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## Go Show

Fewer differences between NCHA and AQHA competitions make it easy for riders to be successful in both

By Lisa Munniksma

According to the NCHA, more than 96 percent of the horses competing in its events are registered Quarter Horses. If you're riding one of these horses, you have options outside of NCHA competition to expose your horse to the show arena, gain experience in a competitive cutting pen, and earn points with another organization. NCHA competition is often the first cutters think of for showing, but some AQHA events offer cutting, as well.

While the differences between NCHA cutting and AQHA cutting were obvious in the past, the playing field is more level today, says NCHA judge and AQHA specialty cutting judge Dell Bell: "There's not a huge difference in it anymore because the NCHA and the AQHA have kind of worked together these last four or five years."

That's not to say there's no difference whatsoever between the two. For NCHA competitors who are considering taking a horse to an AQHA show or two, there are some changes you should be prepared for.

## Judging

Lucky for all involved, AQHA uses NCHA or Canadian Cutting Horse Association rules for conducting and judging their cutting events. As a judge or a competitor, trying to remember one association's cutting dos and don'ts is difficult enough.

Before AQHA called upon specialized judges in events like cutting, officials sometimes had little experience in the arena in which they were judging. Dell points out that no matter how well-intentioned a judge is, if you've not ridden a cutting horse yourself and not gotten to know the nuances and the feel, it's difficult to accurately judge a class.

"I think there are a few people who can be all-around hands and do a good job of judging all of the events," he says. Overall, "when you read the rulebook, you get the rules down but you don't have the experience with the degree of difficulty, the run content, and the style. That's why AQHA went to specialized judges, because it's too hard."

Now that AQHA shows do use specialized judges, there is rarely a discrepancy between the officiating you'll get at an NCHA show versus what's offered at an AQHA show.

"When you go to the AQHA World Show today, it's judged like an NCHA major event. The AQHA has tried to make it the best show there is," says Dell.

This is important to competitors, he points out, because “you have to have some kind of consistency so you know what you should strive for.

“I think for the most part, we have enough cutting judges that almost anybody can feel confident about taking their horse to AQHA shows and getting judged fairly.”

And the AQHA is working to increase the number of specialized cutting judges on their rosters to keep up with the increasing demand for cutting at its shows. With more than 400 AQHA shows offering cutting now, the 32 specialized cutting judges and 11 AQHA All-Around judges who have an NCHA judging card have their hands full.

“Three hundred twenty (AQHA) judges are technically approved to judge cutting. They don’t see cutting as often as the specialized judges do. They don’t get to apply the rules very often,” says Alex Ross, AQHA executive director of judges. “We know the cutting horse exhibitors and owners want the most knowledgeable opinion they can get.”

It used to be only AAAA NCHA judges who were invited to apply for an AQHA specialized cutting judge card. The organization invited AAA NCHA judges in 2005 and now is opening it up to AA NCHA judges with more than 25 credits.

#### Arena Conditions

When you arrive on the show grounds of an all-around AQHA show, the first thing you’re likely to notice is the diversity of horses and riders there. You’ll see the hunter riders in their boots, breeches, and helmets and their horses with long legs and braided manes. You’ll find slow-lobing western pleasure folks with the silver on their saddles. You might even glimpse gaming riders decked out in neon colors that match their horse’s tack, from browband to bell boots.

When you see all of these people together in one place, you’ll realize that the show you’ve pulled up to hasn’t been designed just for cutters.

“When the shows are full shows, and the cutting’s put on with it, usually you’re in an arena unlike what’s usually used for a cutting pen,” says Dell.

Often, because you’re sharing a competition arena with other disciplines, the arena will be larger and the ground will be harder.

“Cutting’s the only class that wants deep ground. It’s pretty hard for them to find a comfort level that fits everybody,” says Dell.

In some places, the cattle and the help aren’t as plentiful. Senior horses may end up with rerun cattle and the help, well, might not be as helpful. These conditions aren’t universal, but cutting isn’t as strong in some regions as it is in others, and there is a learning curve to putting on a great cutting event.

“Any time the cattle are bad and the ground’s bad, it’s hard for a judge, because you’re not going to have the conditions that allow a run to develop and become great,” says Dell.

## Warm Up

At a cutting competition, the warm-up arena has a pretty even flow to it. Everyone just knows the drill. There are rarely riders going against the traffic except to do the occasional rollback.

Put five other disciplines in the warm-up arena, and you’ll need to be flexible in your routine. The reiners want to slide and spin their horses. The pleasure riders like to lunge. Then there are the pleasure driving people, taking up space with their carriages.

“With the AQHA, it’s much more difficult getting all of those different people in (the warm-up arena),” says Dell.

At the larger shows, each discipline will have their allotted time to practice.

“It helps keep everybody from getting in a wreck,” Dell says.

At a regular local show, though, you’ll likely have to share the space and learn to get along.

## Entries

“As a rule, there’s going to be a lot more entries in an NCHA show than an AQHA show. It’s going to be a longer day,” Dell says.

Having more people to compete against usually means having tougher competition, too. The NCHA Amateur class, for example, is a highly competitive division. In the AQHA, you’ll still get great riders and great horses, but you’re more likely to run into competitors who’ve switched to cutting from other disciplines.

“At the NCHA events, it’s a little more specialized. There’s a little bit of difference there,” says Dell.

There’s also a difference in the way you enter classes at an AQHA show, as the entry process tends to be more structured than some of the NCHA competitions. Upon filling out your paperwork and submitting payment to the show secretary, all exhibitors need to present a current AQHA membership card and a copy of your horse’s registration papers. This is similar to the new NCHA rule requiring the original or a copy of the NCHA membership card for the owner and the rider as well as horse registration papers, if the horse is registered.

AQHA membership can be purchased on the day of the show. Exhibitors qualifying for the amateur division can also purchase an amateur card that day to show in the AQHA amateur classes.

Some of the larger AQHA shows—the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, San Antonio Stock Show, and the National Western Stock Show, for example—require pre-registration and won't accept entries after a certain date.

“Some of the shows accept (class) entries at a higher fee if they didn't pre-enter. Most of the shows allow entry the day of,” says Hemphill.

Dual-approved competitions—those recognized by both NCHA and AQHA—run what Hemphill calls “a class within a class.” When you enter the arena for your NCHA \$10,000 Non-Pro ride, you may also be competing in the AQHA Amateur class: “That one run can stand for both organizations and both placings.”

Any horse being shown in AQHA competition will also receive points toward awards and World Show qualification. The points awarded are determined by the horse's placing in the class and the number of horses in the class:

- \* The winner in a class with three entries will receive a half of a point.
- \* The winner in a class with four or five entries will receive one point.
- \* The winner in a class with six to 10 entries will receive two points; second place gets one point.
- \* The scale continues to grow in five-entry increments. With each five-entry jump, one more class placing gets a point. The maximum is nine points awarded to the winner of a class with 45 or more entries.

## Turnout

Every style of riding brings its own style of dress and horse turnout.

“As far as tack and show outfits, I can remember when I first started going to the AQHA shows, you'd see people in their pleasure outfits and their silver saddles,” says Dell. “The people in the AQHA are more conscious about having silver and clean tack, pretty outfits and horses as slick as glass.”

Today, most cutting competitors opt for more working-like attire—whether that means wearing a plain felt hat or riding in a ranch-used saddle is up to personal preference.

Overall, subtleties make up the largest differences between competing in AQHA and NCHA events. It's feasible for a rider to make the transition between one and the other and to do well.

“I think the quality is much better at all levels,” says Dell.

That's one thing all cutters—no matter what competition they're at—strive for.

## SIDEBAR: AQHA Memberships

Whether purchased the day of the show or ahead of time, AQHA membership fees are:

\$35 per year for a regular membership

\$70 for three years of regular membership

\$400 for lifetime regular membership

\$40 per year for an amateur membership (or \$5 added to a regular one-year membership)

\$80 for three year of amateur membership (or \$10 added to a regular three-year membership)

\$15 per year for a youth membership (for those 18 years and younger of January 1 of that year)

\$35 for three years of youth membership

\$50 for lifetime youth membership