

Dear USHJA Members,

This week I had the opportunity to commentate for the USEF Network during the Pre-Green Incentive and International Hunter Derby Championships. I could not have been more impressed by these two events held at the Kentucky Horse Park; from top to bottom each was thoroughly organized and exciting. Both Championships garnered huge support from participants and exhibitors. Everyone wanted to see if their favorite horse would prevail.

The formats for the Championships were smooth and understandable. Small changes to the Pre-Green and Derby schedules and qualifying rounds made it easier for judges and exhibitors alike to do their jobs. I have to tip my hat to Colleen McQuay and Ron Danta for continuing to improve their respective programs. The results were clear this year – higher quality, more prize money, and a palpable enthusiasm in the air. The entire week was a celebration of hunters. The Pre-Green horses showed a glimpse of the future and the Derby horses exhibited the culmination of hard work and calculated horsemanship. Simply put, these Championships make our sport better.

In my role as commentator, I felt dual responsibilities to the viewer. First, I wanted to describe the Championships in a manner that made viewers feel they were in attendance themselves. Second, I needed to explain how I would handle each horse's trip if I were judging. Danny Robertshaw, my co-commentator this year, and I kept reminding ourselves the typical viewer has probably never competed in an International Derby or judged a quality Pre-Green class.

I decided to focus on the components of rounds that, in my opinion, contributed to a horse's score going up or down. I stressed attributes that may be less obvious than a dropped rail or missed lead change – I hoped to leave the viewer with a better sense of movement, expression, scope, showmanship (including attire and turn out), and quality. These are some areas that horses earn bonus points in my eye when looking at a round as a whole. I wanted viewers to find ways to give horses acclaim and commendation in addition to, if not rather than, critique and focus on their limitations. There is a good side to the differences in opinion that we see in judge's scores. We have qualified, professional, and focused people in the judge's booth. We can learn from different scores – whether you agree or not, you can gain a perspective of what someone who has dedicated their lives to horses thinks about one round – one snapshot in time.

Finally, I was awestruck at the level our American hunter riders have ascended to. As participants and fans of this sport, you have a unique opportunity to learn from the best we have to offer. I encourage you to make the effort to come here and see first-hand. If you can, participate... it does not matter if you are an owner, exhibitor, or spectator. I guarantee you will go home inspired if you allow yourself to look around. Maybe you will see a groom take the extra moment to perfect a checker-board. Maybe you will see Johnny Barker effortlessly pilot a green mare – with class and without fanfare. Maybe you will see Susie Schoellkopf pass out flyers remembering a close friend we lost too soon. Maybe you will see Liza Boyd loosen Brunello's girth the moment they get through the out-gate. Maybe you will join Bill Rube as he unveils an exhibit in the Wheeler Museum at the USHJA offices. Whatever you see, I promise you can learn from it and enjoy it – I did.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tom Brennan".

Tom Brennan