

# Shire Horse Society Australia Inc

# Showing Shire Horses in Australia



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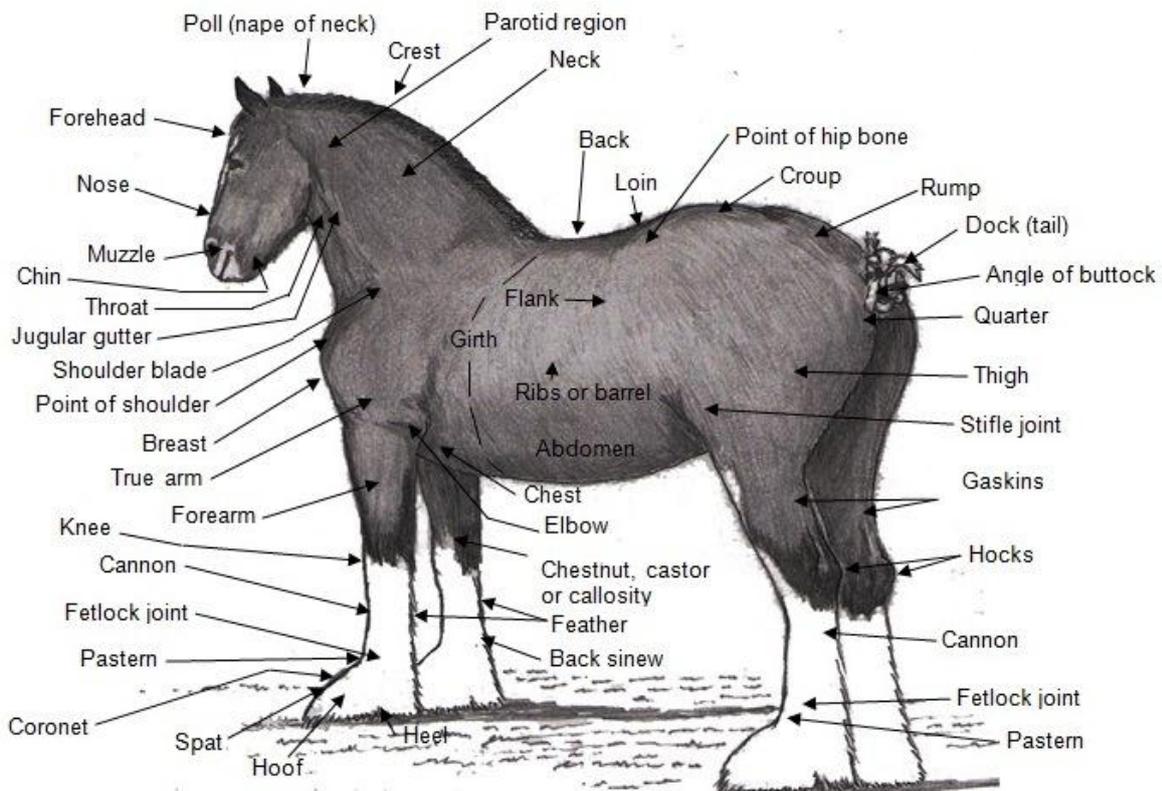
## Section 1

### THE IDEAL SHIRE HORSE

In order to be a success with your showing (and with your breeding program), it is first important to develop an understanding of what constitutes an ideal Shire, and how to look for these things. Here is an introduction into the points of a Shire. Use this information to better understand what the judge will be looking for when you take your horse to a show.

#### Points of a Shire

For reference, Figure 1 lists the key points of a Shire Horse. Many of the following notes will refer to these points.



**POINTS OF THE SHIRE HORSE**

Figure 1 – Points of a Shire

## What to look for

When showing a Shire, the judge is looking for the horse that most closely conforms to the 'stamp' of the breed. That is, the horse that the judge perceives to be the closest to matching the 'Ideal Shire Horse' should be the one that wins. Judging is usually a complex decision making process, as no horse is perfect and the judge needs to weigh up which good and not-so-good points of each horse are the most important to him.

A Shire is expected to have good size and substance, be black, brown, bay or grey in colour, have feathering on their lower feet and white markings on the legs and usually the head. Figure 2 shows the points of an ideal Shire.

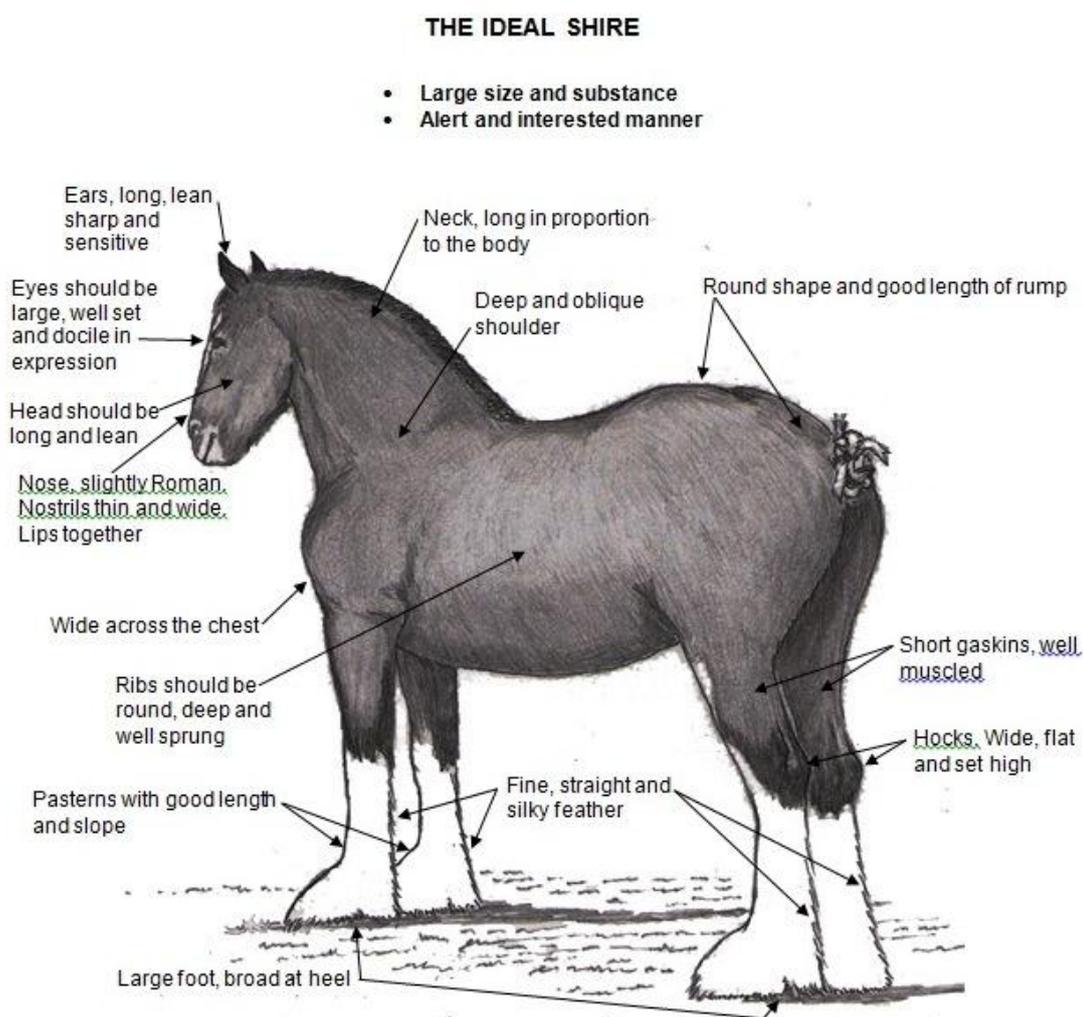


Figure 2– The ideal Shire

- A Shire is to be of good size – usually over 17hh for a mature horse
- The feather should be fine, straight and silky, located down the back of the legs below the knee and hock joints, and around the top of the hoof head, below the fetlock joint to the front (known as 'spat')
- The legs should be straight (for example, without offset canons) and clear of high splints sitting just under the knee
- The knees should be well-defined, tight and clean

## Front legs

The front legs support around 60-65% of the total weight of the horse, so correct conformation is essential. The upper legs should be under the body supporting the front of the horse and set well, not too close nor too widespread at the chest. They should be straight, neither calf kneed nor too far over at the knees and the pasterns should be of good length and exhibit a distinct slope. **Figure 3** shows the correct conformation of the front legs, as well as some common faults.

### FRONT LEGS

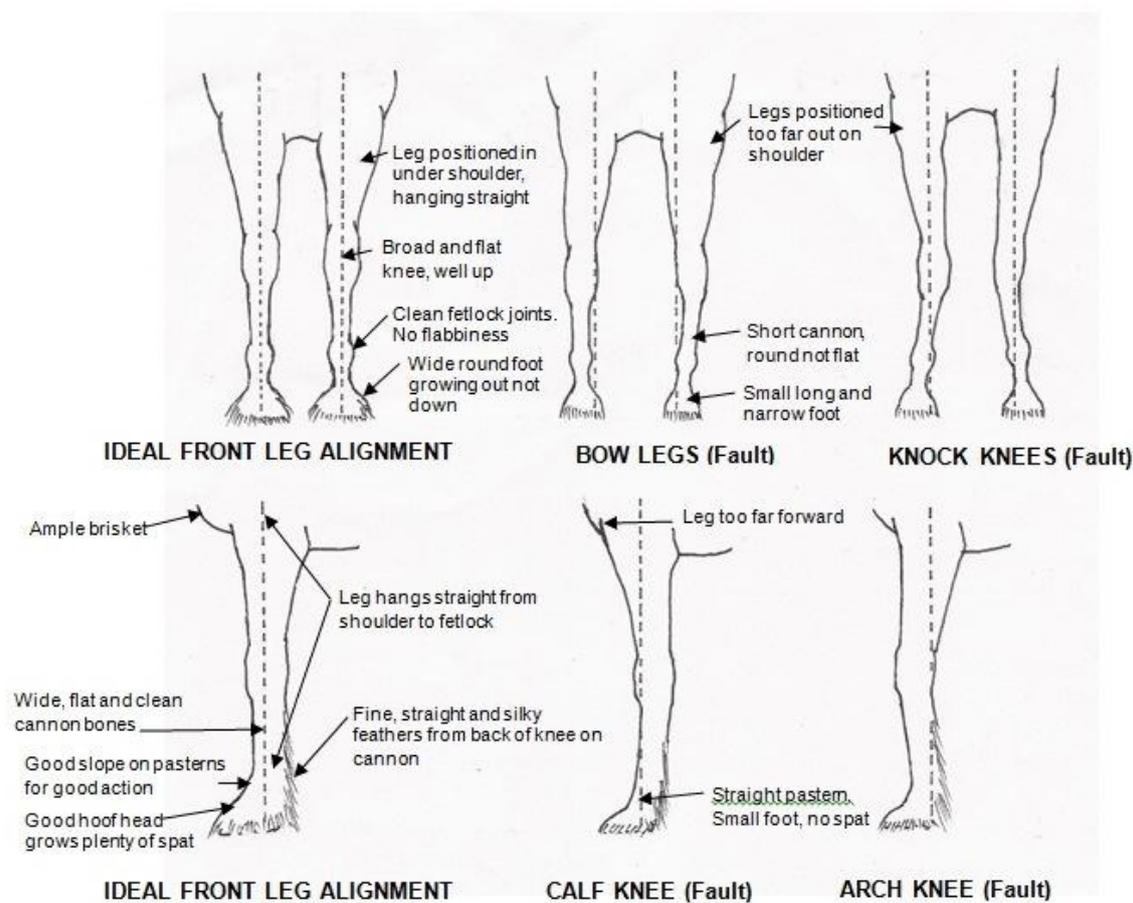


Figure 3– Front legs

**\*Please note\*** – for illustration purposes the faults in the above diagrams are exaggerated. In an actual horse these conformation faults may be present to a far lesser degree.

## Hind legs

- From the side, the hind legs should not appear too straight (post-legged) sickle hocked (where the hind leg comes forward from the hock, rather than straight down). Good hind leg angulation is indicated by the point of buttocks, hocks and fetlocks being in a straight vertical line.
- The hind pasterns should exhibit good slope but are slightly more upright than the front pasterns. The hocks should be set high, and correspondingly the gaskins will be moderately short, broad and well-muscled
- The hind canons and the hocks must be broad and clean when viewed from the side. Combined with high hocks, the hind leg angulation will usually be correct, and is pleasing to the eye.

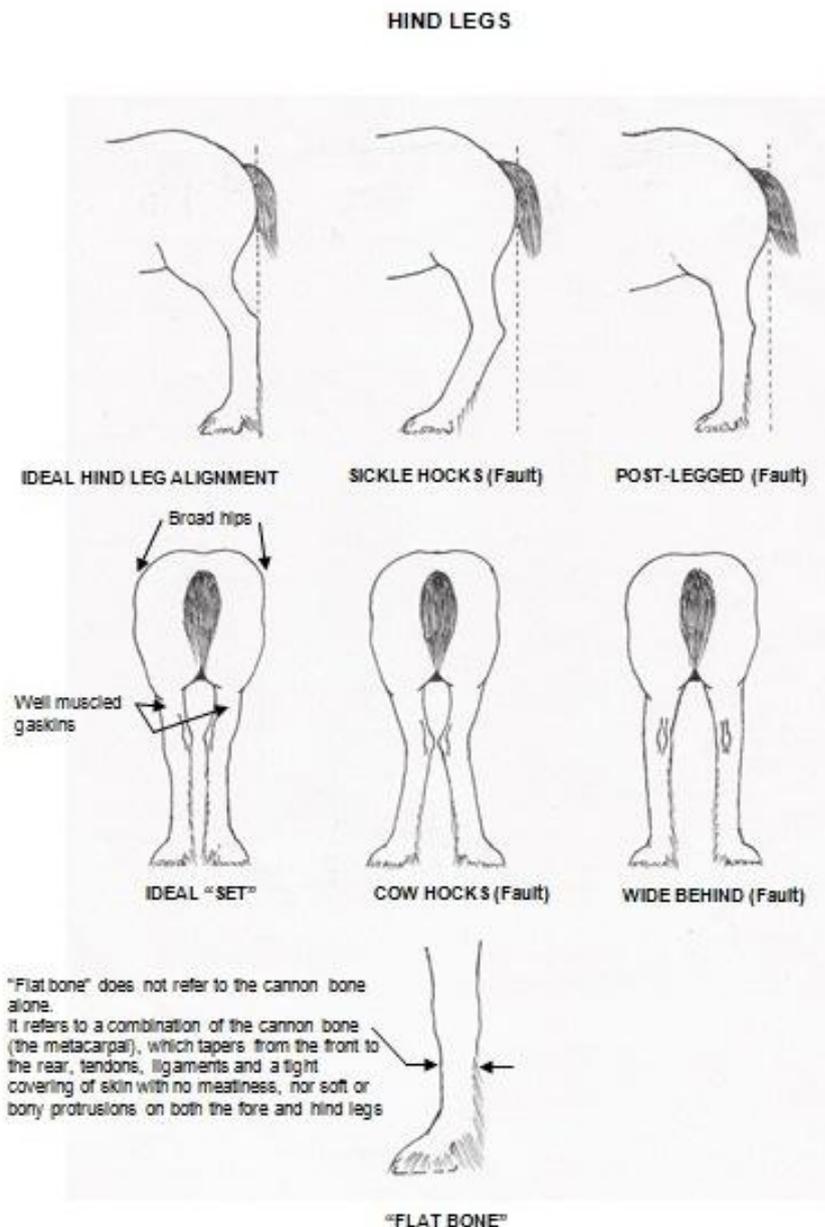


Figure 4– Hind legs

**\*Please note\*** – for illustration purposes the faults in the above diagrams are exaggerated. In an actual horse these conformation faults may be present to a far lesser degree.

## Hind leg 'set'

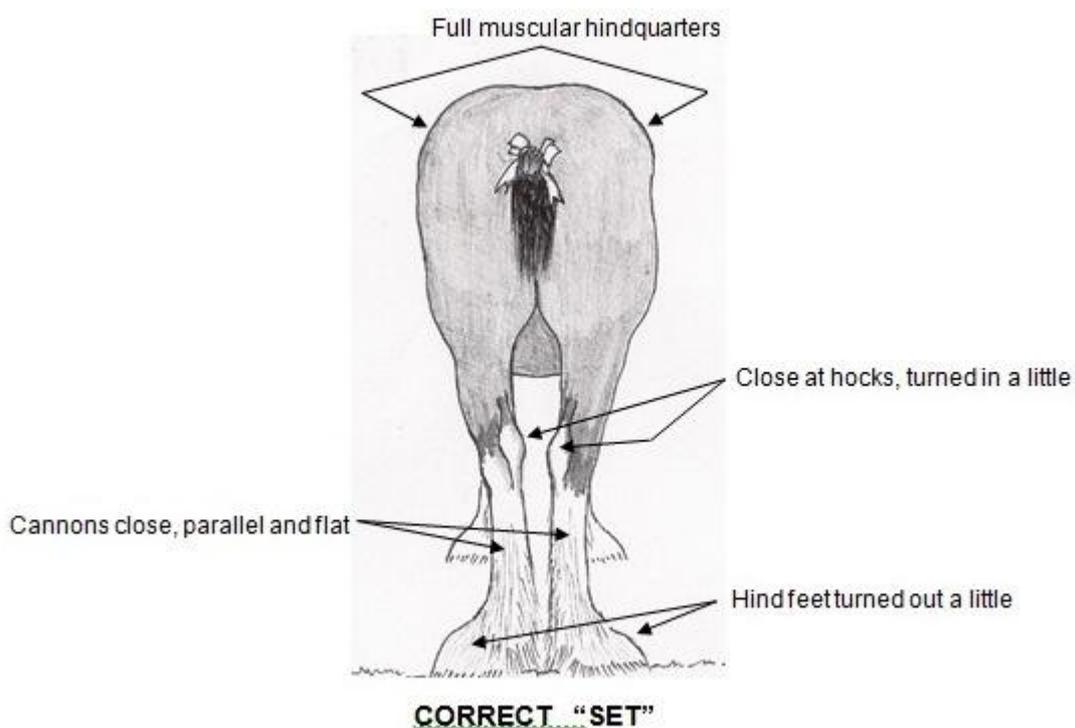


Figure 5 – Hind leg 'set'

The hind leg "set" allows the horse to fully utilise his power. He pushes into the collar, driving forward from the hocks. Therefore, the hind legs must be set close and well under him to maximise push. The inward tilt to the hocks and outward turn of the hind feet is part of the dynamics of hind leg angulation, which begins at the stifles. Older horses are naturally wider set than young horses, particularly if they have done a lot of work and are also fat. A little width at the hocks is more acceptable in an older working horse than in the young horse which has never worked.

From behind, a Shire should exhibit

- Broad hips
- Full, muscular hindquarters and well-muscled gaskins
- The hind legs should be set close together from the hocks down
- The hocks from behind should appear flat and blend smoothly into the canons
- The canons must be close set and running parallel to the fetlocks
- The points of the hocks should turn in a little towards each other, and correspondingly, the hind feet should be turned out a little.
- From behind (or from the front), the rear canons must appear narrow, flat and clean. This is what is meant by "flat bone". The appearance is that of hard bone, tendons and a tight covering of hide. There should be no meatiness, nor soft or bony protrusions.

## Movement (action)

The Shire is an active moving horse, long been used for riding as well as carriage and farm work. Its stride should be long and brisk with good elevation.

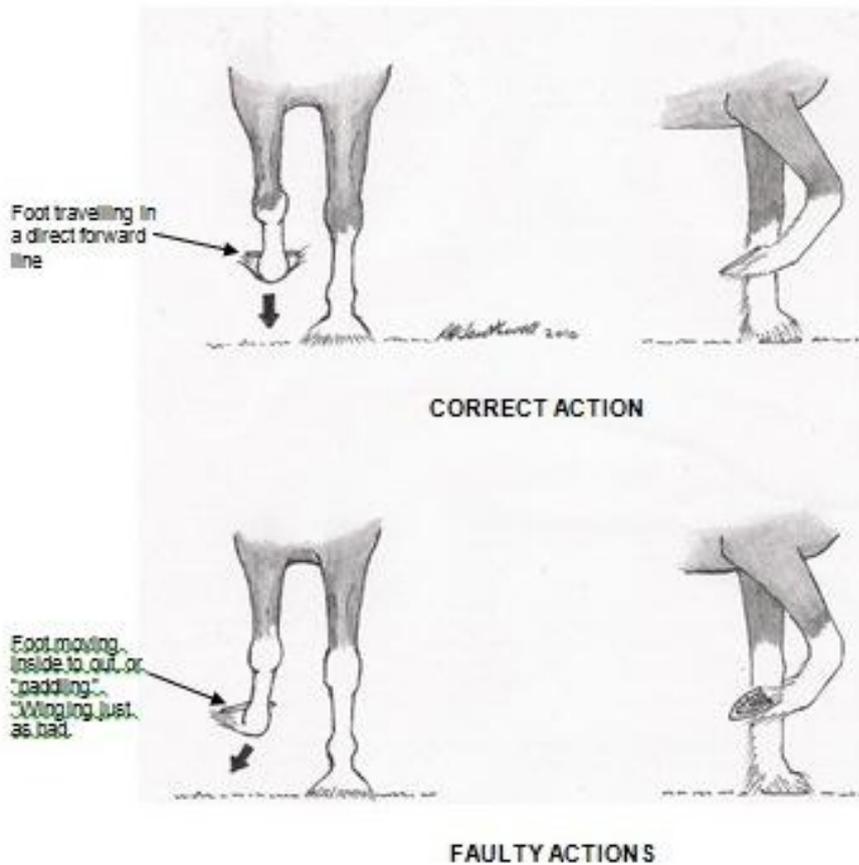
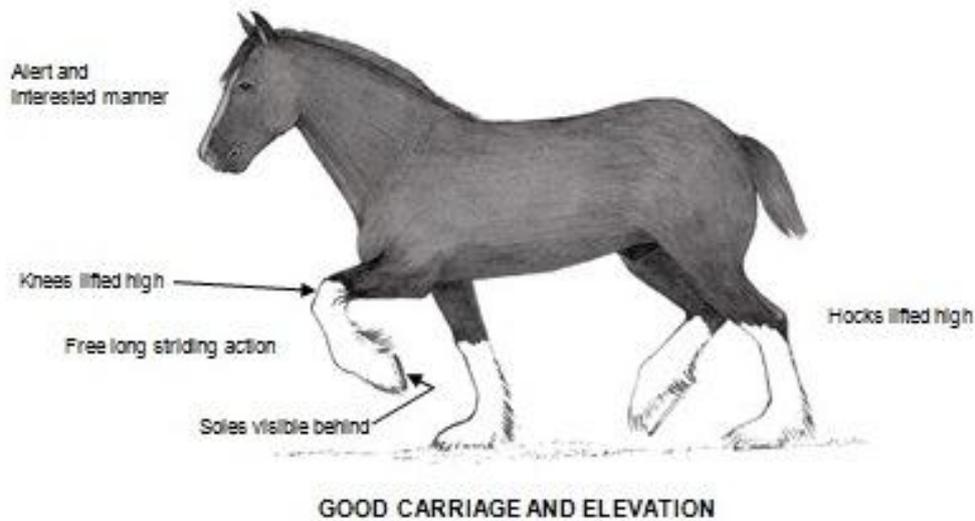


Figure 6 – Action

From the side view, the horse should be seen to have a ground-covering stride when walking out with the hind hoof placed in or in front of the place the front foot has just vacated. Elevation means the knees and hocks are lifted high, with the soles quite visible from behind at the highest point of elevation. The feet must be placed squarely and flat on the ground.



## Section 2

### INSIGHT INTO JUDGES AND JUDGING

Judges of one heavy breed CAN and DO judge other heavy breeds competently.

All draught breeds were bred for essentially the same type of work and are therefore conformed similarly. The differences are mainly cosmetic, such as colour, markings, feather etc. All heavy horses should have large size and substance, a large foot with a broad heel, high clean hocks, flat bone and closely set hind legs. This will be a little bit variable from breed to breed; Clydesdales for example will generally have a little more slope to the pasterns than the other heavy breeds.

Most of the time the judge on the day will be doing his or her best to assess the horses honestly. A “crooked” judge is quite rare, so please don’t accuse a judge of being dishonest just because you didn’t win.

You will come across the occasional judge who is not competent or consistent. It is not uncommon for a judge of another breed (eg Shetlands or Standardbreds) to judge the Shires at a local show. Be courteous and remember that the judge is trying to do a good job even if he is out of his depth.

There are many variables in judging. No horse is perfect and the judge has to weigh up all of them before arriving at his decision. There is much complexity in determining faults and unsoundness and the degree to which they exist in a given animal. Judges can’t help but have their own priorities, probably due to past experience. It will come down to the degree of the faults present in the horses in the ring and the judge’s preferences on the day.

This means that you may see two horses of similar quality going turn-about for placings under different judges. It does not mean that one judge is right and another wrong. It probably means that the judges’ priorities regarding faults may vary a little.

So, to accurately determine your horse’s quality, he needs to be shown on many occasions. Another factor is that winning blue ribbons with the only horse in the class doesn’t mean anything. Very few judges will award the only horse in the class a second ribbon because he’s not up to scratch. A high-end placing in a large class of quality horses is far more worthwhile than a win when you are the only entrant.

## Section 3

### SHOWING YOUR SHIRE – DO YOUR HOMEWORK!

Showing Shires begins at home with feeding, maintenance and handling.

#### Feeding and maintenance

This means that your horse is in show condition, neither too thin nor fat. It also means cool feeding. We don't want a horse that is playing up through being "hot".

The best rule of thumb for Shires is plenty of bulk feed in the way of hay and/or chaff, with much less grain and extruded feeds. There are cool extruded feeds (kibble-type feeds) such as Coprice M or Xtra Cool which are very good. However, the bulk of the diet should be hay or chaff. Hay is better as it is less likely to cause gut impactions than chaff. Many people new to heavy horses are unaware of just how much hay is enough. To fill the gut of an entirely handfed heavy horse (weighing between 750-1,000 kg) requires roughly three quarters to one full bale of hay a day.

High protein/high energy feeds for breeding and performance horses are best left to the horses they are formulated for: Brood mares in the latter stages of pregnancy or lactating mares and young, vigorously growing foals where everything goes into growth. Do not fool yourself into thinking that because you use your horse in a cart every so often it is a performance horse. Wrong! Thoroughbred race horses are performance horses, not Shires!

A horse's teeth, feet, feather, coat, mane and tail must also be presentable for the show ring. To put a good, well shod foot on a heavy horse requires at least 8-10 weeks and two shoeings. Always remember that the foot can make or break a Shire's prospects for a successful show career.

#### Handling

Your horse needs to be under control and obedient at home and, hopefully, in the show ring. The essential basic skills are:

##### *1) Tying up safely*

Train your horse to tie up. A horse trained to tie up correctly will not pull back. Even if startled or alarmed he should not pull back. Do not tie a horse where he might get away. A loose horse running around a showground is a recipe for disaster.

##### *2) Being taught to stand still on a lead*

Train your horse to halt. When asked to halt and stand still on a lead means that the horse has four legs planted on the ground with no shuffling or pushing the handler around. This also means that the judge or a ring steward must be able to approach the horse without him moving away. He must allow his legs to be handled and picked up. Nor should the horse be shy around the head and mouth.

### 3) *Lead willingly and calmly at both a walk and trot*

Train your horse to lead correctly. He must walk beside you willingly and lightly in hand. He should move off promptly at your command, and stop the same way. On your instructions he should halt, walk and trot. Do not allow him to hang back and drag on the lead, or lay against you. Teach him also to respect your space. **To achieve this, practice regularly at home.** Every time you lead your horse at home, make him do it correctly. Then it will become second nature in the show ring.

### 4) *Loading on a truck/float*

Train your horse to load before you take him out. If he's only so-so loading at home, he will probably not load to go back home! Nothing is more stressful than trying to load an unwilling horse at a show, with onlookers offering advice and assistance, or just thanking God that they are not in your shoes.

All of the above means a good education and regular practice when at home. Allowances will often be made for foals or yearlings at their first outing, with the expectation of increasingly better behaviour as they gain experience and maturity. Often young horses will be good at home but the distractions of a show means they may play up out of fear or an overload of strange sights and sounds. Do not show a youngster with a rope around his hindquarters. You do not train to lead at a show. If he will not work out at his first show practice more at home and rest assured he will do better the next time.

Allowances usually won't be made for an older horse that plays up, whether it's his first show or not. By the time a horse is 3—5 years he should be well-handled, educated and possibly broken in. He should also be mature enough mentally to be well behaved. If an older horse is playing up badly at a show he shouldn't be there. Take him home and give him an education.

### **Plan for show day**

Be prepared and be on time. Work out the logistics of getting there and allow plenty of time to get ready for your first class – do not be late for your classes. Many arguments are caused by late arrivals who want to be judged after the class has started or is even over. If the show is close to home, grooming and preparation can be done at home. Factor in enough time at the show to complete the preparation/presentation of your horse and visit the secretary's office as necessary for programs, class tickets, entry fee payments etc.

Show day is where your homework pays off:

- Tie up safely for grooming and preparation? ✓
- Lead to the ring without problems? ✓
- Stand quietly at ringside awaiting your class? ✓
- Lead well and work out well in the class? ✓
- Stand quietly while the judge examines the horse? ✓

## Section 4

### SHOW RING ATTITUDE AND COURTESY

#### Manners

Having covered the horse's behaviour and attitude, let's now look at the handler. If you cannot be gracious and well-mannered whatever the outcome, take your horse home and enjoy him there. Showing is not for you.

Being appropriately dressed, courteous and well-mannered is a part of showing. Always remember there is just one winner in every class. If you lose – be a good loser. If you win – be gracious. If you go away feeling disappointed with an outcome in the ring, please remember that others may be feeling the same way. Everyone has the same rights and expectations as you.

Sometimes we see immaculately turned-out handlers with horses not so well prepared. This may be a lack of good presentation, or perhaps having badly behaved horses. While the handler's presentation is important, remember that it is the HORSE being judged. The well-conformed, well turned-out horse with good manners is likely going to win, and it's of little consequence that your outfit cost a fortune and is the very latest thing in show ring attire.

What you paid for your horse often has nothing to do with how successful he might be in the show ring. In addition, just because you love the foal you have bred does not necessarily make it a champion.

There is an area of showing where people often "just don't get it" which is a source of frustration to judges and exhibitors alike. Led (and harness) classes are about having the best horse, according to the judge on the day. If you haven't developed a discerning eye for good conformation and don't have much experience, be guided by two things:

1. **Your usual place in the classes.** If you are regularly near the top of the class you probably have a good horse. If you are regularly near the bottom end perhaps you need to understand that your horse may be your best mate, but he probably doesn't have what it takes to be a show ring prospect.
2. **Get advice from the right people AND LISTEN TO THEM.** The right people have been there for quite some time and doing well year after year. Ensure that their success isn't based on just one horse over a couple of years. What is important is consistency of good stock over many years, called "performance on the board".

Don't take too seriously advice from 'Joe Blogs' outside of the ring. If he doesn't have performance, his advice is probably not worth much. Be polite and walk away. Newcomers often get confused by contradictory information. Be discerning about your sources.

Another point is getting honest advice about your horse's show ring prospects. Never ask for an "honest opinion" if you can't take the truth. This is a truly loaded question and many judges and knowledgeable people may be evasive, based on self-preservation. "Has a lovely mane and tail" is one tongue-in-cheek evasion that comes to mind. Many capable, honest people have never been forgiven for pointing out a horses' faults when requested to do so.

We all tend to be stable blind to our horses' faults, and this is a very good reason to hold led classes. Your horse is being assessed by the judge, and he is also being assessed privately by other exhibitors. It is your opportunity to assess him too, against his peers in the ring. Perhaps he may have seemed well-grown at home but in the line-up in the ring you find that he's only average. This may be disappointing but it's a valuable lesson in developing your eye and critically assessing your horse.

## Section 5

### THE SHOW RING

You have been called into the ring for your first class. There are many things you can do to help make the judge's job easier, and enhance your horse's prospects. This is called "ring craft".

#### Handler attire

While your standard of dress may change for different levels of showing (for example, you may dress more formally for a Royal Show, compared to your local gymkhana), at a minimum you should always be turned out in a neat and tidy manner, in smart casual clothes with footwear appropriate to horse handling (ie, closed toed shoes) and a hat. Moleskins, a collared shirt, tie, hat and boots are very common and acceptable in any show ring.

#### Shire Horse turnout

The Shire breed has a long tradition of a high standard of turnout. At a show, your horse should always be clean, mane and tail brushed and in good condition and the feather clean and white. While not compulsory, mature Shires are expected to be shown with their manes and tails plaited and decorated and with a neck ribbon (see Figure 8).



Figure 10 – Providence Lady Jasmine. Champion Mare, National Shire Show UK, 2010

It is acceptable for a foal to have only their tail plaited and their manes loose, but from a yearling onwards it is standard for the mane to be plaited as well, for both males and females. A Shire colt or stallion is traditionally shown in a roller from one year of age (see Figure 9). Many exhibitors favour showing with a cane and this is acceptable for a Shire of any age.



Figure 11 – Arclid Minshull Monty. Champion Stallion, National Shire Show UK, 2007

Shire specific show bridles and rollers are often custom made and can be expensive, so it is not expected that every competitor have this level of equipment. As long as your halter/bridle or roller fits properly and is safe, as well as being neat, tidy, clean and well cared for, it is acceptable for the show ring. Please remember that many shows require horses to be shown in a bit when over a certain age, especially colts and stallions.

### The walk

Firstly, you are requested to walk around the ring with the other competitors in a large circle (usually anticlockwise but possibly clockwise, depending on the judge's preferences). During this time the judge will assess each horse for his walking ability, note the overall proportions of each animal, or balance in other words. He is looking for a free moving, long striding horse with good carriage and an alert and interested manner. He's also looking for possible lameness, which will be penalised.

At the walk, the horses' hind foot should be placed in or in front of the spot their front foot just vacated. You can see this by keeping an eye on the ground where the front foot has been and wait until the hind foot is placed down. Young horses will naturally over-step due to their proportionately longer legs.

Walk your horse out well but not so fast he breaks into a jog. If someone in front is too slow you can walk around them, to the outside of the circle. At all times be aware of your horse while keeping one eye on the judge and ring steward so that you are ready when called into the ring.

### **The Line-up**

After walking around the ring you will be called in for the 'line-up'.

Walk and line up following the steward's directions. You may be called to line up in place for initial assessment or in no particular order, depending on the judge's preference. The line-up is not considered the final decision.

In the line-up, face your horse and stand him up for the judge. This means four feet squarely on the ground, neither standing under himself nor camped out behind. The front legs should be square and level, not one in front of the other. The hind legs should be set close together with the back feet even. A well-conformed horse should want to stand correctly, close at the hocks with the canons close set and parallel down to the fetlocks. The point of the hocks should be turned in a little towards each other and the hind feet turned out a little. This correct hind leg stance is called the "set".

To ensure your horse keeps this stance you must be facing him, in front of his head and just off to the near side. Do not stand in the line-up in a leading position, at the shoulder facing forward. Facing the horse means you can see how well he is standing, and he's less likely to move. If all is not perfect you are in the right place to "set" him correctly. (You may even pick up and place a foot to set it perfectly.)

Once your horse is standing well and settled, keep one eye on him and one on the judge. Don't use the line-up to chat to your neighbours, concentrate! If you don't pay attention to your horse, he may grab the chance to move around. You may also miss directions from the judge or steward.

In the meantime, the judge will take the opportunity to stand back and view all the horses together to assess the relative proportions, breed characteristics, comparative hock heights, etc. He will then assess each horse individually. Each judge has his own preferences for order of assessment.

### **How the judge assesses your horse**

A common method is to start at the front, checking eyes and teeth, front legs, feet and chest. This is not in order of importance but rather moving from top to bottom of the horse without going backwards and forwards.

The judge usually starts with the head, often passing his hand across the eyes to note a blink reflex, indicating adequate sight. A thumb may be inserted between the lips in the front of the mouth to check that upper and lower teeth are level, not under or overshot. Undershot or overshot mouths mean a horse cannot crop feed effectively and may be unthrifty (a poor do-er), depending on the severity of the condition. This is highly heritable and must be penalised, especially in a breeding animal.

Travelling down the nearside, height is assessed and the judge may ask some general questions from the handlers such as the horse's age, and whether he is broken in and works. The front leg and foot on that side will be evaluated, both visually and by feel.

At this time, the judge may feel for any lumps or bumps on the canons and pasterns and will press firmly down in the region of the lateral cartilage of the foot. The judge is looking for faults but especially unsoundness which cannot be clearly seen.

Depending on the horse's manners, time constraints and the judges' preference, the foot may be picked up to assess it completely. If the horse is mature the judge will usually feel for unsoundness at the pastern and the hoofhead.

Moving on towards the rear, the front and inner aspects of the hind legs are checked, visually assessing bone, hocks and hind feet. Again, depending on time constraints and manners, the judge may or may not pick up a hind leg to examine the foot, and feel around the inside of the hock, pastern and hoof head, once again looking for unsoundness.

The judge may then then move away from the horse to view the whole animal from the side, before moving on behind him. From the side view the judge assesses overall conformation, but particularly that of the legs, front and back.

From behind the judge will look at the width at the hips, overall set of the hind legs, hock height and length and muscling of the gaskins is assessed. If the horse is not standing well now is a good time to attempt to stand the horse up correctly.

Moving to the offside, the judge will look for anything that may be different from the nearside, following a similar procedure but from back to front. This side is often quicker to assess as many aspects are the same on both sides.

Once the judge is finished assessing the horse, we move on to the workout.

### **Workout**

Generally this involves a walk out and back, and a trot out and back, or less commonly, into a triangular shape. The workout will often include asking the horse to back a few steps or turn in a tight circle (practice both of these at home), and then line up once again.

Your horse's movement at the walk and the trot can make the difference to his placing in the ring.

When a horse is asked to work out in a class, the judge is viewing the walk and trot from behind and then from the front. From behind, the judge is looking for close set hind legs with elevation of the stride at both walk and trot. He also wants to see the soles of the feet, front and back, indicating an elevated lift and clean, high action at each step. When coming back, the judge is again looking for high elevation in front and straight action without winging or paddling (feet moving in a circular direction, rather than straight). If the hind legs are close set they will be clearly visible between the front legs.

Once all horses have been worked out, their relative merits and problems are mentally assessed and compared. Then they are put into their final placings and ribbons awarded. Show ring etiquette calls for congratulations to the winners and placegetters, along with a shaking of hands and/or tipping of hats.

Some judges will offer helpful comments or constructive criticism, others do not. There are good reasons to do so, and good reasons to say nothing, so this depends on the judge and the circumstances.

## Section 6

### Faults and unsoundness

One thing to be aware of is the difference between faults and unsoundness, which often confuses people:

#### Faults

Faults are generally conformation structural problems that a horse is born and bred with. Some of these are highly heritable, particularly those of the feet, legs and mouth. Some faults however, are not structural and may be genetic issues affecting health which are not covered here. These will be unseen and therefore cannot be assessed by the judge.

Small feet, offset canons, splints at the knee etc., may lead to conditions that will shorten the working life of the horse. Foot size and offset canons are heritable and must be penalised.

Conformational faults such as calf knees may lead to strain of tendons and ligaments, and eventual arthritis. This however, is a relatively minor fault in heavy horses. Length and slope of the pastern is much more important. Short, upright pasterns will lead to a greatly reduced working life.

Pigeon toes or turned out feet are undesirable. They may interfere with the horse's action – winging or paddling. Pigeon toed with paddling is preferable to turning out of the feet. These horses often wing (inward rotation of the front lower leg and foot at the stride). This may cause interference with the opposite leg and cause injuries. Injuries higher up and inside the leg usually come with interference. Injuries to the heels are usually caused by forging, which is interference between the front and back feet. Corrective shoeing will often right forging, and bad shoeing can cause it.

#### Unsoundness

Unsoundness is an acquired problem/s which makes a horse unable to do his work, or even live a comfortable life.

Often unsoundness is PREDISPOSED by bad conformation. Two examples are upright pasterns and small feet. Both of these are faults which cause excessive concussion to the feet and legs, which will often lead to the development of unsoundness such as ringbone and/or sidebone.

Unsoundness may also develop through too much heavy work, especially in a young horse. Sprains and other injuries may also cause unsoundness. Typically these are found in the hocks. Bog spavin and thoroughpin are often brought about by strains, sprains or excessively heavy work. These two conditions cause soft, gross swellings of the hock and are due to the leaking of synovial fluid into the joint spaces. They generally don't cause lameness but may contribute to later arthritic conditions. They are indicators that something is wrong, which could be conformation, a past injury or illness.

Infections such as joint ill/navel infection of the foal may cause unsoundness of the leg joints, often the hocks, but also of the knees and other joints.

Three of the more common unsoundness conditions are:

### *Ringbone*

Ringbone is an arthritic overgrowth of the bones of the pasterns and may encircle the pastern, hence “ringbone”. It may bridge the bones of the pastern and freeze the joints. In the long term, the pastern becomes upright and may even “knuckle over”. Ringbone may be felt as roughness or lumps and bumps encircling the pastern. High ringbone is felt around the pastern, low ringbone will be found at the coronet band, and can descend into the foot beneath the hoof.

### *Sidebone*

Sidebone is the laying down of calcium in the lateral cartilages of the feet. These become inflexible and may grow larger, pushing upwards from the coronet, and down into the foot beneath the hoof wall. The horse will eventually become permanently lame. Sidebone can be felt by pushing into the lateral cartilage. This should feel firm but with some give. When sidebone is present the cartilage will be hard and unyielding, or worse, a solid protrusion that is jutting upwards.

It is debatable whether either of the above conditions is heritable, but poor conformation will predispose a horse to developing them. Conformational faults and unsoundness of the pasterns and feet must be penalised heavily.

### *Stringhalt*

Australian Stringhalt is a condition that causes involuntary and exaggerated upward flexion or ‘puppet-like’ action in one or both hind legs as the horse walks, often starting as a slight incoordination in gait and developing into a ‘goose’ stepping movement in severe cases. Horses with Stringhalt are unable to be backed without severe incoordination and risk of falling over, and may be difficult to unload after travelling.

For a long time it was thought to be a hereditary condition, however research has shown that it is caused by horses eating Flat Weed. However anecdotally, the predisposition to developing the condition does seem to run in families – foals perhaps inherit the tendency towards being a greedy eater in the paddock, or learn to eat the weed while grazing with their mothers.

While Stringhalt is not caused by an underlying fault, neither is it acceptable in the show ring. If your horse has this condition, leave it at home or expect to be heavily penalised for it by the judge.

## Section 7

### Final points

When assessing all of the above the judge is not taking into consideration a pretty head, long eyelashes and cute ears. He is looking for a horse that, theoretically, can work six days a week for years before breaking down. Very few horses work to this extent today, but we cannot let these things drop by the wayside. If we accept minor degrees of faults and unsoundness now, they will become major problems in years to come, whereby the breed may look pretty but has no capacity to work.

A little leniency may be given to geldings in some areas, but mares and stallions with hereditary faults must be strongly penalised as they WILL pass on their undesirable characteristics.

It can be a lot of fun to show led horses and it feeds our competitive natures, but do not forget the main picture.

The best reason for judging stock is to keep a breed as strong and consistent as possible; keeping to type and ensuring the animals are sound. We do this by recognising the best individuals and breeding from them, in preference to animals that have serious faults. This is how breeds developed in the past and are, hopefully, being assessed in the show ring today. It is the search for excellence that keeps a breed true to type and on track for the future.