

## English Disciplines – Show Hunters

English riding is divided into a variety of disciplines, or styles or riding. From pleasure riding to competitive events, each of these disciplines is unique and has its own set of priorities and requirements. One of the most common disciplines in North America is the hunters.

Once hunters were based on the sport of fox hunting. Several horses and riders would follow the hounds across country to chase down foxes. While this sport is alive and well, the modern show hunter is a completely different type of horse.

The early show hunters were solid animals, suitable for both the ring and the fields. They were cherished for their versatility and athleticism. A good hunter was expected to be calm and rideable, yet be athletic enough to make it around a series of jumps without undue stress for horse or rider.

As time passed judges began placing the finer, fancier animals higher in the classes than the old-style often less flashy horses that were better suited to racing across uneven fields in the foxhunt. Thoroughbreds and Thoroughbred crosses became highly popular in the ring because of their lighter build, long stride and athletic ability. Soon the hunter ring was filled with bay thoroughbreds and the heavier field hunter type was rarely seen.

Modern hunters are generally solid horses who are refined, but still have substance. They are prized for their long, low movement with as little knee action as possible. With three clean gaits and a long, relaxed carriage they appear to be gentle, relaxing horses to ride.

So what is a show hunter exactly? A hunter division is divided into four classes, three over fences and one on the flat. There are specific divisions for children of various age ranges, for ponies of different heights, for green or experienced horses, for amateur riders and for professional riders. Each division is set at a specific height that is designed to suit the expected ability level of horse and rider.

Over fences the horse is judged on a smooth, even way of going with effortless jumping ability that does not throw the rider out of the saddle. The horse is expected to canter the course with an even 12' long stride (slightly shorter for ponies). The horse should not speed up or pull back from the jumps as it approaches them. Each jump is judged individually on the horse's style as it goes over the jump. Ideally the horse should jump with a nice bascule that utilizes the horse's back and arcs the horse over the fence in a nice, smooth line. With tight knees that are even in front the horse should stretch its head and neck over the fence bringing its knees up towards the chin. The hindquarters should follow smoothly with tight hocks and form without undue effort. Observers should get the impression that the entire performance is effortless.

Between the fences the horse should be calm and relaxed. Turns should be made with wide, smooth corners. Speed is not a priority, so the softer, more even way of going will always pin over a fast, choppy ride. The ideal carriage of the horse varies from judge to judge, but generally the horse should be long and relaxed with its head slightly above the vertical so it can see ahead of itself in order to approach the fences.

Courses are designed in a combination of straight lines, bent lines, single jumps and diagonals. The plan is generally quite simple and easy for horse and rider to follow. When looking at the jumps themselves, they are generally painted in natural colours and are designed to look like things that you might find when riding out in the fields.

On the flat, horses are judged on the quality of their movement, which should be long and low, with little knee action. If the horse has a little "float" to their stride it will catch the judge's eye. Transitions should be smooth and immediate. At no point should it look as though the horse is giving its rider a hard time, nor should the rider show signs of difficulty in the ride. While equitation is not a priority, a rider who can "sit pretty" will show a horse to better advantage compared to a sloppy, yet effective rider.

While some people ridicule show hunters as being boring and easy, there is a lot of training and riding skill that goes into a top hunter. Admittedly hunter jumping is not nearly as trying or complicated as jumping for the jumper ring, but a truly excellent hunter has every bit as much talent as a top jumper.

Showing in the hunter ring is a great way for riders to get started in the horse show world. By building up good habits over fences and on the flat both horses and riders set up a solid foundation for more strenuous competition in the long run. It is a great discipline for riders with confidence issues with many lower-level divisions available.

The show hunter ring is highly competitive and can be a great direction to focus your riding skills. While the higher levels can be very expensive, the lower levels can be enjoyed with just about any horse and by just about any english rider.

## About the Author

Lydia V Kelly is a writer for [www.HorseClicks.com](http://www.HorseClicks.com), popular classifieds of [hunter hack horses for sale](#), [hunter under saddle horses for sale](#) and [horses for sale](#).

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