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## ask the experts

### Show Separation Anxiety

**Q** My 14-year-old Thoroughbred mare is strong and independent at home, but at a show she becomes attached to the neighboring horse (not necessarily one she has met before) and gets upset when it leaves the stable. She screams, spins, kicks and rears in her stall. She is fine leaving the other horse but cannot tolerate being the one left behind, no matter how many horses are still with her. She expends a lot of energy with this behavior, and I'm concerned she'll hurt herself. What can I do to help her settle at a show?

Name withheld by request

#### SEAN CUNNINGHAM

**A** This is a major problem that many horses go through and, aside from the obvious health and safety risks, it can be detrimental to your success at shows.

Keep in mind that horses by nature are herd animals. They simply prefer to be in the company of other horses rather than be alone. Even if the neighbor at a show is a total stranger, horses (mares most commonly) often latch on and become an instant "herd." It is simply a response to the herd leaving. There is a big emotional difference between being the one leaving and being the one left.

Although it's a temporary solution, I found an effective method for dealing with this universal panic-anxiety response, though it will require a bit of proactive work on your part. Here's what to do:

First, find out when your neighbor will be heading out to warm up for each class. Beforehand, take your mare out for a short walk, away from the sight of

the neighboring horse. Be sure to walk in the opposite direction so your horse will not see her neighbor leave his stall. This is the absolute, most important part of this solution. Even if your mare sees her neighbor just for a moment in the warm-up ring—even if she did not see him leave—she will know he's not there when she returns to her stall.

After the neighbor is long gone, simply place your mare back in her stall, perhaps with a pile of hay for an extra distraction. If you've been careful to keep her from seeing the other horse, she will most likely not even notice his absence until he returns to the stable. Hard to believe, but it has worked for me each and every time during busy show seasons.

Obviously, this is just a band-aid to some long-term experience. One method I've used with the hope of creating a lasting effect on this herd-bound behavior at home is to simply play "musical chairs" with the herd, most especially the herd-bound horse, every three to four days. This is easy to accomplish when I have numerous horses who get along and stalls that are separated far enough from the back paddocks. I bring a horse up for a few days to stay in a stall with a run. When she has settled, we put her back with the herd or place her in a different herd altogether (provided all the horses get along) and bring a different horse in. Rotating the horses in this way has helped our show horses adjust to different living situations.

Also, taking your horse on frequent small "field trips," such as to a schooling show or even just for a short drive around the block, is helpful. It allows her to get more comfortable being out on her own and not feeling such a need for attachment at the shows.

Of course, these may not be viable

options for many people who either have a small space with few horses or are in a boarding facility where moving horses around that much is simply not feasible. Perhaps you can chat with your friends and stable operators and work out a temporary arrangement.

## Choosing a Show

**Q** I'm riding at First Level but I am new to showing. How do I pick which shows to go to? Do I start at a licensed show? What are the hallmarks of a well-run show?

Name withheld by request

### JUDITH NOONE

**A** Showing is a lot of fun as well as an opportunity to make new friends and expand your education. I advise you to begin with schooling shows for two reasons: First, knowing you are there for the purpose of schooling, the management and judges have more of a take-your-hand attitude to help you with the entire experience. If you have lost your focus during the test, the judge will most likely speak with you after your ride to give you pointers and encouragement. That is not possible in a recognized competition, where time and scores are reported for awards or other qualifications. Second, the cost of riding in recognized competitions is considerably greater, and a higher performance standard is expected.

When you are ready, however, there are lots of awards and rewards waiting for you in the recognized competition arena. Choosing recognized competitions to attend has been made somewhat easier with the new rating system our national federation (USEF) has instituted. The system details the show regarding footing, warm-up, opportunity for grooming, competition arenas, experience of the

### Sean Cunningham

is a U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) bronze and silver medalist. He was most recently the USDF Region 5 Open Second Level Freestyle Champion and handled the Reserve Champion Colt/Gelding at the USDF Breeder Championships. He operates STC Dressage with his partner, Acacia Coast, in Los Lunas, New Mexico ([stcdressage.com](http://stcdressage.com)).



### Eleanor Kellon, VMD,

is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Veterinary School. Co-owner of the Equine Cushing's and Insulin Resistance Group, she is also the veterinary editor of the *Horse Journal* and teaches a variety of online equine nutrition and horse-care courses ([drkellon.com](http://drkellon.com)).



### Judith Noone

began running dressage competitions in the late 1970s. A long-time experienced show manager, she brought the first CDI competitions to New England and contributed to the show management guidelines manual for USDF. She received the USDF Volunteer of the Year Award for Region 8 in 2009.



### Charlotte Trentelman

is a U.S. Equestrian Federation (USEF) "S" dressage judge who has competed through Grand Prix. A breeder of Holsteiners, she currently organizes a USDF "L" Education Program for her local club. She and her husband, Chris, run Rebel Ridge Farm in Anthony, Florida ([rebelridge.net](http://rebelridge.net)).



Have a question about dressage? Email it to [DressageToday@AIMMedia.com](mailto:DressageToday@AIMMedia.com) or send to Dressage Today, 656 Quince Orchard Rd., Suite 600, Gaithersburg, MD 20878—Ask the Experts is compiled by **Reina Abelshausen**.

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