



Addressing Unintended Consequences For Green Hunters

The trainer sees flaws in the new USEF rules about green hunters—but show managers can still avoid them if they act quickly.

BY TOM BRENNAN
PHOTO BY MOLLIE BAILEY

It's no secret that I have concerns about changes that are currently going into effect in our pre-green and green working hunter divisions. I value tradition, presentation and a predictable product for horse owners. For me, changing the names of these divisions weakens and undermines long-standing brand identity while creating confusion.

However, it's important to remember all of these frustrations will pass. We will get used to jogging pre-green horses; we will get used to combining every division if need be; we will get used to making mistakes because we forgot to check the schedule; we will get used to being really, really clear on our braiding boards; yes we will even get used to calling every single division on Wednesday "green hunter." For all I know this could end up being the best thing for hunters since cotton ear balls! The fact is we just won't know for a long time.

The author believes that trainers—not the rulebook—should determine the strategy for bringing along a horse.

In the meantime, we have a responsibility to work together and make the most of what we have. We owe at least that much to our owners, the clients who have bought horses and dedicated money, time and energy into developing and promoting horses in training.

When I review new rules and program proposals, I think about the industry serving the sport, not the other way around. The shows, governance groups, rules, etc., exist to advance our sport. We must resist any trend where the sport is required to adapt to serve the benefit of the industry. If those trends survive a healthy

criticism and challenge, then they deserve a chance.

The changes that began on Dec. 1 will dramatically affect our industry. They will dictate new training strategies, revolutionize seasonal show plans and manipulate what we value when purchasing horses. Some of us will thrive in

this new landscape, while some of us will long for the comfort of the past. Most importantly, we must preserve the integrity of our hunter sport throughout this industry change.

Reinstatement And Fair Play

The green working division was created as an avenue for inexperienced horses to be developed to their fullest potential while being judged against horses of like backgrounds and experience for one-year segments (e.g., first year green, second year green). The central idea was that in order for fair play to exist, horses of comparable proficiency are to be held to the

same standards. As these divisions grew in popularity and esteem, they became the most coveted championships among professionals.

The major shows that horses must qualify for highlighted the green working divisions. Points were carefully accrued and monitored by professionals and owners to make sure horses were qualified. New competition years begin on Dec. 1. This gave horses a finite amount of time to be put through the motions in their respective division while qualifying. In particular, it was Dec. 1 until spring for Devon (Pa.); for indoors it was Dec. 1 until late

met a list of criteria, most notably not having shown more than a few times in the division (preventing a horse from gaining significant unfair experience). Admittedly, this was a major headache for staff, owners and trainers. However, it was an example of the industry serving the sport the way it should.

Beginning with the 2017 competition year, the reinstatement process is extinct, and this will have unintended consequences. Horses will be granted four opportunities to show in the 3'6" green hunter (formerly first year green) before their eligibility is restricted solely

to that section.

At any time they can go back to the 3'3" green hunter (formerly 3'3" pre-green) until their fifth competition at 3'6".

Most alarmingly, this creates an unbalanced playing field. Without the reinstatement procedure, horses maintain their points in the green hunter sections until the end of

the competition year in which they compete the fifth time. As it stands now, this provides the opportunity for point accumulation towards qualifying before the competition year has even begun.

Effectively, the qualifying periods for 3'6" green hunter and green conformation sections have changed from being the same for every horse to being different for every horse. Instead of having an exact start and end date, those qualifying periods will only have identifiable end dates. This means horses can have vastly different experience levels by the time they arrive at the most important competitions of their careers.

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summer. Most importantly, it was the same for every horse in the country in any given division.

The new rules (found largely but not entirely in HU 103) cover a lot of ground and encompass wide ranging reforms including acceptance of previous jumper experience. They also contain one key change that is seemingly a godsend for the office staff at the U.S. Equestrian Federation. The newly minted green hunter sections eliminate the need for a reinstatement process. Reinstatement was the method by which a horse's eligibility to compete in sections that are restricted by experience could be restored for a future competition year provided it

► **Green Hunters, Then And Now: A Hypothetical Comparison**

OLD SYSTEM

NEW SYSTEM

**FIRST
COMPETITION
YEAR**

- In December, purchase a horse who had not jumped higher than 3' in competition.
- In the winter and spring, show in 3' or 3'3" pre-green divisions.
- Attempt the first year green hunters twice, then decide the horse isn't ready.
- Apply for green reinstatement, and USEF identifies the first year green points as bad.
- Complete the year in the pre-green division and participate in the USHJA Pre-Green Incentive Championships in August.
- Compete at Pennsylvania National in the pre-green division.

- In December, purchase a horse currently competing in 1.40-meter junior jumpers who has hunter potential.
- In winter and spring, show in 3' green hunter division.
- Between April 1 and Aug. 1, show four times in 3'6" green hunter division. Horse feels prepared due to several years of show experience in the jumper ring, but decide it's not beneficial to stay at this level at this time.
- Step down and complete the year in the 3'3" green hunters. Without reinstatement 3'6" green hunter points are not identified as bad with the USEF. Participate in the USHJA Pre-Green Hunter 3'3" Incentive Championships in August.
- Compete at Pennsylvania National in the 3'3" green hunter division.

**SECOND
COMPETITION
YEAR**

- Dec. 1, begin to show in first year green division.
- Over four months, earn points toward qualifying for Devon (Pa.).
- Continue showing through spring and summer.
- Attempt a USHJA International Hunter Derby, decide the horse isn't ready to be a regular contender, but will do more as the career progresses.
- Over approximately eight months, earn points toward qualifying for fall indoor circuit against horses with similar experience since Dec. 1.

- Dec. 1, begin to show in the 3'6" green hunter division again.
- Already have points from four shows toward qualifying for Devon.
- Begin competing in USHJA International Hunter Derbies, which accelerates qualification for fall indoor horse shows.
- Around eight months, earn points to qualify for fall indoor circuit against horses with potentially very different experiences.

Show Managers Can Fix It

With a prejudicial playing field, how will we continue to support these divisions? Will we want to? How do we explain to the owners and young professionals that unless you buck the system you may not qualify? How do you explain that unless you buy a green hunter, rather than a green horse, you may find yourselves behind the other horses in your *experience-based division*. Worse, if we start to actively avoid green horses, who will develop them? Where will they go? Where will they come from? What about the breeders?

[This can be cumbersome the first time you think about it, so I have attached two examples of hypothetical showing experiences. The first shows a traditional track to major shows, and the second shows a modern track to major shows.]

The good news? I believe we have ways of correcting these mistakes through discussion and modifications to the rules. In fact, it is one of the reasons our affiliate organization, the U.S. Hunter Jumper Association, exists. The USHJA is just starting to hit its stride with streamlined functions and program pipelines. Members have voices, and they are starting to use them and participate. The process, though, is deliberately slow and cumbersome to avoid excessive or hasty changes.

The better news? Managers can fix this right now! They are in a time crunch if they want to get ahead of it for 2017, but it can be done. I strongly recommend that managers of horse shows that exercise GR 915 & HU 196 in order to limit their entries, especially Devon, amend their qualifying periods for green hunter and green conformation sections (they have the ability to do so) within their prize lists to begin with Dec. 1 of the previous calendar year. Doing so will counter the unintended ability for exhibitors to access up to four additional shows' worth of points from the preceding competition year between the beginning of April and the end of July.

Additionally, it motivates owners and trainers to keep advancing

their horses up the training ladder (see sidebar). In the old system we would buy a good green horse whenever we could get our hands on one. The green horse would be developed on its own schedule. Without correction, the problem I have outlined forces owners and trainers to have their horses by April of the previous competition year so as to access four shows of points. I hope we get ahead of this sooner rather than later. The industry has an opportunity to help the sport get through this transitional period. Let's take advantage of that.

Keep the experience-based divisions as fair as possible. Let exhibitors, not our rulebook, decide their own strategy to develop their horses. Although I ultimately opposed it, I was involved in three years of discussions around this reorganization, and I do not believe anyone intended to force our hand this way. ☺



TOM BRENNAN

Tom Brennan, Charles Town, W.Va., is a professional hunter rider at Tony Workman's

Winter Hill Farm in Hillsboro, Va., who has won numerous tricolors during the fall indoor horse show circuit. In addition to holding an R judge's card in hunters and equitation, he sits on the USHJA Hunter Working Group, USHJA board of directors, USEF National Hunter Committee and has served on the USHJA International Hunter Derby Committee.

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