

Showtime

My mom and I arrived at the barn a little after eight, the show had just started. Our first riders aren't going for about another hour, leaving me plenty of time to get settled in and have a quick schooling session with Jack. I like having only a light practice or sometimes not doing one at all on show days. There is a thing with equestrians that we call "show anxiety," where you can be the best rider in the world but as soon as show day arrives and you step into the show ring and you know the judge is watching, you completely forget everything, what a posting diagonal is, what a canter lead is, and which fence you are supposed to jump next. Basically you forget how to ride. When I heard people mention it, I thought it was more of an excuse for not riding well. I didn't know it was actually a thing, until I realized I have a textbook case of it, which is why I don't like to ride too much before showing. It keeps my nerves in check.

What a great morning it turned out to be for our beginner riders! They were showing in the lower ring. They brought home some impressive ribbons, with one of our girls even winning the Champion Ribbon in the canter cross rails class. I always enjoy watching our other riders, especially the younger ones, and getting to be part of their journey from walk-trotters to horse owners themselves.

Now that they have finished, it is time to move up to the big show ring where Hannah and Fender are getting ready to start their division, Hopeful Hunter 18".

"You got this." I say to Hannah. I give her a last-minute confidence check and go to stand next to our trainer to watch her round. Fender is an old pro at horse showing. He makes it look easy, and he takes good care of his rider. Their team has been fun to watch grow together these past couple of months.

"Wow! That was really awesome, you guys."

"Really? He didn't look like he was going too fast?" Hannah asks, winded from her ride. She always thinks he is going too fast, when honestly it usually looks like he's hardly moving. But like Jack, Fender is a big, powerful Thoroughbred, so even the slightest change in gait makes you think they are off to the races.

I chuckle a little bit before I respond. "OMG no. You looked great, and your outside line, by the judge, that was pretty perfect. Hold on, let me go and get you some water."

"Thanks. Can we go over my next course?"

While we wait for Hannah's next round, we practice the course. It starts with the diagonal away from the ingate this time, then the outside line, bending line and ends with the outside judge's line. One thing I like about Hunter courses is that if you forget where

you're going all you need to do is look down. Hunter courses have pretty little flower boxes set up on the side of the fence you are supposed to jump, which can be very helpful.

Her next two rounds were just as clean, and they walked away as the Reserve Champions of their division. Jack and I haven't won any of the big tri-color ribbons yet, but I have a feeling we are getting close. Winning ribbons is not what I set out to do when I show, but it has been a long time since we have won one, and winning one would show that our hard work is finally paying off.

There is a division between Hopeful Hunters and when Jack and I ride, so it is time to get ready and head to the warmup ring. One thing about horse showing is that sometimes it's a game of waiting around for hours doing nothing and then rushing to get to the ring. Luckily for us there are a lot of people in our class, fourteen, and we'll most likely go toward the end, allowing us the chance to take our time.

Okay, Jack is all tacked up, his mane and tail look great, and I sprayed him down with some show sheen for a little extra shine.

We're in the warmup ring, doing a little walk, trot, and canter work, getting all warmed up, even jumping a few fences when I hear Jayne say, "Ready to head up to the ring?"

"Yep, we're all warmed up," I reply.

As we walk up to the show ring, I give Jack some neck scratches—those are his favorite—and tell him it's time to go to work now.

"You're going to go after that bay over there. And remember, just ride every stride, keep him going forward, and look early during your turns. You got this." One last minute review of our course, and she escorted us into the ring.

We picked up our canter smoothly and were headed to our first fence. It was the single brown diagonal with the purple flower boxes, the same one we practiced last night. We were jumping it toward the ingate. I can usually tell how the course will go based on that first fence. "Nailed it," I thought as we landed on the other side. Perfect strides, perfect distance, and rhythm. Six more fences to go, and each one rode just like that first fence. I exited the ring with a giant smile. I knew we rode great.

"That's a blue ribbon for Number 724, Whiskey Lullaby." I heard the announcer say over the loudspeaker. We did it! A blue ribbon! At that moment any lingering nervousness vanished.

“That was probably the best I’ve seen you ride him,” Jayne says as we stand, learning our next course.

“You guys looked fabulous!” Hannah has finished taking care of Fender and is now up at the ring to watch us ride.

“Keep riding the rest of your courses like that. There is nothing that I want you to change. Hannah, will you go over the next course with her?”

As we were going over the course, my mother walked over to congratulate us on our great ride. She brings me water and tells Jack how good a boy he was. She never misses the opportunity to praise us, even on days when I think I rode badly.

“Thanks, Mom. That did feel pretty great.” A few more sips of water, and it’s almost my turn to go again. My mother returns to her seat with the rest of our team cheering section.

The rest of our rounds were as good as I could have ridden them, I thought. We missed a few distances here and there, but overall we rode cleanly. We didn’t knock any rails down, and we hit all our strides. There was no funny business. I was super proud of our jumping today. But we weren’t done yet. We had the dreaded flat classes next, the ones where they judge you not on fences but on how you maneuver your horse on the ground. This is where we struggle, and there are a lot of talented horse and rider combos in my division.

First up, under saddle. “Okay, Jack, we need to hit these canter leads, and we’ll have a chance,” I think aloud. We start the class going to the left, the direction where we struggle. Our trot work feels amazing; he is moving beautifully. Then I hear “Riders, canter your horses.” I remember Jayne telling me not to rush the transition, to take a second and set Jack up properly. A little outside rein, inside leg, a smooch, and off he goes. I take a brief glance down. *The lead is good.*

“The lead is good, now let him go.” I can hear my trainer from across the ring. She is the one person I can always hear when I am showing, no matter how loud the audience gets.

I sit up in the saddle, loosen up on the reins only slightly, and let Jack carry me around the arena. We change directions. The outcome is the same. “Wow” is all that I can think. We line up in the center waiting for the judge to place our class.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, I heard the announcer say, “And now for the results of Limit Rider Under Saddle. In first place 653 Magic Mike, Second Place 724 Whiskey Lullaby . . .” The rest of the places are lost on me. Second place! No time to

celebrate; we have one more flat class, equitation, the class where they judge how I look. We make our way back to the rail, tracking left, and wait for the announcer to start handing out our instructions. This ride wasn't as clean, but I still think I rode well.

“The results of Limit Rider Equitation. First Place 987 Daydream Believer, Second Place 105 Chocolate Martini, Third Place 653 Magic Mike, Fourth Place 724 Whiskey Lullaby.”