A QUESTION OF SOUNDNESS: RETHINKING 'ROARERS' IN THE HUNTER RING

A longtime soundness rule considers 'broken wind' grounds for elimination. However, judges, veterinarians and sport leaders are asking whether every horse that makes a noise should be treated the same.

BY MOLLIE BAILEY



TERISE COLE

When longtime U.S. Equestrian Federation R-rated judge Walter "Jimmy" Lee hears a Hunter making abnormal breathing sounds from the judge's booth, he listens and watches carefully to make sure that he's confident about the noise. Then, if he's sure, he marks a zero on his card.

After all, GR840 in the "USEF Rulebook" is clear: Horses who "roar"—often as result of recurrent laryngeal neuropathy, or RLN (*see sidebar*), making a distinctive whistling or roaring noise while exercising—are not sound.

The rule reads: "Unless specific division rules state otherwise, all animals except stallions and mares in Breeding classes, must be serviceably sound for competition purposes—i.e., such animal must not show evidence of lameness or broken wind. Animals with complete loss of sight in either eye may be found serviceably sound at the Judge's discretion, except in a class over fences where a Judge may ask a rider to change horses."

Judges can find it tricky to tell if a horse has "broken wind" when they sit at a distance from the ring or in an enclosed judges' box.

For Lee, the rule is clear: Unsoundness of wind is the same as unsoundness of limb.

"If he's lame, you throw him out; you don't mark him down," said Lee, who resides in Keswick, Virginia. "If he's a little bit lame you don't say 'Well I was going to give him a 90, now I'm giving him a 75. No. He's lame. He gets nothing. It's real simple, I think."

But not all horsemen agree on how this longtime rule should be applied. Some question whether a horse who makes a respiratory noise but otherwise performs comfortably should automatically be considered unsound for his job. Others point to the practical challenge of determining the nature and severity of a horse's breathing issue during the two minutes a judge evaluates him in the show ring.

"I found over the years, that sometimes they just make a little noise or some noise, and their performance doesn't seem to suffer at all," said experienced judge Tony Sgarlata, who also holds his USEF R-rated licenses. "So, are we being fair to the horse that otherwise maybe won't have a job?"



TRICIA BOOKER

While some horsemen suggested putting a roaring Hunter in the Jumper or Equitation ring, technically GR840 applies to all USEF breeds and disciplines under the USEF umbrella. The rule considering "broken wind" an unsoundness has been in the "USEF Rulebook" since 1954.

Different Judges and Opinions

One thing judges seem to agree upon is that roaring is rare in the show ring, so it's not as if there are a huge number of horses competing with RLN. Some newer judges haven't encountered it at all when officiating. But Sgarlata said he's seen a few horses show up at the main Hunter ring where he's been judging lately who were making a windy noise. Sgarlata pointed out that it can be tricky to tell if a horse is roaring when sitting in the judge's booth, and it can depend on whether one is competing indoors, where the noise can echo, or in a big outdoor ring, where you might not hear the horse at all.

"We judge the horses sometimes with the windows [in the booth] open, [sometimes] with the windows closed," said Sgarlata, who hails from Zone 3. "Sometimes there's

A HIGH BLOWER VS. A ROARER

A horse that breathes loudly isn't necessarily a roarer. Some horses are termed "high blowers," which is when they emit a pronounced "whooshing" noise during the canter or gallop. A high blower typically makes a blowing sound in rhythm with his gait, and it's most often on the exhale. The horse's airway is essentially normal, and it doesn't affect the horse's performance.

A roarer, by contrast, usually has recurrent laryngeal neuropathy, and during exercise the air rushing through the narrowed opening creates the characteristic roaring or whistling sound. This noise is typically made on the inhale, thereby reducing the intake of oxygen during exercise.



MARY JO PETERS

"Is [roaring] really relevant to the performance we're asking of a Hunter? I'm not sure it is," said judge and trainer Robin Rost Brown, who is also the USHJA Hunter Vice President.

a lot of chatter in the booth because announcers are on the radio. So, that horse maybe makes a pass by you once on course, so if you don't have absolute silence in the box, you might miss the fact that the horse is making a bit of a noise."

Because RLN can impede airflow, Sgarlata believes the important question is whether the horse appears to be struggling. To him, a little noise from a horse who looks comfortable is a very different situation than a horse who is struggling toward the end of the course.

The USHJA Officials Education Committee Chair Connie Tramm Hunt agreed.

"If the horse seems to be struggling—really for whatever reason, body soundness or wind soundness—it's our responsibility as stewards of horse welfare to not reward that horse for struggling," said Tramm Hunt, who hails from Zone 5, and holds her USEF R-rated licenses.

But, she added, if the roaring wasn't affecting their performance or way of going, it wouldn't be an automatic elimination for her.

Zone 2's Ralph Caristo said that as a judge, when he hears a horse making a noise, he calls for reinforcements.

"I'll get the steward and say, 'In my opinion I think this horse is making a noise, and I can't give it a score,' " said Caristo, who added that he lets the steward relay his concern to the exhibitor. "I go through the proper channels, and I won't want to give it a score."

Zone 2's Susie Schoellkopf has been training and judging horses for decades. She had a Hunter in her barn that roared, so she arranged for him to undergo tie-back surgery, after which he went on with his career at the top of the sport without roaring.

Like Lee, Schoellkopf agreed. She said she's seen just a couple roarers in her years of judging, and that she's eliminated them. (She said she's eliminated a handful of horses for limb lameness as well.)

"I don't think we should look for it, but if it stares us in the face in a class, we need to address it," she said.

A Rule Across Disciplines

USHJA Hunter Working Group chair Robin Rost Brown and her husband Otis "Brownie" Brown, both longtime judges, disagree on how to deal with a roarer in the Hunter ring.

"For me, personally, I'm a bit more forgiving at the lower levels," said Rost Brown. "Brownie's opinion is if we're to consider roaring an unsoundness, it needs to be considered at all levels, and he will eliminate a horse for being a very significant roarer. His reasoning is if that person goes to the next horse show and says, 'Well, Otis Brown didn't eliminate my horse. Why would you?'

"We had a show in Ocala [Florida] about five years ago, and a prominent judge was judging, and she threw a horse out in a derby," Rost Brown continued. "He had already shown in the Performance Hunters and gotten ribbons, but she felt on that day that his wind was impeded, and she did not give him a score. That created a lot of controversy. But she felt passionate about it, and that's how it stood. The horse did make a lot of noise that day, and you could even hear it on the video. Again, it's different day to day."

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>
> —Susan Schoellkopf

While some horsemen suggested putting a roaring Hunter in the Jumper or Equitation ring, technically GR840 applies to all USEF breeds and disciplines, including Hunters, Jumpers and Equitation, and also Morgans, Three-Day Eventing, Dressage and so on. The rule considering "broken wind" an unsoundness has been in the "USEF Rulebook" since 1954.

There doesn't seem to be a huge number of roaring Jumpers, either. Experienced USEF and Fédération Equestre Internationale Jumper judges and stewards David Distler and Charlotte Skinner Robson each said they'd never had a roarer in their rings, but that if they did, they would eliminate the horse.

The Future of Roaring in the Show Ring

Rost Brown, who also sits on the USEF National Hunter Committee, said that she believes the soundness rule should be discipline specific, and that Hunters should have their own rule. She pointed out that the roaring rule isn't applied fairly across the board.

"Is it really relevant to the performance we're asking of a Hunter? I'm not sure it is," she pondered. "To other judges' points, now so often we sit in an enclosed judge's booth. You don't necessarily hear them the way you used to. Is it fair that a horse shows all season, qualifies for indoors, gets to indoors, and all of a sudden, wow, that horse is making a noise [that the judges can hear]? They can't be considered for a ribbon; that's what I dislike."

Hunt said that the USHJA judges' clinics regularly address roaring, and it was discussed during last April's USHJA Hunter And Equitation Judges Forum, as well. Rost Brown said that both the National Hunter Committee and the Hunter Working Group members have been talking about the possibility of amending the soundness rule and changing how "broken wind" is addressed.

The veterinary perspective adds another layer to the debate: An audible respiratory noise doesn't necessarily mean a horse is struggling to breathe, noted veterinarians Duncan Peters and Michelle Maguire. They added that horses with mild or moderate RLN aren't adversely affected by moderate exercise, such as showing in the Hunters, so for them a horse who roars can be suitable for the Hunter ring. Peters said roaring is more of a problem for Jumpers.

"We have horses [in the Jumper ring] that will tend to get tired at the end of a course because of their fitness level or the degree of paralysis of the muscles of the arytenoid cartilage, and they'll start knocking rails down," said Peters. "I've had three or four cases that had the tie-back surgery done, and those horses became no longer 4-faulters or 8-faulters. Also, those horses [with RLN] will tend to yank down and pull on the rider. The horse is trying to open up the airway, and the easiest way to do that is to have a straight line from nostril to lungs.

"The Hunters go with their head and neck sort of out and forward, a little more, with a loose rein and easy gallop and a constant regular cadence," he added. "That's a lot easier for a horse to manage a breathing problem than a Jumper that's making sharp turns, speeding up, slowing down, going at different rates around the course and getting into a jump-off. It isn't quite as much of a problem for the Hunters."

WHAT IS ROARING?

The condition that causes horses to roar is recurrent laryngeal neuropathy, which happens when there's a weakening of the muscles that abduct the arytenoid cartilage that forms the larynx. RLN typically affects horses on one side of the larynx—usually the left—and causes a roaring or whistling noise when horses breathe, which is most notable during exercise.

Damage to the left recurrent laryngeal nerve, a long nerve that controls the muscles in the larynx, causes the weakened muscle. Roaring is typically diagnosed by using a dynamic endoscope while the horse is being exercised.

Michelle Maguire, DVM, who works at Palm Beach Equine Clinic, explained that the way RLN affects horses depends on how paralyzed or weakened the muscles are. The degree of paralysis is graded on a scale of one to four, with four being the most severe.

"The way it affects horses depends on the degree of paralysis and also depends on their job," she said. "Do they need to perform at their highest level? So, a Thoroughbred racehorse performing at max speed is going to require the entire cross-sectional airway of the larynx to allow air to get through in the lungs to properly oxygenate to have enough energy in the muscles and to do their job."

Horses make all kinds of noises, said Duncan Peters, DVM. A horse with big nostrils might make a blowing sound, and other horses with a displaced dorsal soft palate make a different kind of noise. A horse's breathing can vary depending on weather conditions or how hard a horse exerts itself. Peters distinguished between an inspiratory noise, made while the horse is breathing in, and an expiratory noise, when a horse is breathing out. He said it can be hard for a judge to assess when a horse is roaring versus making a different noise, but he has a helpful trick.

"Roaring is an inspiratory noise," he said. "The way to tell whether it's inspiratory is to watch when a horse is cantering. When the front legs are off the ground they inspire. When the front feet hit the ground, they expire."

The most common treatment for RLN is laryngoplasty, also known as tie-back surgery, which typically reduces the roaring noise, but often not completely. During a laryngoplasty the arytenoid and cricoid cartilage is sutured to keep that half of the larynx in a permanently open position. That makes the horse more prone to aspirate food or water into the airway, so it's recommended that horses who undergo tie-back surgery eat off the ground and have their hay wet down.

RLN is sometimes caused by trauma to the neck, such as a kick, or genetics—or it can be idiopathic, i.e., of unknown origin. But sometimes the cause is iatrogenic, that is, caused by medical treatment, due to poorly administered IV injections on the left side of the neck. That recurrent laryngeal nerve, one of the longest nerves in the body, comes from the head, goes around the arch of the heart and comes back up the left side of the neck near the jugular vein.

"If people are stabbing to try to get into the vein or they get drugs outside of the vein around that nerve, you can cause damage to that nerve and cause roarers," said Peters. "I'd say a large number of horses are roarers because of that."