

“Members must ride, show, or exhibit horses they have owned or leased and personally trained for 90 days prior to the county and state fair.”

- 4-H Horse Contest Guide, page 5

This single statement has been the topic of more questions, discussions and debates than any other “rule” in the contest guide. This handout is intended to help clarify what this statement means. Of primary importance is to understand the intent of this rule. To do that, we must first understand the purpose of the 4-H program in general.

4-H is a youth development program. Its purpose is “to assist youth in acquiring knowledge, developing life skills, and forming attitudes that will enable them to become self-directing, productive members of society.” 4-H uses a variety of projects as tools to do all this. Horse is only one such project.

By using a project of interest to the member, our goal is to develop each individual to his/her maximum potential. The purpose of fairs is for 4-H members to demonstrate what they have accomplished with their projects during the year.

We can meet the goals of the 4-H program only if the accomplishments are the result of the 4-H members’ own work. The project must be the 4-H member’s project. Members in a 4-H sewing club would not exhibit a garment that someone else had sewn. Members in a photography club would not exhibit a photo that someone else had taken. Likewise, in a horse club, members should not show a horse that someone else has done all the work on. If a professional trainer does all the work with the horse, then it is really their project and not the 4-H’ers.

This brings us to the intent of the 90-day rule. The rule states that the 4-H member must have “personally trained” the horse for 90 days before fair. The intent is that for at least 90 days before showing a project animal, the horse truly is the 4-H member’s project and he/she is doing the work with it.

Much of the confusion over this rule arises from the question of whether or not anyone else can ride the horse during those 90 days. The rule does not state that no one else may be on the horse. It simply says that the 4-H member must “personally train” the horse. Again, the intent is that a professional trainer (whether a family member or not) should not be riding the horse during this time. 4-H members may still take lessons and receive help, but a trainer should not get on the horse and ride it. Similarly, during those 90 days, no one but the 4-H member should be exhibiting the project horse, as showing assumes a certain amount of training is being done.

Beyond these guidelines, counties have flexibility in determining what they will and will not allow. Some counties have chosen to enforce a rule that no one but the member may ride a 4-H project horse during those 90 days. Other counties allow family members (as long as they are not professional trainers) to use the horse occasionally for such things as

a trail ride, working cattle on a ranch, or riding in a parade. Many counties have much more lenient policies with junior members (especially where safety is a concern) than with intermediate or senior members attempting to qualify for state fair. The important thing is that each county have established guidelines, including a process to review individual variance requests and consequences of infractions. Exact county rules may vary as long as they maintain the intent and integrity of the state's 90 day rule.

Additional questions should be directed first to the county extension agent and then, if necessary, to the state 4-H office.

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