

And now introducing the 2019 panel of perfection!

MEET THE CELEBRATION JUDGES

By Sadie Fowler

The challenging task of selecting judges for the Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration is one of the toughest jobs the Celebration Board faces each year. It's a duty that's taken seriously and done with great deliberation.

The group of committed individuals from the Celebration Board charged with the difficult task of hiring the judges for the world championship horse show have several factors

to consider as they form the panel each year. Mainly, their goal is to create a group with the right chemistry and diversity, with each person on it also exhibiting the knowledge, integrity and work ethic required to get the job done, and done well.

It often starts with about 40 people who are able, eligible and willing to judge the Celebration, and from there, the committee prudently narrows the field down to the best

five. If you're one of those five, you're in for perhaps the gig of a lifetime ... But make no mistake, it won't be easy.

The process begins with the selection committee sending a message to every Triple A judge to ask them two basic questions. Number one, are they available? And if so, would they like to be considered for the panel?

A COMMON DENOMINATOR OF HONOR

Once the wide list is narrowed down to five and those individuals are called and officially offered the job, no doubt, there's a common denominator in terms of the typical response to the invite.

"Almost always they seem very proud and often surprised," said Celebration CEO Mike Inman. "It's an honor to judge the Celebration."

Inman has been through the process several times now, and he's heard lots of great reactions about the job. It's exhilarating, it's an honor, it's meaningful and fun. It's also incredibly challenging.

"Of all the things I hear, there are two common themes regarding what's hardest about judging the Celebration," he said. "One, it's very mentally and physically taxing. Two, the size and quality of classes makes it very challenging."

One thing many folks don't realize is that when you're judging a large horse show, especially one as important as the Celebration, judges aren't just looking for the top two horses. When any given classes is filled to double-digits with world champions, you can see how selecting the top 10 in the right order might be quite difficult.

"When you have more world champions in a class than ribbons to give out, that's quite a challenge," Inman said.

THE RIGHT BLEND OF PERSONALITIES AND EXPERIENCE

As always, this year's panel consists of a blend of veteran judges to first-timers to the Celebration. The 2019 panel is comprised of Jamie Bradshaw, Nathan Clark, Jamie Hankins, Kenny Smith and Robbie Spiller.

The 81st edition of the Celebration takes place Aug. 21 through Aug. 31 on the historic show grounds in Shelbyville, Tennessee. Interestingly, it's very rare for the show to end in the same month it begins. What's not rare is the quality and blended-to-perfection panel that's been created with the intent of having another Celebration that no one will soon forget.

Both Smith and Spiller will be making their first Celebration appearance as judges.

"Last year's panel included two new faces and we felt like the mix of three experienced judges along with two new ones was a good mix and produced great results last year," Inman said. "In addition, The Celebration is committed to expanding the judging pool and giving more of our licensed judges an opportunity to work our shows."

Clark and Bradshaw will return for the fifth time to mark the cards. Clark previously judged in 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2016. Bradshaw last judged the Celebration in 2013 but also marked the cards in 2006, 2009 and 2011.

Hankins will be returning to center ring at The Celebration for the first time since 2011 and will be marking the cards for the seventh time. Hankins judged in 1994, 1996, 2001, 2003 and 2008. Hankins judged with Clark in 2008 and with Bradshaw in 2011.

The Celebration has been committed to diversifying its panels and this year's panel only includes one judge who has marked the cards at The Celebration in the last five years.

"We are excited for this year's show and appreciate these five judges for agreeing to take on one of the most prestigious jobs and responsibilities in our industry," Inman said. "Judging the Celebration is the most important job our judges can accept and we expect this year's panel to do an excellent job."

These five individuals have judged at most all of the industry's major venues, indicating a widespread amount of confidence in all of them by the industry at large, which was a major factor in the selection committee's decision process.

A CLOSER LOOK

Want to meet the judges? In the days leading up to the Celebration, each of the five judges were asked a variety of questions by Sadie Fowler, editorial director of the Walking Horse Report. What follows, in no particular order, captures a glimpse into each of their mindsets going into one of the most important work assignments of their lives.

M E E T T H E J U D G E S



Kenny Smith

Kenny Smith is a lifelong resident of Manchester, Kentucky, where he met his wife Renee Finley Smith. Together, they have three daughters; Dalia Smith-Harr, Molly Smith and Annabelle Smith. As a family, they own a convenient store in London, Kentucky. During his childhood, Smith was first introduced to Tennessee Walking Horses through his uncle, Calvin Hacker, who owned and trained horses throughout his life. He attended The Celebration annually and loved the sport dearly. Prior to the Celebration, this year Smith judged the Fun Show.

WHR: How have you prepared mentally and physically for the Celebration?

Smith: My daughters said I had to lose weight and increase my daily exercise to prepare for the show, so that's what I did.

WHR: Who was an early influence in your life and why?

Smith: Throughout my life I have been blessed with parents, family and friends that have supported my love of horses.

WHR: What is one principle in life that has guided you and why?

Smith: My Dad always said, "Get up, get your clothes on, get to work and the rest of it will take care of itself."

WHR: What is something you've learned in life that can be applied to judging this important show?

Smith: In my experience, I believe the worst decision is no decision, and that is especially true of judging.

WHR: What advice would you give to exhibitors?

Smith: The best advice I can give is to stay on the rail and show your horses.

WHR: How did you feel upon receiving the calling with the invite to judge?

Smith: At first, I was honored and then I thought, "Oh no, I've got to buy some clothes."

WHR: What are a few classes you're most excited about judging?

Smith: I'm excited to judge the Amateur Owned and Trained since Dalia and I have always shown in that class.

WHR: What has been your most difficult assignment as a judge?

Smith: When I judged a youth exhibitor class without enough ribbons for all participants.



Nathan Clark

Nathan Clark is married to Anna Clark and together, they have two kids; Frank, 13, and John Winston, who is eight. Clark has been showing horses since he was nine and he has passed that love on to his own children who also show. Showing just how much of a family affair it all is, Clark even met his wife while showing horses. Outside the show ring, Clark is a project manager at Woodward Construction & Design.

WHR: What other shows have you judged this year?

Clark: Magnolia Classic in Corinth, Mississippi and the Columbia Spring Jubilee. That's it until the upcoming Celebration.

WHR: How did your journey into judging begin?

Clark: I have been judging since 2002 and I always enjoyed judging, even as a kid. I even did youth judging contests as a child several times growing up at the Celebration.

WHR: What advice would you offer first-time judges?

Clark: Worry about the next class — not the last one.

WHR: Do you think the current judging system is the best system for this horse show or would it be of any benefit to offer separate panels for pleasure and performance?

Clark: I like the current system. I judged in 2012 with a split panel. But I think having one panel allows for the judges to stay in rhythm and stay fresh. Everyone now days is very capable to judge both divisions as most shows offer a good selection of classes throughout the year.

WHR: The Celebration is considered to be a huge honor, but nonetheless, it is also a huge challenge. Describe how you feel going into the show.

Clark: The first week is tough, both physically and mentally, because we are judging morning and night. The heat can be a little tough. But the overall feeling is that it's a great honor to be asked to judge and I'm very much looking forward to it.

WHR: What's your life like outside of horses and what are you looking forward to doing after the Celebration?

Clark: My son Frank will be starting his first year of junior high football and he really enjoys that so we will be looking forward to that. We also plan to camp, trail ride and attend some college football games.

WHR: Who has been one of the most impactful people in your life and why?

Clark: My grandfather was an early influence in my life; he went everywhere with me watching and showing horses.

WHR: What advice would you give to someone new to the horse show industry?

Clark: Have fun, that's what it is all about. Have fun and enjoy the friendships and the competition.

WHR: If you've made a bad call as judge, what have you learned that helps you recover quickly?

Clark: Don't worry about the last class. Worry about the next class.

M E E T T H E J U D G E S

WHR: What classes are you most excited about?

Clark: I'm always most excited judging the two-year-olds, three-year-olds and juvenile classes.

WHR: How important is it for a show like the Celebration to move along quickly and how does this happen?

Clark: It is very important, and speed comes from having confidence in your choices.



Jamie Bradshaw

Jamie Bradshaw is from Arab, Alabama, and is judging the Celebration for his fifth time. Married to Chrissy, the Bradshaws have two children, Brody, 16, and Ella, who is 12. Bradshaw is a former horse trainer but now enjoys life in the poultry business, which allows him to spend more time with his family. Judging is one of Bradshaw's very favorite things to do. When he's not doing this or working on his 41-acre poultry farm he is extremely busy playing his part as a father and husband. Both of his children play sports and Bradshaw even serves as the president of the Booster Club for football and baseball.

WHR: What other shows have you judged this year?

Bradshaw: This year I judged Cornersville and the Fayetteville Blue Ribbon, followed up from Tunica last year.

WHR: You still hold the record for being the youngest judge to ever judge the Celebration. Tell me about that.

Bradshaw: It was 2006 when I first judged the Celebration and I was 29. I was told I was the youngest person at that time who had ever judged and I don't think anyone else has been younger and judged since that. I'll never forget that first night walking into the Big Oval. The nervous emotions were there of course, but to be standing out there with all those people. Just the prestige of it alone was very special because I never imagined having the opportunity to do something like that. The juvenile riders were the first to show on my first night and when they came in I was just blown away.

WHR: What have you learned about judging the Celebration since that first stint that you will apply to this year?

Bradshaw: I really, really love judging. I mean I probably enjoy it more than anyone else out there. One thing you learn from judging the Celebration is that there are so many classes and in each of those classes there are so many good horses, and everybody wants to win.

You have to tie the class and move on to the next class, where you're going to crown another world champion. You need your focus to do that. So whatever you did in the last class, it's over — prepare yourself for the next class. Also, a 10th place ribbon means a lot to a lot of people. Tying first through 10 is as important as tying the first three. When you judge you're judging first through 10 and when the classes are filled with such quality, sometimes you run out of ribbons.

WHR: Is there any other advice would you give to newer judges to the Celebration?

Bradshaw: Tie the best horse and move on, and remember, it's your opinion. It's what you've been hired to do.

WHR: Do you miss being in the training business? Why did you change paths and what are some pros and cons of each?

Bradshaw: I trained horses for Ferguson Farms for 17 years. Basically, before Mr. Ferguson died, back when he became sick, he got out of the business and when he got out I decided it was the right time for me. I didn't want to go far and in fact my 41-acre poultry farm is just down the road. There are pros and cons to everything, but I enjoy working for myself. I love farming and being able to take care of something that's my own. Also, I get to spend more time with my family.

What people need to know and might not realize about horse trainers is they work all week so they can work all weekend. So another advantage to what I'm doing now is that I'm able to spend more time with my family, which is important to me.

WHR: How did you meet your wife? Was she also in the horse business?

Bradshaw: Actually, her dad was the fire chief of a small town and he was putting on a horse show and she stopped by to check on him and I was lucky to meet her that night.

WHR: How do you prepare for the Celebration?

Bradshaw: It's a very tough job, physically and mentally. One thing I do is jog, which may sound silly, but I believe in order to prepare mentally you have to be physically prepared. The way I prepare is by increasing my exercise routine to make sure my legs are strong.

WHR: What makes you qualified to judge the Celebration?

Bradshaw: I think my experience helps a lot and with experience comes the confidence you need to make a decision and stick with it and be able to move forward efficiently.

WHR: What advice would you give to a first-time exhibitor?

Bradshaw: My advice is this: The ring is big so find a great spot where the judge can see you. It's hard to see a horse if they are two and three deep. So find a spot and show your horse.

WHR: Is there anyone in particular who served as an important influence to you?

Bradshaw: I respect a lot of the older trainers who came before me. While I trained they always had a positive influence on me ... The horse business has been very good to me. It's a big family and I raised my kids in it so the whole industry has had a huge influence on me and I still have many friends in it that I talk to to this day.

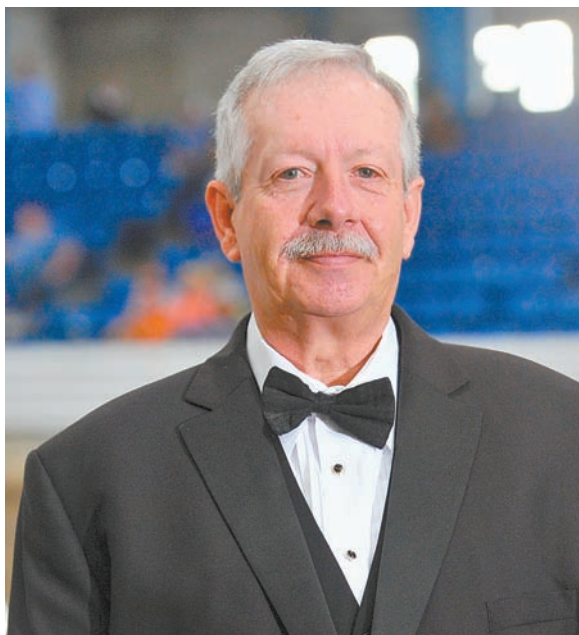
WHR: When you wake up each day, what is it that drives you?

Bradshaw: The good Lord blesses me daily and I give all the credit to him every day. I try to serve him, my wife and my kids.

WHR: How would you describe the state of the industry right now?

Bradshaw: From the outside looking in, I think horses are better than they've ever been and it's a horse that can be marketed to anyone. Not only should the industry be proud of that, but they should also be commended for it. I think our industry is not heading in the right direction but rather has already gone in the right direction and people should notice.

M E E T T H E J U D G E S



Jamie Hankins

This year marks the seventh time experienced judge Jamie Hankins of Paris, Kentucky will contribute to the Celebration judging panel. A third generation trainer and native of western Kentucky, Hankins grew his training business in the heart of horse country in the central part of the state alongside his wife, Jennifer Hankins. His children are Amy Northrop, Chad Hankins, Jarrod Hankins, Justin Hankins, Logan Hankins and Claire Hankins. When not training, Hankins stays actively involved in his children's lives and loves attending University of Kentucky basketball games in the winter.

WHR: Tell me your thoughts on this year's panel.

Hankins: I have always been pleased in who they select. The committee does their job well, and they work hard to get the right blend of not only experience but also personalities. There's quite a bit more to the selection process than people realize and I'll tell you, I'm really excited about this year's panel. I've judged the Celebration with Nathan and Jamie (Bradshaw) before and they're great to work with. I have judged another show with Robbie before and she's great too, and Kenny, I know him real well and I know he'll be great to work with so I'm excited.

WHR: How did you feel being asked this year. Any different, considering you've judged in numerous times in the past?

Hankins: The Celebration has done a good job blending the old with the new to satisfy the industry and keep the pool fresh. I was just as excited to be asked to judge the show this year as I was the first time. It's an honor and a privilege to be asked and it's a duty I'll never take lightly.

WHR: What other shows have you judged this year?

Hankins: I judged some major shows last year and sat out this year, since I had put my name in the pool. Since I had done that I just didn't want to be out there too much.

WHR: What advice would you offer a first-time Celebration judge or someone interested in putting their name in the pool next year?

Hankins: I would tell them this: Yes, you think you are going to be overwhelmed and you will be overwhelmed. But keep your cool and remember you were hired for the job for a reason. Also, look at every horse in front of you and remember everyone paid the same entry fee to get in so look at every horse and don't let things get to you. Know the rules and refresh on them ... There's no way to describe what it's like to stand on that west grandstand on Thursday night. I'll never forget the first time I did it. My best advice is to simply keep your mind right and your head on straight and refresh, refresh and refresh.

WHR: Do you think the current judging system is the best option?

Hankins: I've been around a long time and I'm probably showing my age here. I've done it under a variety of circumstances, from a divided panel, to when they used the lottery, to when they'd use the red, blue, white and yellow marbles, to spinning to see who is call judge. As much as you think other options might work better, or think that two panels would give the performances judges some rest they might need ... it really is better just having one. Yes, it is physically hard, but once the panel gets into their mode they need to stay in rhythm and I think having two panels, one for pleasure and one for performance, disrupts that rhythm. Plus, it's very costly.

WHR: What is something you've learned about judging the Celebration from an early experience doing so that you can apply to this year?

Hankins: I know to look where I'm supposed to be looking and not to concentrate or get side-tracked looking down those turns because you'll miss a lot of horses. I had a great mentor in Mike Carpenter and I'll never forget him telling me this. The crowd might be going wild looking at those top two horses battling it out but you have to just let them battle it out, focus and keep looking where you're supposed to be looking so you can tie the next eight. Another thing I learned early on is to be very careful in terms of writing down your numbers. It can be very easy to transpose numbers.

WHR: On that note, you bring up a good point about getting the numbers right on the cards. How helpful or important is the ringmaster? Tell me what their value is to you in terms of the little details like that.

Hankins: Very! The ringmasters at the Celebration are very important and the Celebration has the best out there. Some of the one night shows don't necessarily have the best ones because often they are

doing it on the side and they just aren't as qualified. In that case it can be distracting. But at the Celebration, they are well-trained and they are not hired lightly either. They aren't in your way and have a subtle way of looking over your shoulder and help double check your numbers and trust me, if you transpose one or write a number down twice they're going to know it. Having good ringmasters saves a lot of time and effort and in my opinion they are invaluable.

WHR: How do you prepare for the Celebration in the weeks leading up to it?

Hankins: I try to get rested and stay away from the daily grind. People will want to talk to you about it and congratulate you and, while I appreciate all that and I know they mean well, I do my best to keep to myself and get away from all that. I like to stay alone as much as possible and get rested up so I can be prepared and fair. I try not to read the papers or talk to anyone so that when I'm in the ring I am only focused on exactly what I'm seeing in that moment. In order to be ready for the Celebration you have to be rested and have an open mind.

WHR: You mentioned Mike Carpenter being an early influence. Tell me more about this.

Hankins: I remember last year when they made an announcement during the show about him having judged the Celebration 13 times. Experience is the best teacher and I learned so much from Mike. He really helped teach me to keep my head in the game and hopefully I can do the same for some other younger folks. I guess everyone likes to be a mentor to somebody.

WHR: What else would you like to say about the Celebration? What would you like for our readers to know?

Hankins: It's the Celebration. Everybody prepares so much, from the officials making the show happen and the leaders of the industry, to the trainers, grooms, riders and owners ... But when it comes Celebration time it's all about the exhibitors. It's their time to shine. I'd like to tell those exhibitors to ride their horses and ride their horses like it's the Celebration.

WHR: Any other advice to those exhibitors riding their horses?

Hankins: The Big Oval is a big ring and it's hard to stay open. But I'd say this: You've been taught how to show and position yourself. More than likely, the Celebration is not an exhibitor's first show, so use the skills you've been taught. Don't over or under ride your horse. Position yourself and ride your horse at the right moment. That's what it's all about.

WHR: As you go through your day-to-day life as a trainer or even judge, what keeps you motivated and what are you striving to do?

M E E T T H E J U D G E S

Hankins: There's a lot of people who have placed their trust in me and I just want to constantly be the best I can be for my clients and those people counting on me. I try to work hard and do my best for my clients, when I'm judging I try to stay up on the rules. I stay up on the rules, stay in compliance and do things the right way. When you do this everything takes care of itself.

WHR: How would you describe the state of the industry right now?

Hankins: I think we are at an all-time high. Horses are bringing more money than in years, horses are looking great and we've all studied and learned so much and come a long way with breeding and training. We're presenting a good, modern horse and things have come so far. I wish the powers that be would see that and give us a chance. I wish they come see our horse, give it a chance and be a part of the many great things this industry offers.

WHR: Lastly, what's it like going into the final class of the Celebration? Can you tell me how that feels?

Hankins: It's the last class and you are working on adrenaline at that point. The morning classes have been over a while at this point so you're rested and you have your second wind. What you feel in that moment is "This is what it's all about." I hope this year is the best we've ever seen. It feels exciting and like, "This is it!" You never lose the thrill of that moment ... the thrill of preparing to crown the next World Grand Champion. Yes, let's do this ... Let's go crown the next World Grand Champion!

Robbie Spiller

Robbie Spiller, a native of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, has been involved with horses all her life. She grew up on a big working farm and dairy but had a fondness for horses from day one. Having first showed at the Celebration in 1964 in the Roadster Pony class, Spiller later enjoyed showing in the juvenile and pony division, back when everyone had to canter. She won her first blue ribbon in 1974 under the direction of the C A Bobo and sons stables on Delights Champ in the 15- 17 juvenile division. She has owned and operated Spiller Hill Farm in Deason, Tennessee for the last 28 years. Having shown and been involved with every aspect of the horse business, Spiller now mainly specializes in trail and field trial horses for riders all across the country.

WHR: How did you feel upon being called and asked to judge this year's Celebration?

Spiller: When I received the call to judge this year's show it was an answer to a life-long goal. It is such a honor that I wish my Daddy and some of my friends that have passed away could be here to share this experience with me. But it also showed me that if you believe in yourself and your abilities, that with a little perseverance and hard work you can fulfill one of your life's ambitions.



WHR: Prior to starting your own operation here in Tennessee, who are some other trainers you worked for that have influenced your career?

Spiller: After moving to Shelbyville permanently, I worked for many great trainers including Steve Hill, Albert Lee Rowland, Wink Groover, Howard Roberts, Buddy Hugh, Phillip Wilson and David Landrum.

WHR: What other shows have you judged this year?

Spiller: I judged the Manchester show in May and also the very first Summer Sizzler in July. I currently have no commitments after the Celebration.

WHR: Describe how you're feeling going into this assignment.

Spiller: Having attended every Celebration for over 50 years, it has been a life-long goal to judge this show as I believe it is the highest honor a judge can receive to be chosen for this event. It is also the most challenging. It is my responsibility to give each entry the total consideration they deserve.

WHR: What are some things you have learned from other assignments that you plan to apply to judging the Celebration?

Spiller: I have worked hard to prepare myself so I can give every exhibitor my full attention. I try to see every horse not only from the rider's point of view, but also from the fans who are very educated in what they like. However, it is my job to be able to see and evaluate each entry from a professional standpoint. To me, it is very important to realize how important each horse and their performance is to every rider.

WHR: What advice would you give to exhibitors?

Spiller: Don't worry about anything but showing your horse. Give yourself every advantage as long as you do not interfere with other riders or the safety of others. Also, enjoy your ride!

WHR: In your opinion, how can the industry attract newcomers and market itself better?

Spiller: This is something I feel very strongly about. We are missing many ways to promote our very versatile horse. Most times it is a progressive thing when you start riding. However most people are competitive and think maybe their trail horse might be good in the ring. And it goes from there. We know we have a great horse. We need to reach out to people and let them know that the Tennessee Walking Horse has something to offer each and every age group and level of experience.

WHR: How would you describe the state of our industry?

Spiller: The state of our industry is on the upswing in more ways than one. I see this in sales, attendance and enthusiasm. We are the most optimistic bunch I know and we have a horse to be proud of. I think more people are realizing this.

WHR: Do you ever feel as though you've made a bad call as a judge and if so how do you recover or prevent this from interfering with your mental focus moving forward?

Spiller: Every judge has made a bad call or one you second guess yourself on. However, it is very important not to dwell on it and judge every class with a clear mind and a fresh start. After the show you can let yourself see how you could correct what made you see things from that perspective.

WHR: Describe your thoughts on this year's panel.

Spiller: I am so honored to be a member of this year's panel. It's a great combination of experience and a fresh perspective. We are a diverse group and each has a strong background in all aspects of judging. I think we all respect each other's opinion, without having to agree on every call.

WHR: What is something about judging that many people might not realize?

Spiller: What most people don't realize is how badly most judges want to do a good job. It's very hard physically, mentally and emotionally. It's a way to showcase your knowledge and love for the breed and to contribute back to the industry. I would love to see every owner and exhibitor judge a show made up of their friends and peers and sign their name to each card to be made public. Maybe it would help to see that it really is a hard job.

WHR: Tell me, in your opinion, the factors that play into moving the show along most efficiently.

Spiller: It is very important for a judge to keep the show moving along. However, not at the expense of giving each entry the opportunity to show their horse to its fullest advantage. It is also up to show management to get the entries in the ring in a timely manner and to have ringmasters, a paddock master and an announcer on the same page.