

Rules for Safe Riding in Company

Think 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. Here are some tips on how to embrace the chaos and coax your best warm-up out of your horse even when conditions aren't ideal.

1. Leave some space. 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
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. 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. 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. Today might just not be a good day to show.
10. Wear your number. It's required by USEF rules, and it'll also help the ring steward keep track of any yahoos.

11. 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.)

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