilitator is crucial throughout the duration of an event.

Many folks have said to me "Wow, what a thankless job!"

Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Every person that I help all day long says "Thank you." Some even bring gifts. We've received thank you cards, cookies, cupcakes and even a beautiful purple orchid. Gifts aren't necessary, but we welcome them nonetheless. We received these items because we took the time to listen or tried to go the extra mile to resolve an issue. Once, I just allowed a person to vent. Later that day, there was an apology for "going off," followed by a pan of brownies!

To know that people appreciate what we do is incentive to keep up the good work. Chocolate sustenance never hurts as a motivator either!

The days spent at a horse show interacting with exhibitors, owners, officials and spectators is a fulfilling time that pushes us to do our best. I want to connect with people and exceed their highest expectations.

It is a pleasure to congratulate the winners, but it's equally important to empathize with the exhibitors who will need better luck next time. After all, we've been there. We have felt the vulnerability. We know the hard work that goes into training ourselves and our horses, and the disappointment of not taking home a prize. I may not know exactly how to console an exhibitor in a time of loss, but I can assure them that I am glad to have shared the week with them – and that I sincerely look forward to seeing them at the next show.

Welcome to the office! 🐾

Jennifer Bishop is a partner in the show management company HorseShowPros LLC. She lives in Sedalia, Colorado. To comment on this article, send your email to aqhajrnl@aqha.org.



COURTESY OF JENNIFER BISHOP

Jennifer is comfortable handling entries and the essential record-keeping tasks, but over the past year she's come out from behind the desk.