



# Coaching Youth Judging Teams

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## Introduction

Horse judging teams are developed and coached for competitions In FFA, 4-H, and collegiate contests as well as breed association contests. For the purpose of this guide we will focus on preparing a team to judge horses, more specifically Arabian horses, in local and national contests.

Youth horse judging competitions are usually held in conjunction with a fair or a horse show. Special classes with four horses each are created specifically for the judging contest. These classes are not classes in the show and their entrants do not show to win awards, but rather for the express purpose of exhibiting for the judging contest. Most contests have from four to ten classes. Some of these are in-hand (halter) classes while the other portion is performance classes. A panel of official judges places the contest classes. Of the classes judged, anywhere from two to five classes are designated as oral reasons classes (usually these reasons classes are equally divided between in-hand and performance). When contestants judge a reasons class, they should take notes on the class as they will later orally justify their placing to a reasons judge. Awards in judging contests are given based upon total points earned in placing the classes and giving oral reasons.

## Scoring

A perfect score for a placing class (placed the same as the officials) would be 50 points. When the official panel places the classes, they will put a series of "cuts" or point values on each pair of horses in the class. The size of the cut is determined by how close the pair of horses appear. A possible cut for a close placing could either be 1 or 2 points. A cut for a vastly different or mismatched pair of horses (one horse is obviously superior to the other) may be 5 or 6 points. For example, an official placing of one class might be:

1-2-3-4

Let's imagine in this class there were an obvious "top" horse, a closely placed middle pair of similar horses, and a fairly obvious "bottom" horse. Therefore, the cuts or points on the class were:

5-2-4

So the official would be listed as follows:

1-2-3-4

5-2-4

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Contestant A placed the class 2-1-3-4, and would receive a score of 45 (50-5) because the top pair of horses was switched.

Contestant B placed the class 1-3-2-4, and would receive a score of 48 (50-2) because the middle pair of horses was switched.

Contestant C placed the class 2-1-4-3, and would receive a score of 41 (50-(5+4)) because the top and bottom pairs of horses were switched.

Contestant D placed the class 1-4-2-3, and would receive a score of 40 (50- (4+2+4))

Notice that when contestant D placed the number 4 horse two positions out of place, he lost ten points total. Four points are lost for placing 4 over 3; and six points for placing 4 over 2 (the six points represents the cut between 2 and 3 plus the cut between 3 and 4). This illustrates the cumulative nature of cuts and how they can compound penalty points deducted from the possible 50 point class score. Reasons are also scored based upon a possible 50 point maximum. If a contestant "sees" absolutely everything the judge did and tells the judge this in a logical and easy to follow manner, the contestant could earn a possible score of 50. 50 point scores are extremely rare. The less the contestant is able to accurately tell about a class, the more points will be deducted from the possible 50. The more the contestant tells and the more he was able to "see," the higher the reasons score.

Once all the scores for judging and reasons are totaled, the contestants and teams with the highest scores win awards. Awards are given to high scores in in-hand judging, performance judging, reasons, and overall total scores. Awards are given to both individuals and teams. Usually these awards are given to the top five teams and top ten individuals.

## **What You (the Youth Leader) Need to Know**

How you intend to organize your judging program determines what you as the coach/organizer need to know. Some teams have one person acting as the coach and organizer; other teams have separate people holding these responsibilities.

If you are both coach and organizer, you will need to know everything! Most Arabian horse contests are judged according to class specifications in the United State Equestrian Federation (USEF) rule book, which may be found at [www.usef.org](http://www.usef.org). Additional rules may be found in the AHA handbook which is online at [ArabianHorses.org](http://ArabianHorses.org). Other breed associations will also issue any specific rules pertaining to judging their breed. Be sure to understand and make your team familiar with the rules by which the contest will be judged. In addition, you will be responsible for knowing judging procedures for

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the specific contest you have entered. Approved contest procedures developed by the National Horse Judging Team Coaches Association (NHJTCA) may be found at [www.nhjtca.org](http://www.nhjtca.org).

In brief, some procedures common to all contests are:

- All halter horses are judged as sound of wind, limb, and breeding
- All performance horses are judged as they appear
- All tack is considered legal
- Preprinted matter is not allowed to be used

In addition, coaches need to be aware of the meetings they should attend. Most contests offer the following meetings:

*Coaches Meeting-* At this meeting you receive judging packets and patterns for any applicable classes. This is the meeting for discussion any special needs or special rules which may be in effect for the contest. You may be asked to volunteer as a group leader or other contest official.

*Official Placings-* This meeting is usually held after the last set of reasons is given. The official judges or a representative will give the official placing of all the classes and the class cuts.

*Awards Banquet-* Depending on the size of the contest, this may be held immediately following the contest itself, the same evening as the contest, or the following morning.

## Forming a Team

AHA sponsored teams compete with either three or four members per team. Tabulation for awards is based upon three scores per team. This is done so teams with four members can drop the lowest score. Thus, it is to your benefit to form a team with four members.

## When to Start

Success in judging, like most things, comes after lots of time and work. Generally, the successful teams are those that begin practice or "workouts" early in the year. Workouts ideally should begin during January or February. Starting early also allows you to generate additional interest as the year progresses. This is particularly important during the first couple of years with a new team when you are still trying to get youth involved in the program. Kids often recruit their friends, but if you start too late additional participants will not have enough time to learn skills. In addition, many of the local 4-H and FFA clubs sponsor judging contests during the later part of the school year and these contests can be used as practice contests.

## How to Find Kids

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If you are forming a team sponsored by a club, use the club directory to inform members of the new activity. If you are forming a team to be sponsored by a region or multiple clubs, use the directory, training barns, 4-H, and FFA. When you have a list of names and contact information assembled, send an informational flyer. Consider this flyer as you would a piece of advertising: it should be fun, intriguing, and include a "call to action"- meaning tell the reader to do something. Include a return portion, phone number, and email for more information.

Word of mouth is a very good method with kids! Help participants maintain a high profile by taking them to shows where they can practice their judging skills, and be seen by other interested kids. Make sure you as the coach or organizer talk to these potential members directly to create interest. Typically, participation becomes increasingly self-perpetuating.

Consider age restrictions and considerations- Although many contests do not have a lower age limit, younger children should be carefully prepared for the amount of work and pressure involved in a contest. As well, there is typically an upper age limit at contests. Be sure to check rules for any contest you consider entering. AHA judging contest rules are in the AHA Handbook, which is online at [ArabianHorses.org/membership](http://ArabianHorses.org/membership).

## **Beginning Judging**

### **Judging In-Hand Classes**

Where and how do you start? A good beginning point is in-hand (halter) classes. Consider beginning with photos, which are valuable because they don't move or change, are plentiful (especially stallion photos), inexpensive, and you can even demonstrate on them by drawing.

Begin by teaching basic points of good conformation, conformational faults, balance, and breed ideals. Type and quality are important to establish at this stage. Providing your team members with the "ideal" will allow them to determine which horses most closely resemble this perfect Arabian horse. The AHA Youth Judging Guide is an excellent resource for teaching balance, conformation, and structure! Purchase it online at [ArabianHorses.org](http://ArabianHorses.org) under "Marketplace."

Next, progress very simply by presenting the team with a very dissimilar pair of horses: one very good and the other not so good. Begin calling their attention to the difference in horses by asking questions such as:

- Who has the most type?
- Who has the least type?
- Which horse has the shortest back?
- Can you tell who has the longest hip?

Remember to phrase your questions so the team always thinks comparatively.

Develop a systematic method of judging which the team can apply every time they judge. Have

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them begin with the "big picture" before focusing on specific points. For example, begin with overall balance before focusing on neck, shoulder, back, underline, hip. The best way to do this is to view horses from head to tail. This keeps notes- and eventually reasons- very orderly and easy to follow. At this beginning stage, expect the team to identify major differences and see the big picture. As they become more experienced they'll be capable of finding specific differences.

### **Performance Judging**

Performance classes are nearly impossible to judge using photos (although they can be useful in demonstrating headsets, length of rein, etc.). Videos are extremely helpful in preparing to judge performance classes, and most teams do the majority of their workouts this way. Videos allow for discussion and replay of classes which is very valuable in teaching a team to view and sort differences. Order your copy of the Arabian Horse Judging DVD online at [ArabianHorses.org/youth!](http://ArabianHorses.org/youth!)

Plan regular team trips to local shows so your team can practice judging live classes. Arabian shows can be found at [ArabianHorses.org](http://ArabianHorses.org) under "Competitions/ Event Calendar." Shows need not be exclusively Arabian shows, however, to be helpful in learning to identify and sort placements. Ideas for all-breed shows include 4-H, open USEF shows, Pony Club. Solicit a local trainer to hold a few classes for your team, too.

Basic types of classes such as Western Pleasure and English Pleasure are recommended starting points. In the beginning, encourage the team to simply find their favorite and least favorite horses in the ring. Do not allow them to consider disqualified or excused horses. Ask them why they chose each horse as the best or worst in the class, and require their answers to be comparative. Continue this procedure until the team as a whole is able to reliably choose the horses the coach also chooses as the best and worst.

Next have the team begin choosing the three best horses and the last place horse. At some smaller shows, this may be the entire class! This step allows the team to become comfortable in identifying and ranking a total of four horses.

### **Oral Reasons**

Reasons are without a doubt one of the most important parts of the judging experience. They can also be the most intimidating. Reasons should not be started immediately, as participants need to understand the classes they watch before they can present them accurately. Once a youth is comfortable with seeing the basics of a class, presenting oral reasons is less frightening.

Beginning the foundation for oral reasons can start with a group discussion. When judging in-hand classes, have each team member tell specifically why they chose one horse over another. The goal at this point is simply correct identification of desirable and undesirable points. For example, a long tail does not justify a high placement. A more balanced, higher quality horse might earn a high placement. Make sure participants can comfortably discuss their placings in their two horse halter classes without

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using slang terms. For performance classes, have them explain the class as it progresses and what each horse did well or poorly. Again, emphasize their use of comparative terms.

## **Intermediate Judging**

### **Judging In-Hand Classes**

When a team is able to compare two horses successfully, it is time to judge full classes. Develop a systematic procedure for sorting horses in a given class. This could be a list of questions, group of points to view on each horse, or a simple scoring system. Team members should look for specific points on horses such as length and shape of neck, length of back, angle of shoulder, etc. The team of course should be able to recognize an obvious top horse and obvious bottom horse, and this will help them progress to looking at the class in terms of pairs. This means establishing a top pair, middle pair, and bottom pair. Have them find positive attributes in one horse that are not evident in the other horse in that pair. In addition, now is the time to develop a system for taking notes. The more complete the notes are, the easier it will be to remember the class and consequently the better the reasons. Viewing the class notes should easily reveal if the placing matches.

### **Performance Judging**

Once the team can identify the top and bottom horses in a larger class, a full class of performance horses can be judged. Choose four horses out of each class for the team to judge. Selecting easily identifiable horses helps team members to locate "their" horses easily. Look for brightly dressed riders, unusual horse coat color, or distinguishing markings. Official placings for these four horses can come from you or the judge in the ring (note the official judge's placing may vary based on what he or she sees- which will vary from what you see from the stands). Have the team place and take notes on these classes. Remind the team to avoid concentrating too much on writing extensive notes during the class- the team needs to watch the class to avoid missing occurrences! Notes can be expanded following the class. They should approximate the same format as halter classes and follow the progression of the class, all gaits, both directions of the ring, overall transitions, and the back.

## **Oral Reasons - Get Started**

The team should now be ready to give a full set of oral reasons on their classes! Team members have the opportunity to earn 50 points per set of oral reasons in a contest. Contestants are allowed two minutes per set of reasons, which is ample time to describe a full class.

### **Grading and Scoring Reasons**

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Reasons scores are to be reflective of organization, relevancy, accuracy, terminology and presentation of reasons, regardless of the student's placing of the class. A bad placing must not automatically result in a low reasons score- students must be allowed the opportunity to "outtalk" their placing score. If students see the differences in the horses and reflect those differences accurately in their reasons, they must not be penalized on the reasons score because their emphasis for placing the horses was different than the official judges. Placing scores will adequately reflect incorrect emphasis in placing.

### Scoring Oral Reasons

SCORE	COMMENTS
0	No Show
20	Poor – shows up, limited preparation or organization, weak delivery
25-30	Fair – fair delivery and organization, relatively accurate; excessively long or too short
31-35	Average – organized and presented in a logical manner, may be weak in terminology, but accurate
36-40	Good – good presentation, accurate terminology, may have a few weak points, generally good
41-45	Very good – should be complete, use of accurate terms and descriptive terminology to compare each pair; well presented
45-50	Excellent - must be complete, organized, well presented, accurate and delivered effectively.

### Reasons Outline

Reasons should be split into a top pair, middle pair, and bottom pair. The following outline will present a clear and logical system.

Class Placement 1-2-3-4 Name of Class and Placement

#### Top Pair

1. Reason for placing 1 over 2
2. Grant(s) of 2 over 1

#### Middle Pair

1. Reasons for placing 2 over 3
2. Grant(s) of 3 over 2

#### Bottom Pair

1. Reasons for placing 3 over 4
2. Grant(s) of 4 over 3

Closing statement of class placing

#### Detailed oral reasons outline

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Below is an example outline for a simple set of clear, concise oral reasons.

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I placed this class of (Breed) (sex or age group) \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_.

I placed (1st place horse) over (2nd place horse) because (describe 1st place horse's strong points in comparative terms-compare to 2nd place horse).

However, I grant (2nd place horse) (give a point in which the 2nd place horse was stronger than the 1st place horse-use comparative terms).

(Transition)

I placed (2nd place horse) over (3rd place horse) because (describe 2nd place horse's strong points comparing it to 3rd place horse).

However, I grant (3rd place horse) (give a point in which the 3rd place horse was stronger than the 1st place horse-use comparative terms).

(Transition)

I placed (3rd place horse) over (4th place horse) because (describe 3rd place horse's strong points in comparison to 4th place horse).

However, I grant (4th place horse) (give a point in which the 4th place horse was stronger than the 3rd place horse).

(Transition)

For these reasons, I placed this class \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_.

Reasons are scored on five major characteristics: organization, relevancy, accuracy, terminology, and

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presentation.

- Organization - Styles of reasons will vary with individual personalities and coaching methods, but all reasons should be well organized and systematic. The basic approach is the comparison of animals in three pairs; the top pair, the middle pair and the bottom pair. Other additions will be included and are perfectly acceptable as long as the basic organization is followed. However, reasons should not consist of a simple description of each animal. The focus should be on why one animal in a pair was placed over the other animal in that pair.
- Relevancy - Reasons should reflect the actual differences in the pair and should consist primarily of those points of comparison that were significant in the placing of the pair. Use of comparative or descriptive reasons that are irrelevant or unimportant in the placing of the pair are discouraged and should be scored lower. Judges should be alert for the so-called "canned" reasons that may sound good but in fact do not fit the particular pair or class.
- Accuracy - Truth is the primary consideration in scoring reasons. Students should be credited for accurate statements regardless of how the horses may be placed. Errors of omission are to be considered when the student leaves out something important, but inaccurate statements are considered the major fault in a set of reasons. A complete and accurate set of reasons should receive a high score, even when the student's placings differ from official placings. Official judges are cautioned to listen carefully for accuracy and should not penalize the reasons score simply because the student's placing is different from the official placing. It is entirely possible for a student to receive a high reasons score with a low placing score.
- Terminology - Some emphasis should be placed on use of terms commonly used to discuss horses or performances. Terminology will vary among students, but it should reflect that terminology commonly used by horsemen. Major emphasis should be placed on comparative rather than descriptive terminology. However, descriptive terminology can be used to a limited extent in the opening statements and to describe faults.
- Presentation - Oral reasons should be presented in a poised, confident, convincing manner, but they should never convey arrogance. Loud, boisterous, arrogant delivery is not desirable and should be penalized. Likewise, shy, timid, unconvincing presentations should not receive the highest scores. Reasons should be presented in a relaxed, conversational manner. The presentation should not contain lengthy pauses and must be delivered within 2 minutes. Speaking manner will vary, but all students should use correct English. Oral reasons should be

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grammatically correct with proper pronunciation and enunciation of words and syllables. While good presentation is important, reasons judges are cautioned that this is not a contest of oratory at the expense of accuracy, relevancy, organization and terminology used in discussing a particular class of horses.

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Terms used to describe horses are very important, and the Arabian Youth Judging Guide has an extensive listing of terms. Purchase your copy from [ArabianHorses.org](http://ArabianHorses.org). In addition, encourage team members to develop their own terms. These terms should not be slang and must be concise descriptions.

The logical order for halter reasons begins with general points, and progresses to specific details. Specifics should be discussed as the horse stands- that is, from head to tail and then across the underpinnings (legs and structure). Some obvious identifying characteristics should also be included such as color, markings, and genders.

Allow team members to initially use their notes during reasons. This allows them to build confidence and learn the basic flow of reasons without worrying about memorization. Emphasize that reasons must be reflective of the class judged. "Canned" sets, or generic sets which are not specific to the actual class judged, are neither truthful nor accurate; they should be strongly discouraged. Writing out a complete set of reasons should also be discouraged. Repetition should be avoided as it is not accurate in many cases- most horses are placed differently because they have different strong and weak points when compared to others.

It is very important to begin team members' experience with oral reasons correctly! Ensure the team starts and continues in an organized fashion. Bad habits or a poor or nervous attitude toward reasons can be particularly difficult to overcome. AHA offers further details on oral reasons in the Youth Judging Guide.

Ultimately, an intermediate team should comfortably give reasons on both in-hand and performance classes. A comfort level with a variety of terms and a relaxed attitude are necessary. The only way to achieve this is through giving many, many sets of reasons.

## **Advanced Judging**

### **In-Hand Judging**

If you haven't already, it is time to judge real live horses! If you have the opportunity to judge classes set up for your team, do so in the same order and format as in a judging contest: side view first, the front view, and back view. Then judge them on the move from the front and back views (and possibly side). Follow up with a close inspection, three-quarters view, and side view again while participants mark their final placing.

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The team should be more sophisticated by this time, and more specifics should be evident when evaluating horses. This includes length of cannon bone, shoulder to pastern angle correlation, width eye to eye, etc. Personal preferences will be more apparent but if accurate and based on valid criteria, should not necessarily be discouraged.

Work with the team on recognizing the "type of class" they are viewing. Is it a two-pair class, an obvious top horse/ close middle pair/ bottom horse class? Discuss the differences between an unsoundness and a blemish. A "Which is Worse" quiz can be helpful, as it helps explain structure and its impact on functionality. For example: Which is worse, being calf kneed or over at the knees; toeing in or toeing out; straight legged or sickle-hocked?

### **Performance Judging**

In the area of advanced performance judging fall the more intricate, specialized classes such as Equitation, Pleasure Driving, and individual work classes. In these classes, as with the in-hand classes, the team should be gaining sophistication. They should think more along the lines of degrees of motion rather than just whether a horse can trot or not. More considerations specific to certain classes should be used, such as impulsion and elevation in an English horse.

### **Reasons**

Advanced reasons are the most difficult to perfect but the most rewarding to listen to. They should always include the obvious information such as color, sex, and markings. Team members should be capable of clearly detailing the layout of the class (top pair/ bottom pair, top horse/bottom horse class), and discuss different criteria used to arrive at the placing. It is important to paint a vivid picture of the class to the extent that even someone who hadn't seen the class could identify it among other classes on a videotape!

Keep in mind that the vast majority of team members will not give advanced sets in the first year of judging. Do not push the team into advanced reasons before they are truly comfortable giving intermediate level reasons.

### **Workout Exercises**

Below are possible exercises for improving judging and reasons skills.

#### **In-Hand**

As was discussed in Beginning In-Hand judging, a quiz of important halter horse points can be developed. This might include:

Which horse has the most type?

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Which horse is the best balanced?

Which horse is the most structurally correct?

Questions should become progressively detailed according to appropriate judging level. Quizzes such as this foster systematic, objective judging, and encourage good notes. Use this as a homework exercise and have team members bring their answers and horse photos to you for review.

### **Performance**

Familiarize the team with the judging criteria and class specifications for the many different possible performance classes. This too can be presented as a quiz, or class discussion.

### **Reasons**

Practice, practice, practice! Many exercises are used to help team members improve reasons. Have participants give reasons in the mirror, record them on a video camera, give them to each other, give them to the wall, and so on. Focus is critical when giving reasons, so build concentration by having them give reasons to each other- at the same time. Do this either one on one, in a circle, or all facing a wall together. Again, the best exercise for giving reasons is simply to give reasons.

### **If You Need More Help...**

If this is your first judging team, you may feel you need more help than is provided here! Below are some additional resources you may find helpful.

#### **National Horse Judging Team Coaches Association (NHJTCA)**

The NHJTCA, as its name implies, is a group which focuses on and supports horse judging coaches. This organization is a valuable resource for all coaches, from beginner to advanced. The NHJTCA also establishes contest rules which are commonly followed at horse judging competitions. Visit the NHJTCA website at [www.nhjtca.org](http://www.nhjtca.org).

#### **Reference Material**

The Arabian Horse Judging DVD features footage filmed at the 2003 Arabian Horse Judging Contest. Navigate easily through ten classes of in-hand and performance. Choose to view official placings, cuts, and sample sets of oral reasons for each class. Order it from [ArabianHorses.org/youth](http://ArabianHorses.org/youth)! AHA has two guide books for sale through [ArabianHorses.org](http://ArabianHorses.org) under "Marketplace." The Arabian Youth Judging Guide provides an extensive look at preparing for youth horse judging competitions, including judging basics, structure, reasons, and judging terms. The Arabian Horse Type booklet details classic

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Arabian characteristics.

Other critical reference materials available are rule books. USEF makes their current rules available online at [www.usef.org](http://www.usef.org). These rules cover class specifications and judging procedures. AHA produces a handbook, online at [ArabianHorses.org](http://ArabianHorses.org), which may include additional information not necessarily covered in the USEF handbook.

### **Reference People**

Finding people with judging team experience can sometimes be a challenge. Many 4-H and FFA clubs have judging teams, and these coaches can be of great assistance in helping your team get started. Check with a local agricultural college or university, which may have a judging team. Members of these collegiate teams are especially helpful because they are currently competing in judging and can give a fresh perspective in judging. While some of these people may have experience judging something other than horses, their input can still be very valuable, and you can adapt the style accordingly for horses. Seeking out experienced help is especially important when preparing for the stylized presentation of oral reasons.

Finding help with the judging itself is often somewhat easier. Trainers, even if they are not carded judges, are good sources for technical help. They constantly evaluate their horses and must have a good eye for a horse to be successful. Judges are obviously among the most desirable sources for help, as they can give a perspective on judging systems and note-taking. Be sure your team is advanced enough to understand the trainers and judges and take full advantage of their time.

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