



Understanding Green Hunter Incentive Stake Scoring

Numerical scoring is only part of the strategy that judges use to rank and place a class.



Top: Tom Brennan judging the US Pony Finals with Julie Winkel

Center: One of Tom Brennan's judge's cards

The USHJA Green Hunter Incentive Program has infused the Hunter sections with energy, excitement and money. Since its inception in 2013, the program has doubled in size from 271 horses to 568 horses in 2018, debuted five regional championships this year, and paid out a whopping \$2,369,887.

With so much money and prestige at stake, it's incumbent on all of us to understand and respect the program enough to get it right—especially those of us who judge these classes.

The format of the program is ideal: Enrolled horses may enter the USHJA Green Hunter Incentive Stake class at any horse show where it's offered, competing to win money and qualify for the Platinum Performance/USHJA Green Hunter Incentive Championship in Kentucky each August. The Incentive Stake class is usually held concurrently with one of the classes a Green Hunter horse would already be doing. This option is allowed when the stake class

is run in the same ring, over the same course of jumps, and in front of the same judge(s) as the Green Hunter section or Conformation section. This structure allows the horse to compete for more money in the stake class without jumping any more jumps. From a judging perspective, the one round that a horse actually does is considered for prizes on two judges' cards—the section class as well as the stake.

Typically, a horse performs and receives a score—let's say an 85. This score is applied to both cards the judge is holding: the Green overfences class and the USHJA Green Hunter Incentive Stake. Herein lies the potential to make a mistake. If the Incentive Stake includes more than one section of Green Hunters (3' and 3'3", for example) we risk the integrity of the results by simply carrying over the same score from one judge's card to the other. In other words, we occasionally get it wrong.

This isn't a frequent problem, but we need to educate exhibitors and judges about the danger—and the solution.

For example, I judged a major horse show this past summer with a large number of Green Hunters, and there were about 25 horses in each of the 3' and 3'3" Green Working Hunter sections. A USHJA Green Hunter Incentive Stake class was offered to enrolled horses in both sections. Of these 50 or so horses, about 12 were participating in the stake.

By the time the 3' horses had completed their class, I'd already seen seven horses on the Green Hunter Incentive Stake card. Scoring is always relative to the rest of the class, so therefore, those seven scores were inherently related to the other horses in their section.

As I made my way through the 3'3" Green Hunter section that came next, I noticed a problem developing. The 3'3" horses had much more quality and were much more competitive. My scores were curving lower. It was becoming harder to get high scores because the competition was strong, whereas the 3' horses that had

We must get the order right as we see it from our chairs on that day.

gone earlier were easily using the upper register of scores because there was less competition in their section.

I had a pit in my stomach as my final 3'3" horse completed its Incentive Stake round. The horse had performed well enough to win the USHJA Incentive Stake class (against the other 11 horses entered) but only well enough to be fourth in its 3'3" Green Hunter section class (against the other 24 horses entered). In order to win the Incentive Stake class, I had to give it a score higher than 86. In order to be fourth in the 3'3" Green section, I had to give it a score of exactly 85.

A moment later, the confused announcer sent out over the PA the news that one 3'3" Green Hunter had received not one, but **two** scores for his single performance. I could hear the groan come from everyone in earshot—exhibitors, trainers and managers alike.

Kidding aside, I'd decided to score the round an 87 in the Incentive Stake and an 85 in the 3'3" Green class. The horror!

The most important thing to remember is that while judges may seem responsible for many tasks, they only have one role that can never be compromised: **We must get the order right as we see it from our chairs on that day.**

Although that horse performed one round, it was competing in two different classes. The significance of a horse's numerical score pales in comparison to the importance of its placing.

If I had simply carried the same score onto both cards, it would have allowed horses who are not even entered in the USHJA Green Hunter Incentive Stake to influence the results of that stake class.

That is unacceptable.

You would never want the results of the Junior Hunters to be determined by horses competing in the Regular Conformation section. Judges need to compare trip to trip in the Green Hunter classes. The USHJA Green Hunter Incentive stake should be judged separately.

As this program continues to grow and invigorate our sport, we continue to educate ourselves, our clients, owners and judges about what is and isn't important. While scores can be exhibitor-friendly and exciting for spectators, they must never handicap a judge from getting the order right. The numerical scoring system is

designed to compare horses to each other within one class. The scores are not comparable to a standard. An 85 one day is not an 85 the next day. An 85 in the Children's Hunters is not an 85 in the Junior Hunters. Personally, I rarely use scores at all if not required to do so.

Judging can be a hard task—tough travel, holding multiple cards at times, dealing with weather, long hours, poor nutrition, etc. Giving one round two very different scores only makes it harder and uncomfortable to explain. When appropriate, though, it's the fairest process for the trainers, riders and owners. If you're seeking comfort, judging isn't for you.

An apprentice judge recently asked me what the hardest part of judging is for me. We have to stand out on a ledge and call it like we see it. We have to judge each round against the other rounds in that particular class—not the class before. We have to be willing to explain ourselves if that's what it takes to get it right.

We owe that to our USHJA Green Hunter Incentive program, our exhibitors and our licenses. So, yes, one round did get two scores—and it should, if that's what it takes to get the order right.

The USHJA Green Hunter Incentive Program is one of the most popular programs in the Hunters, and it needs to be judged correctly. 

Tom Brennan, of Charles Town, West Virginia, owns and operates Vineyard Haven Farm with his wife Tracy Brennan. He is a USHJA and USEF Board of Directors member, is in the USHJA Hunter Working Group and is also a member of the USHJA International Hunter Derby & Incentive Task Force, the USEF National Hunter Committee and the USEF National Breeds and Disciplines Council. He's a USEF R-rated judge and has presided over such shows as the USHJA Green Hunter Incentive Championship and the USHJA International Hunter Derby Championship (Kentucky), Aiken (South Carolina), I Love New York, the Oregon High Desert Classic, Blowing Rock (North Carolina), the USEF Pony Finals and the New England Equitation Championships. As an active competitor, Brennan has shown and trained horses in the USHJA Green Hunter Incentive and USHJA International Hunter Derby Championships, the ASPCA Maclay Regionals and the East Coast Fall indoor shows. He has also commented for the USHJA International Hunter Derby Championships, the WCHR Professional Finals and the Dover Saddlery/USEF Medal Finals.



Tom Brennan, right, with Danny Robertshaw

TRICIA BOOKER