

2026 NACTA JUDGING CONFERENCE ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY



NACTA

NORTH AMERICAN COLLEGES
AND TEACHERS OF AGRICULTURE

ILLINOIS STATE

Agriculture

Horse Judging
Contest Official Rules

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NACTA 2026 Horse Judging Contest Official Rules – Hosted by Illinois State

1. This judging contest will consist of placing classes of both halter and performance. Four classes will require the presentation of oral reasons. The reasons classes will be announced after all class placings have been submitted.
2. Two- and four-year institutions will compete in separate divisions, both for team and individual competitions.
3. Two- or four-year institutions may enter 2 teams consisting of four (4) members, with the top three (3) scores counting towards team score. The total score for the lowest overall scoring member will be dropped; however, this individual can still qualify for individual awards if applicable. A competing individual may compete in this contest up to two (2) times as an official contestant in a national NACTA Horse Judging contest.
4. Individuals, in addition to being on a team, may also participate for individual awards. Two- or four-year institutions may enter up to 10 individuals (2 teams of 4 plus 2 additional individuals).
5. Neatness of dress is greatly encouraged. Contestants may not wear any pins, badges, or article of clothing that identifies them personally or their school/team. Contestants may not wear hats while judging classes, but they may be worn while giving oral reasons.
6. All halter and performance classes will consist of four horses numbered 1-2-3-4. Back number corresponding to the horse numbers will be worn by all handlers and riders.
7. Classes will be judged in accordance with the current year AQHA Rulebook and/breed appropriate rule books for non-Quarter Horse Breeds. Any needed clarification will be made upon team/individual contest check-in.
8. Five to Ten (5-10) total classes will be judged, consisting of two to four (2-4) halter and three to eight (3-8) performance classes. Performance classes may include:
 - Trail
 - Western Pleasure
 - Western Horsemanship
 - Western Riding
 - Hunter Under Saddle
 - Hunt Seat Equitation
 - Showmanship
 - Hunter Hack
 - Reining
 - Ranch Riding

- Working Western Rail
 - Ranch Trail
9. **Performance:** Performance classes may be rail or pattern classes, or a combination of both. Patterns will be given to coaches at team/individual check-in and contestants can use them as reference during the contest.
10. **Halter:** Halter classes will be separated by age group and sex. Depending on the availability of horses, halter classes are open to breed variability and similar age groups may be combined into a single class (i.e. 2- and 3-year-old mares).
1. Based on National Horse Judging Team Coaches Association (NHJCTA) guidelines, contestants will have 15 minutes to view each halter class. Contestants will be instructed to face away from the arena when horses are being brought into the arena, and will turn to face the horses once time begins.
 - i. Side View – 3 minutes
 - ii. Front View – 1.5 minutes
 - iii. Rear View – 1.5 minutes
 - iv. $\frac{3}{4}$ view – 4 minutes
 - v. Close inspection – 4 minutes (2 minutes per group - if facility, contest, and officials permit)
 - vi. Final Side View - 1 min
 - vii. Contest officials will decide if halter horses will track.
11. Reasons will be given on four classes, with at least 1 being halter. Contestants are encouraged to take notes on all classes. Reasons classes will be announced at the end of judging.
12. **Contest Procedures:** Timing and conduct of classes will be conducted under the guidelines of the NHJTCA. All horses will be considered sound of mouth, wind, and limb in halter and judged as they go in performance. At the beginning of the contest, rules regarding soundness, note taking, and no talking will be restated for contestants. If gait asymmetry is suspected, contestants can take this into consideration for the horse's quality of movement. All tack and attire will be considered legal. Each class will consist of four horses. Handlers/riders will be identified with numbered vests.
13. **Communication:** While the contest is in progress, there will be no talking between contestants or anyone except as directed by the contest officials. No pagers, cell phones or other forms of communication will be allowed on any contestant. Violation of this rule will result in disqualification. Coaches will not have contact with their contestants at any time during the judging and reason session. If a contestant has special accommodations, these will need to be communicated to

the group leader prior to the start of the contest. Violation of this rule will result in disqualification. Placing scantrons will be provided.

14. **Materials:** Contestants are responsible for the proper marking of all class placing cards. Contestants must provide their own No. 2 pencil only. Contestants may use clipboards, notebooks, plain paper, official AQHA score sheets, the 2025 AQHA Rulebook or other approved rulebooks, as long as these items are clean and free of marks. Horse judging manuals, texts or lists of terms are not permitted. Violation of this rule will result in disqualification. A group leader will be placed in charge of each group of contestants. Contestants should remain seated until scantrons are called for and are responsible for turning in their scantrons to the group leader. Late scantrons will not be accepted.

15. **Description of Cuts:**

1. Horses are extremely similar; no obvious reason why one should be placed over the other; or, both horses have numerous faults, and none supersedes the others; placing is strictly a matter of personal preference; placing varies among official judges.
2. Horses are very close, but one horse has one or two qualitative or quantitative advantages; most official judges would not switch the pair, but half of the contestants could logically switch the pair. Serve as tie-breaker official in case of ties.
3. Horses are of unequal quality, but there is a logical placing in favor of one horse; either one horse has several faults or several advantages; all official judges would agree on the placing; no more than one third of contestants would be expected to switch the pair.
4. Horses are not of similar quality; one horse has several decided advantages based on many points; all experts would quickly see the placing; no guesswork or personal preference required to make placing; no more than 10% of contestants would be expected to switch the pair.
5. Large number of extreme differences between the horses; placing is obvious to everyone on first, quick observation; careful study not required for the placing; pair consists of an inferior horse vs. a consistent winner; only very inexperienced, uninformed contestants would switch the pair.
6. Horse not even comparable; differences reflective of a champion quality horse or performance vs. a horse or performance that is not of show quality
7. Largest cut; differences reflective of a world-class halter horse vs. an extremely poor quality or lame horse; or a world-class performance vs. a disqualified performance.

16. Determination of Ratings:

- i. Fifty (50) points shall constitute a perfect mark on placing and 50 points shall constitute a perfect mark on reasons.
- ii. Final standing shall be based both upon the placings and oral reasons. In classes where no reasons are required, the class placing only will be considered.
- iii. Contestants are encouraged to not use notes during reasons, and if notes are used the highest score given will be a twenty (20). A contestant who is reasonably well prepared and gets through a complete set of reasons \should never receive a score less than twenty-five (25).
- iv. Two (2) minutes will be allowed for each contestant to give oral reasons to the judge, and reasons that exceed the two-minute limit will be penalized.

17. Tie Breakers: Based off NHJCTA guidelines with final decisions made by the contest Superintendent/Tabulator.

1. If tied for a division award in halter or performance, the contestant or team having the highest reasons score in that division will be listed first.
2. If tied for a division award in reasons, the contestant or team having the lowest overall placing score will be listed first.
3. If tied for individual or team overall award, the contestant or team having the highest overall reasons score shall be listed first.
4. If still tied for either of the above, the contestant or team having the highest score in placing reasons classes shall be listed first.
5. If still tied, the contestant or team with the highest overall placing score in all classes shall be listed first.
6. If still tied, the contestant or team with the highest single class reasons score shall be listed first.
7. If contestants are still tied, the youngest contestant or team shall be listed first.

18. Official placings and cuts will be presented after the completion of oral reasons.

The decision of the officials and all class placings will be final.

19. Awards:

1. Teams: Top 3 teams and individuals for two- and four-year institutions will receive awards in the areas listed below:
 - i. Halter
 - ii. Performance
 - iii. Reasons
 - iv. Overall
2. Individuals: Awards will be given to 1st place individuals from two- and four-year institutions (2nd and 3rd place will be acknowledged but no awards given) in the following areas:
 - i. Halter
 - ii. Performance
 - iii. Reasons
 - iv. Overall