



The art of looking good

Kaitlyn McAleese

[Back to Articles...](#)

The Art of Looking Good:

Why braids and polished buckles are more important than you think...

As a groom and a professional braider, making horses look beautiful is something I spend a lot of time and energy doing. In fact, it is what I spend *most* of my time and energy doing. As a university student and (mostly) active member of society and the global community at large, I've spent an equally large amount of time asking myself, why? Why, amidst a global environmental crisis, a financial meltdown and a poverty stricken third world am I spending almost all of my time making hunters and jumpers shiny and polishing buckles with a toothbrush? Although I'm still working on validating my job as a service to the world's underprivileged, (I'll be sure to alert the media when I do) I am absolutely certain that exceptional turn-out of our horses is a meaningful use of time. For the equestrians in the throws of an existential crisis (I'm looking at you under employed, 20-something year olds), this one is for you.

When you go to the show is your horse the one that is dirty, hairy, wearing pink polos and sporting a mane reminiscent of Spirit of the Cimarron? Or do you have the clipped, shiny and braided horse with the pristine tack and polished hooves? If you fall into the former category, not to worry, I pass no judgement. Well normally I would, but not this time, I swear. Your peers however, are definitely judging you. There is a time and a place for not caring what other people think but for the record, at the horse show, especially a rated horse show where other people are putting in the effort to look polished, is not one of those situations.

I think the most important point to be made here is that everyone knows what the winners look like. Even lime-green-saddle-pad-girl and mohawk-mane (you know who you are) know what professionals at the top of the sport look like when they compete. Their horses have beautiful coats that speak of an exceptional feed and grooming program, and the whole picture is clean, sophisticated and understated. Tight and even braids, clean white saddle pads, polished boots, well-fitting and cared for equipment. The look is impressive and you immediately assume this person knows what they are doing. If everyone knows what the winners look like, then why doesn't everyone try to look like them when given the chance? One of the best ways to learn is by watching, specifically, by watching people who are better than you. Look at what they are wearing, watch how they warm-up, pay attention to what their grooms are doing for the horse. Watch and learn. If you are watching the big Grand Prix and seeing horse after horse come into the ring with exceptional turn out and still bringing a medium-clean horse in an un-oiled bridle to the ring, chances are you aren't observing and applying the training techniques or stylistic components of the top riders either and that is where your performance as a rider will truly start to suffer.

You may win with your unbrushed tail and dirty boots, and I don't think anyone begrudges your success based on that alone, but if you were watching and learning you would notice that nobody who takes such little pride in how they present themselves to the rest of the industry makes it all the way to the top in this sport. If you ask me, that's the whole point isn't it? People who look the part tend to ride the part because, as their turn out suggests, they are working harder than the people who can't even find the time to break out the curry comb. They respect their horse, their sport, and themselves



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[Back to Articles...](#)

enough to always make the extra effort. They took the time to braid, so chances are they will also make time to ice and bandage their horse, and chances are their horse will try harder and jump better than your horse next time. Good turn-out tends to go hand-in-hand with sound horsemanship because it is based on having healthy and happy looking horses, the best equipment and an exceptional attention to detail.

When I get a horse ready for the ring, I spend as much time on the 0.75m jumpers as I do on the Grand Prix horses. They are all bathed and braided, and they all look like winners. I may not be solving world hunger, but I can take pride in the fact that I am aware of my surroundings enough to take note of who is doing a good job and who isn't, and adjusting my behaviour accordingly. If I've lost you up to this point here's the big picture point I'm trying to make here: if you're going to do something, do it well. In horses, in life.... work harder, perform better, look like the winner and people will take notice. So break out the boot polish and braiding elastics because we're changing lives here, people!