

My Guide To Some Unwritten Rules Of Eventing

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To our adult amateurs and young riders, we welcome you to the world of eventing. One of the first items that you'll receive after you've joined the U.S. Eventing Association is a rulebook containing the many regulations of our sport. What you won't receive is a code of conduct, the "unwritten rules" that govern how those who've been eventers for a long time act on a daily basis.

But you should learn them, because adherence to any kind of unwritten code is what author Louis Auchincloss calls "obedience to the unenforceable." And it matters.

Every sport has a code of some sort, and, since veteran participants in any sport either welcome newcomers who subscribe to the code or avoid those who don't, it might be useful to understand some key aspects of the eventers' "ethic."

"Rule" No. 1 is that, because this is such a high-risk sport and because we're really all in the same risky boat, eventers always help each other. If I'm at an event, waiting to go out on cross-country, and I see someone who's just finished, I'll ask what to look out for out there. That's because I know, beyond a doubt, that my fellow rider will tell me everything he or she can think of to make my ride a success. Even if it means I beat them. That will always be true. Always.

Or, if a rider discovers that a hole is developing on the left side of the landing in the water jump, or that a blinding slant of sun is making a certain approach dangerous, he or she won't simply go back to the barn or their trailer with that information. They'll tell someone to warn the riders that follow, so that the problem will get fixed. "I help you; you help me." That's something you can count on in this sport.

"Rule" No. 2 is to forget that slogan, "The customer is always right," as it applies to your relationship with the event organizer. You aren't so much a customer as a guest on someone else's property, usually someone who needs you a lot less than you need them.

Organizers who provide the land over which we ride and compete are the very heart and soul of eventing, without whom there literally is no eventing. So we all must be respectful, polite and appreciative to the organizers.

If we see a real safety hazard, we have officials like the technical delegate to whom we address our concerns. We don't complain to the organizer or to volunteers. We don't leave trash. We conduct ourselves as if we were appreciative guests who want to be

invited back. In fact, it's almost a cliché among organizers that anyone who's never organized an event shouldn't be allowed to ride in one, because only organizers can understand the work involved.

"Rule" No. 3 is a corollary to "Rule" No. 2: Always try to do something to give back to the sport. Volunteer to paint jumps, or park cars, or be a jump judge. Give something back, either in time or money or expertise. We're not entitled to ride in events. We're privileged to be the beneficiaries of other people's efforts and money and land, and we all need to reciprocate.

If we lose this spirit of helping out, we shouldn't be surprised if organizers simply get sick of providing the sport that we all so dearly love.

"Rule" No. 4: In rodeo, the toughest horse sport, the code is not to condone even one minute of whining. "So you got bucked off in front of throngs of cheering spectators? So you got hurt in the process? So? Suck it up, buddy, this is rodeo."

Well, eventing isn't quite as tough as rodeo. So how about allowing one hour of petulant pouting, followed by one hour of silent sulking, after which, "Enough, already!" Face it, the only person other than you who cares that you got a 3 in your dressage test, or had a refusal at the water jump, is your mother. And even she can stand only just so much of a crybaby attitude. Who ever heard of a sniveling cowboy? Do you want to be known as the sniveling eventer?

"Rule" No. 5: Eventing isn't a particularly "glitzy" sport, where you can roll in with multiple grooms, sit around idly until it's time to ride, and then after riding, hand your panting horse off to some paid employee so you can go shopping or get your nails done. Eventers appreciate horsemanship, a work ethic and a do-it-yourself approach to making sure that your horse is healthy and happy.

Eventers know that many other horse sports aren't noted for this kind of an old-fashioned ethic, and they hope that if you need the psychological stroking that being coddled provides, you'll go ride in one of those other sports--and leave eventing to real eventers.

"Rule" No. 6: Excellent event riders aren't apt to say things about their horses like, "He won't go on the outside rein," or "He won't jump corner jumps." Instead they might say, "I can't get him to go on the outside rein," or, "I'm having trouble getting him straight to corner jumps." They blame the horse less and their own inadequacies more.

I could go on, but these are the kinds of "rules" you won't find in any book. But they're more crucial to the continuation of eventing than any written rules. Yes, we all break these rules some of the time, but usually we try to get back on track.

In general, eventers tend to judge other eventers according to their courage, their "true grit," their commitment, their relationship with their horses, and their positive attitude. Eventing is a risky, hard, down-to-earth sport, and it isn't for everyone.

"Obedience to the unenforceable" means just that. No one can force anybody to adhere to or even subscribe to a code of conduct like this, but I can promise you that those who do obey the unwritten rules are going to find themselves much more warmly welcomed than those who don't.

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