The Dirt Rider – My First Show Jumping Experience Julia F., California

It was the Yolo County Fair Horse Show: a hugely anticipated event on a horse owner's calendar. At the show, horses and riders gather from around the country to compete at the exquisite Nelson Ranch. I was present with my mare, Loulou, along with several of my friends. On the second show day, Loulou and I were preparing for a 2'6'' jumping course; it would be the first time jumping Loulou in a show. I had years of jumping practice behind me but never had I competed before. I can remember the writhing, chaotic state my stomach was in as I brushed Loulou's red, glowing coat and sprayed her with coat shine. When I was finished, she looked like a brand of fire with her glossy coat groomed to perfection. But I was unsure of our chances. Would she jump a clear round? Would I spoil it for her by messing up? I longed to show the county how perfect my new, beautiful horse was, but my intense nerves were not helping my confidence.

"Number one eighty-three, please enter the arena," said the cool, calm voice of the announcer. The gentle buzz of voices of gathering spectators drifted through the hot July air. Hearing the announcer addressing my number, I mounted and clucked to my horse and approached the arena entrance. The stiffness of my collar and pressed breeches felt restricting and uncomfortable as I passed through the metal gate. As all eyes drilled into my back, I felt the hot, hard rays of the sun on my face, and a trickle of sweat crawling down my cheek. The manicured look of the jumping arena was intimidating compared to the sloppy, makeshift familiarity of the jumps at home.

"Number one eight-three is the horse on course." That was my cue. Signaling Loulou for a canter, I rode a circle and aimed for my first jump. Leering at me in red and yellow stripes with purple hydrangeas, the jump neared as Loulou's even canter brought me closer and closer. We were upon it, and took off, sailing over effortlessly. I was encouraged and looked toward the next jump. Heels down, sit up tall, eyes over the jumps, pressure with inside leg, steady hand. I flexed my right rein and Loulou turned sharply to face the diagonal line of jumps that came next. I could feel the judge's eyes glued to me, picking out every detail, every minute flaw in my form. The vivid blue and white of the jumps dazzled my eyes as near the line of obstacles. Loulou popped over the first and began to gather speed for the next. Holding her back, I concentrated on the timing. One…two…three…four…five strides and takeoff! Loulou made it look effortless and a smile tugged at the corner of my mouth.

The next part of the course included a tricky turn and a maneuver between jumps that Loulou

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and I had never practiced before. I gritted my teeth as Loulou cantered boldly toward the fourth jump: a stone wall. As I neared it, I sensed her tensing through the soft leather of the saddle. I squeezed her to reassure her, but the falter ruined the timing and she jumped too late, her front hooves knocking against the wall and throwing me forward. Dazed, Loulou was rushing. I quickly regained my balance, but my dignity had been flattened. Trying to pull Loulou up in time for the turn, I leaned out of the saddle and made the turn with two inches to spare, my metal stirrup thudding against the wooden lime green of an oxer jump. Loulou was galloping now…too fast, too fast! The jump came out of nowhere; it seemed to appear in front of us, and I desperately prepared for an emergency takeoff. A quick jolt, a flying sensation, and THUD…I hit the dirt with immense force. At first, my shocked lungs forgot to breathe and I sat in the dust gagging. Looking around behind me, I glimpsed Loulou obstinately pawing behind the jump she never cleared. As an anxious audience looked on, I stood, brushed off my breeches, and with crimson cheeks, trudged out of the arena with Loulou in town.

The dreadful embarrassment of my situation as I had exited the arena on foot will always remind me that no matter how perfect riders can be, their horses will always find ways to humble them and to teach them lessons. Looking back on my experience, I am thankful that I entered that class. Entering a showing arena with challenges my horse and I never faced before was foolish and inconsiderate to Loulou. However, the disastrous ending taught me not to overestimate my ability but to be more patient. As my horse-loving friends would say, Loulou had made me what I deserved to be that day: a “dirt rider.”

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