
Education Committee

Grooming the Friesian Horse in Preparation for a Judging

By Laurie M. Kasperek, Education Committee

Like me, you've probably often wondered how best to groom your horse for his or her big day at the judging. How much hair are you allowed to remove? How much attention to details is required? Just how natural is "natural?"

This past January, the Friesian Horse Center in Drachten conducted a two-day clinic for the members of the Stallion Keuring tour. One of the sessions was a demonstration of the techniques used by the FPC to prepare young horses for shows and keurings. Sybren Minkema, an employee of the FPC and a certified FPS judge, illustrated the procedure by clipping and grooming one half of a young Friesian stallion, leaving the other half "au naturale" for the obvious comparison. The well-known trainer, Gerda Hakker of Vlederveen, Drent, also contributed extensive insight into the preparation of Friesian horses for showing during her recent visit to the United States. Piet Hoekstra, assistant-inspector of the Friesian Horse Studbook, states that the days of pulling the horse out of the field and bringing it to the judging are over (Phryso 1993). According to Hoekstra, some were still bringing ungroomed horses, expecting the judges to "see through all that."

Sybren begins all grooming sessions with a complete bath, being sure to remove any grit and grime that accumulates along the crest of the mane and tail bone. Some owners use a shampoo that is specifically designed to bring out the black hair color, but not everyone agrees with the use of this type of product. Gerda and her husband, Leen Hakker, have never accentuated their horse's black coats in this fashion, accepting the fact that there are varying degrees of black. According to Gerda, the manes, forelocks and tails of their horses are never brushed or combed except right before a show- too much hair is lost during the process. Additionally, it is not the practice in the Netherlands to cut bridle paths. Much of this hair is allowed to become part of the forelock, which in some horses is indeed magnificent! Both Sybren and Gerda would agree that finger-combing of the clean mane and tail is in order!

Sybren clips the horse of long, unwanted facial and body hair. This includes along the muzzle, under the chin, the throatlatch, the ears, the underside of the neck, the belly, around the sheath and the legs above the knee. If your horse has the wonderfully small curved ears that the judges like, you should clip the entire ear, both inside and out, to accentuate this desired feature. Never clip the inside of a large ear as this will make them look even larger. In this case, Sybren recommends clipping the outside of the ear and only evening-up the hair along the edges. Once clipping is completed, Sybren surprises those unfamiliar with the world of "showing in hand" by lighting a candle and using it to burn off any remaining offending hairs on the horse's face and body. As the hair ignites, Sybren snuffs it out with his other hand, brushing in the direction of the coat. If you are lucky enough to have a Friesian with a mustache, it is permissible to leave this very unique characteristic intact, as long as it is neat.

A little judicious use of black shoe polish is acceptable to Sybren to enhance the face, just as baby oil is fine to define the face, ears, and legs. Of course the oil may pick up dust so a wipe-down with a clean cloth is essential just prior to entering the show ring. Although Sybren is quick to point out that "one can't really fool the judge" you do want to show your horse to his/her best and emphasizing the best points are "part of the show." If you have a horse that is slow in descending his leg during the trot and has a lot of fetlock hair, you can minimize this perception by carefully clipping some of the front fetlock hair. The leg will "appear" to descend faster. Be careful- according to Sybren, this is the only amount of fetlock hair that should ever be touched and then only if necessary to a very trained eye.

One final note of advice from both Sybren and Gerda: If you have a horse with a small-refined head, chose a headstall of the finest proportions. This shows that wonderful-breed-typical head to advantage. If, on the otherhand your horse has a coarser head or a long face, choose the very best QUALITY headstall that you can afford to deflect attention.

Natural beauty does need a little help to show itself to its best, so get out the clippers and clipper oil and give your horse every possible advantage to strut his or her stuff for the judges!