Form-to-function emphasis showcases the versatility of the Arabian as a sport horse.

By Kara L. Stewart
Main Ring Traditions
What most people envision when they think of Arabian show horses—the “main ring” division Class A Arabian breed show circuit—has been around for more than 50 years.

The circuit offers halter classes for horses considered to be the best Arabian breeding stock, and its under-saddle classes—including English pleasure in cutback saddles, trail, western pleasure, native costume, country English pleasure and park—exhibit the Arabian’s performance talents as groups of riders and their horses walk, trot and canter along the rail in both directions.

Enter the Arabian Sport Horse Division
While the traditional main ring division has always been popular with breeders and exhibitors, over the years, more Arabian owners have been showing their versatile horses in “open” competition—dressage, hunter/jumper, eventing and other sport horse shows that are open to all breeds.

Before the sport horse division was created, the main ring Arabian shows offered only a small number of cressage and hunter/jumper classes. The Arabian sport horse division now offers separate shows unrelated to main ring events. Categories include under saddle, in hand and show hack—all specifically to showcase sport horses.

“The idea to create a separate sport horse division came from a group of Arabian devotees in Nevada,” explains Janet Henderson, who chaired the AHA’s Sport Horse Committee for six years before stepping down in 2007. Today she serves as vice chair, is a recognized regional- and national-level AHA judge, and holds judges cards for open dressage and hunter/jumper competitions.

“These people were showing their Arabians in open hunter shows, and they thought it would be fun to show in working hunter classes with other Arabian owners,” Henderson says.

An ad hoc committee took the idea to the International Arabian Horse Association (IAHA), the organizational predecessor to the AHA, and the sport horse division rules were formed at the IAHA’s 1998 annual voting convention. However, it didn’t take long for the popularity of sport horse classes to cause growing pains.

“The dressage and hunter/jumper classes were being squeezed into the U.S. Arabian national championship show,” explains Bill Pennington, past president of the AHA, founder of the Arabian Sport Horse Nationals, and current member of the Sport Horse National Show Commission.

“There was no room to add any more classes, let alone sport horse classes. I had an idea and called Molly Stanley, who chaired the IAHA Sport Horse Committee at the time,” recalls
Pennington. “What did she think about creating a national championship show just for the sport horse? That way, an entire show could be dedicated to the sport horse classes rather than shoe-homing them into the main ring nationals.”

Held in 2003, the first annual Arabian and Half-Arabian/Anglo-Arabian Sport Horse National Championship show had about 300 horses entered. The 2007 show drew more than 600 entries. According to the AHA, this is the only sport horse show offered by a breed association. Classes include dressage, hunter/jumper, pleasure carriage driving, under-saddle, and in-hand conformation. Held in late September, the Nationals rotate in location from Idaho to Virginia. The 2008 show will be held Sept. 23-27 at the Idaho Horse Center in Nampa, Idaho.

**Sport Horse Focus**

The sport horse division is tailor-made to showcase the athletic, well-built Arabian horse. With a focus on movement and conformation, its purpose, as stated in the USEF rulebook, is as follows:

“...To evaluate and encourage the breeding of Arabian and Half-Arabian/Anglo-Arabian horses suitable for dressage, working hunter, eventing, jumper, combined driving and competitive trail and endurance, and to provide an opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of breeding programs. Form to function will be emphasized.”

Sport horse judging is based on classic tenets that produce quality equine athletes—for example, balanced conformation—no matter the individual breed being judged.

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**Classes and Formats**

The categories of Arabian sport horse classes include in hand, under-saddle, show hack and “other.”

**IN HAND**

The goal of any breed’s sport horse program is to create an athletic horse that can successfully compete in the open show-ring against horses of any breed. To promote this principle, the Arabian Sport Horse Committee developed an expanded scoring system for the in-hand classes based on movement and conformation.

“As the rules state, ‘form-to-function’ is the main criteria,” Henderson explains. “So, out of 100 points possible, 40 percent is dedicated to movement and 40 percent to conformation.”

For the remaining 20 percent, the committee members also wanted judges to rate manners, willingness and responsiveness of the horse to its handler with 10 percent of the score. The final 10 percent is attributed to breed characteristics, balance, harmony and overall suitability as a sport horse.

**UNDER SADDLE**

The Arabian sport horse under-saddle classes are similar to main ring rail classes, with groups of horses being asked to
Hunter flat classes are among the many show options for Arabian sport horses.

“...The benefit of using open judges for the Arabian sport horse division is that the horses are judged by the same criteria: form-to-function, gaits and conformation. As open judges, we don’t change what we’re looking for in Arabians versus warmbloods versus Thoroughbreds, or at a schooling show compared with a national championship show.”

An Eye to the Future

Another benefit to the sport horse division is that weanlings, yearlings and 2-year-olds can be evaluated in-hand before they are old enough to ride. By using the feedback from the open judges, the owners or breeders can evaluate what their horse will be best suited for and start the horse’s training with an eye to that discipline.

In addition, because the judging criteria remain consistent from year to year, an exhibitor can compare scores. They likely will indicate a horse’s strengths as well as areas where he could be improved through training. Scores can also help breeders...

walk, trot and canter along the rail in both directions.

Entries are judged on performance (purity and quality of gait), manners, conformation, suitability as a sport horse and quality of scope.

SHOW HACK

Many competitors in the show hack division wear formal snadbelly coats. The main difference from under-saddle classes is that riders and horses perform dressage-based collected, normal and extended versions of the walk, trot and canter, and are required to hand gallop, stand quietly and back readily.

Judging is based on performance, manners and quality of conformation, with manners also being of primary consideration in the amateur and junior rider classes.

OTHER CLASSES

The Arabian sport horse division also includes the hunter/jumper disciplines—on the flat and over fences—as well as pleasure carriage driving and dressage. All of these follow USEF standards.

Open Judge Perspective

One of the biggest differences between the main ring and sport horse divisions is the use of open judges, rather than Arabian breed judges. Many exhibitors enjoy the feedback from the broader perspective of the open judge, who might adjudicate everything from warmblood shows to international three-day eventing competitions, such as the Rolex Kentucky CI***.

Robin Brueckmann, dressage judge at the 2007 Sport Horse National Championship show, is a USEF “S” dressage judge and “R” eventing judge. She trains, teaches, and gives clinics around the world.

Sport horse judging is based on classic tenets that produce quality equine athletes.
training. Scores can also help breeders adjust their breeding programs to improve a trait over the long term, such as a croup angle or cannon bone circumference.

**Choosing Your Arabian Sport Horse**

“The sport horse division puts the emphasis on a horse you’re going to ride, not just a horse you’re going to show in-hand for its entire show career,” says Bazy Tankersley, founder of the renowned Al-Marah Arabians in Tucson, Ariz., who has been breeding Arabians for more than 60 years and believes in breeding for quality horses, not fads.

“A successful sport horse should be of the quality necessary to be competitive in the open classes.”

To achieve this, it’s best to choose a horse that fits a certain discipline, both physically and mentally. That’s not to say that one supremely talented and versatile horse won’t do well in dressage and jumper classes, but typically, a horse specializing in the area he’s best suited to will score better than the horse that competes in multiple disciplines.

“For a sport horse, we’re looking for a level or uphill build and balance,” Henderson says. “Hunters need a level balance to show their ease of going, while the uphill balance with withers higher than the croup is necessary for the dressage horse to collect and the jumper to propel over a fence.”

“You also want the front limbs longer than the hind limbs and some angulation to the hocks,” Robin Brueckmann says. “The neck should be set fairly high, which is not a problem with Arabs. The breed tends to be short in the back, so you need to watch that the back is not too short.”

**Welcome Back**

For people who left the main ring Arabian classes, the sport horse division is piquing their interest in returning to high-level competition.

Henderson shares that many competitors especially like the fact that the sport horse is judged by open judges, and they feel their horses are being measured by a standard.

Virginia-based breeders and competitors Denise and Robert Gainey, of Gainey Cornerstone Arabians, showed in the main ring for years, but now they show in the sport horse division exclusively.

“It’s fun! The quality of the sport horses is extremely good, yet the feeling at a sport horse show is low-key and fun compared with the main ring,” Denise Gainey says.

Another reason exhibitors are heading back to the Arabian show-ring in the sport horse division is that the points they earn in open competitions qualify them to enter the Arabian regional and national sport horse championship shows.

Some areas may have only one main ring Arabian show each year that offers sport horse classes. Because a single show isn’t enough to qualify a horse for the championships, riders use their open show points to qualify.

In addition, horses can earn AHA performance horse credentials, such as Legion of Honor and Legion of Merit, through their open show career. These sought-after awards are proof of a horse’s excellent conformation or superiority in the show-ring.

“The division lends itself to continuing improvement, and it’s also fun,” Brueckmann says. “By taking a long-term approach, you’ll improve your horse in his discipline and yourself as a rider, based on your score sheets and judges’ comments. Along the way, you’ll have fun with other like-minded people who are headed in the same direction and share your love for the breed.”
ARABIAN SPORT HORSE CLASSES

Classes offered at Arabian Sport Horse shows can include a variety of disciplines, including:

1. IN-HAND CONFORMATION CLASSES:
   Shown on a triangle at the walk, trot and extended trot

2. DRESSAGE:
   Training Level to Grand Prix

3. HUNTER:
   Flat classes and over fences
   - Green: 2'9" to 3'
   - Regular: 3' to 3'3"
   - Amateur to ride (ATR), Junior to ride (ITR), Amateur owner to ride (AOITR): 2'6" to 3'

4. JUMPER:
   - ATR, ITR, AOITR: 3' to 3'3"
   - Open classes for any age of horse or rider and amateur or professional rider: 3'3" to 3'6"

5. PLEASURE CARRIAGE DRIVING:
   - Working: judged primarily on the suitability of the horse to provide a pleasant drive.
   - Turnout: judged primarily on the performance and quality of the turnout, which means the condition, fit and appropriateness of harness and vehicle.
   - Reinsmanship: judged primarily on the ability and skill of the driver.
   - Freestyle reinsmanship: judged individually on the horses’ abilities and the skill of the driver’s execution of a self-designed driving test.

The Sport Horse Rides Ahead

The Arabian Sport Horse division truly offers something for everyone. From under-saddle classes to open jumpers and dressage, the sport horse disciplines run the gamut of abilities found in the athletic Arabian. For more information, visit the Arabian Horse Association at www.arabianhorses.org

Kara L. Stewart, who showed Arabs in main ring shows for many years, is tempted to head back into the ring via the Arabian sport horse division.
**Characteristics**

Small head with straight or slightly concave profile below the eyes.

Small muzzle and large nostrils; large, round, expressive dark eyes set well apart.

Long, arched neck set high onto the withers.

Short cannon bone, short back, broad and strong loins with fairly horizontal croup, well-sprung ribs and a naturally high tail carriage.

Height: an average of 14.1 to 15.1 hands.

Colors: bay, chestnut, grey, black. Skin is dark except under white markings.
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