



Russell Christie on **Rob Roy** — HOYS 2003 lightweight cob winner and reserve champion — congratulates Robert Walker with Tim Briggs' heavyweight and champion **Boy George**.

Photo courtesy of Real Time Imaging

The art of presenting a show cob

Three experienced ride and conformation judges tell us what they expect to see in a top show cob performance.

By Natalie Reynolds

Q. What qualities do you look for in a top class show cob?

'A top show cob must have excellent conformation and presence,' explained Richard. 'They must have four good, ground-covering paces and I take particular interest in a cob that has a good walk, as it is the first thing you notice when they enter the ring. They should carry themselves well and be uphill, looking through their bridle. For me they must have a good step. Despite them being of cob type, they are still a show animal and must move well. I want to be impressed by their way of going and I like to see them travelling with purpose and have a good outlook. There is an amusing old saying when looking at a show cob, that they must have the head of a lady and the backside of a cook.'

'First impressions really count,' Brigit stressed. 'A cob should have a purposeful walk, a trot that is not too flamboyant — but not choppy either — a well-balanced canter and the ability to demonstrate a smooth extension. For a cob to be a good sit-on and ride, they should have a matching front and rear and be in proportion with a good shoulder. I look for quality in the limb to carry its bodyweight.'



Good feet are essential, with a pastern neither too upright nor too sloping. Ultimately, the animal must be a cob and nothing else masquerading as one. Your average cob and a top class show cob are worlds apart in terms of quality and performance.'

'A cob must have short cannon bones,' said Michael. 'The limb must match the top and really I am looking for a strong animal that shows no weaknesses. The hindquarters and hocks should be powerful. I like to see a good-fronted cob that exhibits spark and energy. Cobs are often quirky creatures and have these flamboyant characteristics. I do not like to see their character stifled too much with excessive working-in, or looking robotic in their performance. They have to come into the ring and make you want to look at them, with their ears pricked and have an almost jolly disposition. I love to see a good gallop and when this is executed properly, they should lower and cover the ground, displaying lightness and manners when asked to come back. A cob is historically a utility animal and I am looking for a very strong and sound example with a good foot.'

Q. Do you expect the performance to differ between a lightweight, heavyweight and a maxi cob?

'Both light and heavyweights need to be balanced,' said Richard. 'They need to display athleticism and have a flat movement which is low to the ground.'

Clare Trebble's heavyweight cob **Morrows Marksman** champion at Great Yorkshire Show 2015, ridden by Simon Reynolds.



Photo courtesy of ES Photography

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Showing producer and judge Richard Telford has been involved with horses all his life. He has been professionally producing show and event horses for over 30 years. Richard has competed and won at most of the UK's prestigious shows including HOYS, Olympia, Royal Windsor, Great Yorkshire and The Royal Highland Show. He has produced and competed event horses up to CCI2* and during the reduced 2020 season, qualified three horses for the British Dressage Regional Championships. Richard judges for BSHA, SHB(GB), NPS, Arab Horse Society (AHS) and the RoR.

Richard Telford



Brigit Ensten

Brigit Ensten is on the judging panels for the BSPS, BSHA, SHB(GB) and the Suffolk Horse Society. She has judged HOYS twice and all over the world, including in Australia, South Africa,

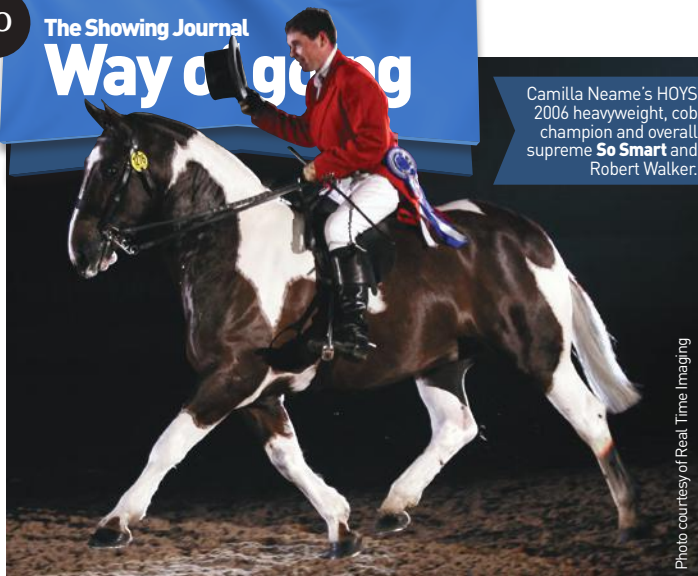
Royal Dublin Show and Balmoral. Brigit had a diverse equestrian upbringing with her parents Lionel and Ann Ensten, whose stud produced winning racehorses under Rules, point-to-pointers and show horses — both in-hand and under saddle. Brigit has competed on show ponies, working hunter ponies and in show jumping. She recalls winning a point-to-point on a homebred which also won a hack class. She was Junior European eventing team silver medallist in 1979 and produced many young event horses, crediting her mentor Ruth McMullen MBE as a great influence on her equestrian career. Brigit is also passionate about hunting, beginning with the Enfield Chase aged five and proud to have hunted the two Gold Cup winners Midnight Court in Leicestershire and Burrough Hill Lad in Yorkshire.

Michael Cooper is an all-round horseman who evented at advanced level and rode for Great Britain twice in the Rural Riders European Championship eventing teams in Holland and Switzerland in 1995.

Michael later branched out into showing and has a particular interest in working hunter classes, in which he was second at HOYS with UFO and second at RIHS with Stravinsky. Michael has also been successful in flat classes, including posting wins at Hickstead Derby, The Great Yorkshire and Royal Windsor on a variety of animals. He was third at HOYS with the heavyweight cob Dylan Thomas. Michael is well known for sourcing and producing young horses and takes great pleasure in finding and bringing on youngsters, often progressing them through the ranks. He officiates for BSHA, SHB(GB), IDHS and the Heavy Horse Society.



Michael Cooper



Camilla Neame's HOYS 2006 heavyweight, cob champion and overall supreme **So Smart** and Robert Walker.

Photo courtesy of Real Time Imaging

'A maxi cob is essentially a taller cob but should not stand much more than around 15.3hh, in order for the correct type to be maintained. The conformation should reflect the standards we look for in the measured-in categories, where we are looking for a good amount of flat bone, with short cannons. They should not, for example, be a small hunter type with its mane taken off'

'A maxi cob needs to be in proportion, not have too much daylight underneath it and conform to the standard and the type required for the light and heavy categories,' said Brigit. 'In terms of performance, any category of show cob should have athleticism and power. The trick with a cob is to maintain a light feel and that is something I look for in a good performance, regardless of whether they are of the heavier variety. The skill of production and perfecting a pleasing performance is learning to understand cobs in order to get the best out of them. It is all down to the ability of the rider to be balanced, which helps to prevent the cob becoming strong. The footfall should be light across the ground and you should not be hearing them coming.'

'No matter if they are a light, heavy or maxi, they should be able to move lightly across the ground,' explained Michael. 'The way of going for any show cob should be balanced and show purpose. You want to see them moving powerfully from behind and slightly off the bridle in front. I never like to see them on their forehands or bearing down into the ground. Even the heavyweights should have a lightness of movement and display self-carriage. We have to remember that although they are of cob type, they are still a show animal.'

Q. Do you have any tips for riders, so they may show their cob off successfully to the judge?

'Riders should aim to keep a good space in the ring, so that the judge can see the horse in the best possible light, without being crowded or covered up by another competitor,' explained Richard. 'The art of good ringcraft comes with

experience and from looking around the ring to find a suitable space without cutting anybody up, or allowing others to overshadow your performance. This is especially important when the combination is in front of the judge. Riders should use the whole ring, without rushing the horse but maintaining a lovely natural rhythmic movement that complements their animal. The trot should not be rushed, and the canter should look easy and ground-covering, without being too slow.

It must be remembered that cobs were originally all-round animals, and so they should display strength, power and balance that is reflective of a workmanlike performance.'

The late Lady Caroline Tyrrell's 2017 HOYS cob champion **Our Cashel Blue** ridden by Allister Hood, pictured with judges John Newborough and Michael Cooper. The pair went on to be champion again in 2019.

'The art of presenting a show cob at the highest level is quite complex,' said Brigit. 'You can have the best cob in the world, but if it is not correctly trained and presented it will not achieve its full potential. Basic training

is so important and there are no quick fixes. Teaching a cob to leg yield allows it to become manoeuvrable and supple. So often, we see cobs that can only go in straight lines and have that rigid look. Cobs can have very powerful necks and if they become too thickset, they become difficult to keep supple and soft in the contact. Riders must also learn to be savvy when presenting a cob in conformation. Make sure they are stood up straight and square in front, and allow them the rein to stretch their necks so they do not look tight and stuffy. Trotting them at the right speed — and not interfering too much — is also a skill to be practised. You have to remember that at the top level, every detail matters.'

'The best advice I can give when riding a cob is to make a friend of them rather than an enemy,' explained Michael. 'You never want to start a fight with a cob! You should aim to ask them rather than tell them — a little bit like a mare. They have big personalities, and in my

experience, can take things to heart if they feel under pressure. Instead, try and work them whilst hacking out to keep them interested. If not, they can very easily use their strength and bodyweight to either get strong or block you with tension. Always aim to keep the contact light and your body position in balance with them. Often people underestimate how complex cobs are, thinking that they are an easy option. Although some are, of course, there are also some that require a bit of 'kidology' in order to win them round. This is especially apparent if you get a very good cob that might have exceptional power in a small chunky frame, and it does take skill to channel that strength and scope in the right way in order to achieve the partnership you require. They are essentially little people with great big personalities.'

Q. Where do you think some riders go wrong with cobs?

'Some make the mistake of having a cob that is too heavy and they instantly lose the lightness that the judge is looking for,' said Richard. 'Another common mistake is having them too tight in front, which restricts the movement and also presents the illusion of a short, stuffy front — or perhaps a strong cob. Cobs, like any show horse, should display a natural way of going, whereby they should swing over the ground in a comfortable way. Rhythm and balance are the key, and it is the rider's job to portray this to the judge.'

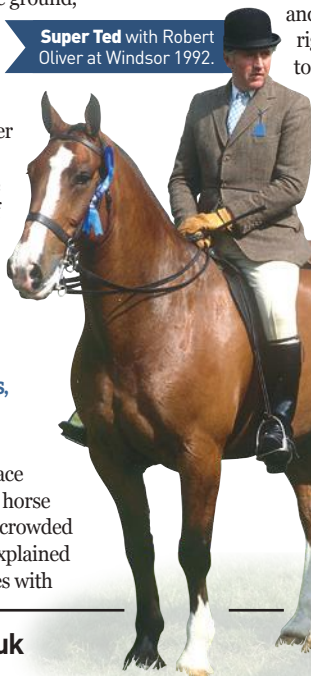
'We so often see overweight cobs,' added Brigit. 'Excessive weight affects the performance and the ride. If you are having to manufacture one with weight, then you have the wrong animal, and it is not a true cob. A wide animal has no wither, and it makes for a very uncomfortable ride, as though you are sitting on a round barrel with no definition. When the shoulders get overloaded with weight, this affects the stride. There is nothing worse than watching or riding a stuffy, obese cob. Riders should aim to train their cobs to move forwards, covering the ground — especially in the canter — encouraging lightness and athleticism. A common mistake is when cobs curl up and do not show a true canter. They become stiff in the back and just go in an up-and-down motion. This is especially noticeable in a big grass ring. My advice would be to train out of the manege, hack out and canter in open spaces with a group of horses to develop a true canter that covers the ground with purpose.'



Simon Charlesworth and the multi-champion lightweight **Fait Acobblé**.

Photo courtesy of BS Photo Art

'There is certainly an art to presenting a show cob,' said Michael. 'Sometimes, I see tack that is inappropriate and does not complement the cob. It is worth considering that not every cob will need an excessively thick noseband. Take a critical eye to your cob's head and work out if it needs to be broken up with a thicker noseband or not. If they have a lovely head, a normal hunter noseband is more than sufficient. You never want to cover up a handsome head with tack. Also, saddles are never easy to fit



Super Ted with Robert Oliver at Windsor 1992.

Photo courtesy of Bob Langrish

Nicky McConville and her multi-garlanded Randalstown Rolex.



to a cob. Often, they are flat over their withers and round. As a ride judge, there is nothing worse than riding on a saddle that either does not fit the horse or does not fit me. I am a tall man at 6' 1" and so it is essential that the saddle, the leathers and the irons are appropriate. A correctly fitting saddle should also serve to show off the shoulder in a show horse, and this is especially important in a cob that may be slightly challenged by being too short-coupled. It is all about being critical of your animal and deciding what looks and feels the best. It is never a one-size-fits-all for all cobs.'

Q. What makes a good cob ride from a judge's point of view?

'I like cobs to be flexible and forward without being strong,' said Richard. 'They have to be fit enough and feel like you could go hunting on them for a couple of hours. Cobs should be mannerly and most of all comfortable. I make my judgements according to the overall quality and performance of the animal, considering any spooks or misdemeanours in relation to the rest of the class.'

'Cobs should carry the rider forwards happily and comfortably,' said Brigit. 'The first few steps in walk can tell you a lot about whether there is tension or acceptance of the aids. They should stand whilst mounting and dismounting. I do not mind a wrong lead or a small shy, as long as there is a fair reason. I want to ride a cob that shows expression — not a robot. Good conformation will indicate whether they are a good sit-on. This is where the conformation and the performance are connected. A good sloping shoulder, for example, will normally produce a comfortable and smooth stride and serve to provide a good place for the saddle to fit, placing the rider in an effective and comfortable position. Overweight horses lose the flex in the neck and they become unmanoeuvrable. I am not looking for foot-perfect — mainly I am assessing if they are comfortable, pliable, biddable and pleasing.'

soundness, whether they are comfortable and powerful — a cob that can cope with and cover different ground.'

Q. Do you have any pet hates when it comes to cobs?

'I tend to dislike cobs that are over-bitted or not bitted correctly,' explained Richard. 'A lot of consideration should be taken when determining what bit your horse should go in. Sometimes we see riders following the latest trends or resorting to quick fixes, such as the use of a Swales, without first correctly tackling the issue which may be reflective of poor schooling. Too many people are using bits that they do not understand the action of, such as elevator bits. Quite often the fault is with the rider's hands causing a problem in the first place — using too much hand to gain their balance and not enough leg. The cob then learns to bear down on the bit, becoming heavy and unresponsive. Correct training is essential, especially if you are to achieve the lightness and feel that judges are looking for at the highest level.'

'Good conformation is so important,' said Brigit.

Sue Tennant's HOYS 2018 cob champion **Silver Diamond** ridden by Magnus Nicholson with judges Sarah Chapman and Brigit Ensten. The pair went on to retain the heavyweight crown in 2019.



'A good cob ride should make you smile,' said Michael. 'I like to feel as though I can travel. They need to be smooth and never on the forehand, with enough length of rein in front of you. Above all, they should be comfortable and show expression. I want to feel as if they are taking me around the ring, and not having to niggle at them. As judges, we only have a very limited time to assess the ride and it is so important that they are well prepared. Be aware of what the judges are looking for in a good ride. I am not too concerned about a slight spook or if they are a bit sharp. I am assessing

Grandstand ridden by Roger Stack



Q. What really catches your eye in a top cob performance?

'Without doubt, a combination of correct conformation and movement catches my eye,' said Richard. 'A cob that displays all of the attributes discussed is a rarity. There have been a few cobs in the past that stick with you and it is good to keep a standard and a benchmark with which to compare when you are judging.'

'The best cobs are just naturals,' said Brigit. 'Of course, they have to be well produced but the natural born performers that have all the attributes of conformation, movement and temperament are few and far between. Often it will take a very skilful person to get the best out of

them, but when you watch a proper partnership, with the rider and cob in unison, they really do stand out. It is obvious from the ground when a cob is supple and rideable, as the rein contact is a little looser and the rider looks to be being carried around the ring, rather than having to interfere too much with the horse.'

Simon Reynolds and Hallmark IX.



'An exceptional show cob is a very rare thing and so when one does appear and it is well produced and presented, they tend to be dominant,' said Michael. 'They are a type and not a breed, so quite often they have no breeding recorded, or are a throwback. Trying to breed a show cob would be a very difficult thing to do. The conformation is equally as important as the performance. Also, they must have the personality to want to please and carry various ride judges throughout their career in all sorts of different settings. To find an animal that moves and performs, but also has the all-important limb and cob qualities, is what defines the absolute best.'

'I really do not like "ploddy" cobs that are unresponsive to