

45 IDEAS – SURVIVAL TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL EVENT COVERAGE

MODERATOR

Pat Trowbridge is English Group Publisher – Active Interest Media— DressageTodayOnline, Practical Horseman and In Stride. He began his publishing career in 1996. During his over 20 years; he has held many positions including Advertising Sales Representative, Advertising Sales Manager, and Advertising Director for Equine Group Publications, Director of Corporate Special Project, Associate Publisher for Trade Titles and Vice President/Group Publisher: Equine & Farm. Trowbridge grew up riding horses on his family’s small farm in Kansas. He resides in Southern California with his family.

PANELISTS

Megan Arszman has been a writer in equine media for more than 14 years, starting with an internship with The American Quarter Horse Journal. After a few years of working on the inside of magazines, from the Journal to NRHA Reiner and The Horse: Your Guide to Equine Health Care, Arszman is now a freelancer. In her time, she has covered events such as the World Equestrian Games, the Breeders Crown, the Breeders Cup World Championships, the Kentucky Derby, NRHA Futurity and Derby, AQHA World Show, seminars and conferences, as well as the American Kennel Club National Agility Championships. Her portfolio includes website and print feature writing, social media coverage and management, and extensive marketing and building relationships with the press in her current role as the director of marketing for the Indiana Horse Racing Commission.

Jennifer Bryant is a freelance writer, blogger, and photographer. Bryant has covered Olympic Games, World Equestrian Games, World Cup Finals, national championships, selection trials, and other high-profile equestrian events for clients including the United States Dressage Federation, the United States Para-Equestrian Association, and TheHorse.com. She learns something about riding and training from every event she covers, and she tries to bring her perspective as a longtime rider, competitor, and horse lover to her reporting and photography.

Diana De Rosa is a veteran equestrian photo journalist, who has traveled the world and has recorded equestrian history for over 40 years. Her stories and photography have taken her to over 30 countries. An accomplished rider herself, De Rosa understands the horse world from many different angles. A language major in college, De Rosa went on to run a riding school, then was editor of an equine magazine for 13 years and eventually focused on her writing and photography. She has over 1000 published stories and photos to her credit. She has received numerous awards for her photography. She has been one of the few journalists to be credentialed to cover the past eight Olympic Games (including being on assignment for USA Today for the 1992 Olympics). She has also covered or been on staff at every World Equestrian Games, numerous Pan American Games and World Cups. She is also on the executive board of the American Horse Publications (and a past president) and the Press Club of Long Island.

Jennifer Paulson has a 20-year history in publishing, media, and advertising. She's covered almost every major Western event, from cutting, cow horse, and reining to world shows and World Equestrian Games. Paulson's work history includes editorial positions with The American Quarter Horse Journal, Ride with Bob Avila, Western Horseman, Horse&Rider, NRHA Reiner and NRHA Pro Trainer. She recently started her own creative strategy business, Jen Paulson Creative, to consult on projects for associations, brands and publications.

Larri Jo Starkey since joining The American Quarter Horse Association staff, has crossed the United States repeatedly and has traveled internationally a few times, covering through words and photos every type of event an American Quarter Horse can compete in from halter to racing. Starkey's background is in newspapers and ranching, and she now serves as senior editor for AQHA Publications, a division of AQHA media. She writes and edits for the website, for social media and for all four of AQHA's print publications.

1. **Dress the part.** Know what kind of event you are attending and the attire expectations before you go. If you are covering an event such as the NRHA Futurity or the Kentucky Derby, and you might have to walk in dirt, don't wear heels. Dress comfortably, but not sloppy, and try not to stick out too much.
2. **Read everything you can about the event in advance** – official communiqués; press kits, accredited-media memos on transportation, food, and accommodations; event website; venue website; hotel website, transit website(s). The material may be dense and English may not be the writer's first language, so read carefully. Several times at an event I discovered I knew important details other journalists had skipped over.
3. **Look for a different stories.** Most everyone is going to cover the winners, biographical background, how it happened and how it compares to their past stories. You may also be required to do this but always keep a couple of things in mind when you do: Are you putting in takeaway quotes of interesting facts in that story? If it's about a horse or a person, ask the questions that go beyond like, what do most people NOT know about you? Do you have a hobby or a favorite author? What about your horse, when you think back to the times you've spent together what stands out? Always think in your mind what the takeaways in your story will be. Are there interesting details that people remember? I once did a story on David Distler and the title of it was – Take a Look in His Truck. David has a collection of baseballs and when he can he gets them signed. I bet not too many people know that. Those are the kind of takeaways you want people to leave with.
4. **Know your subject.** The members you'll interact with are deeply involved in and passionate about their sports. Show them respect by knowing the ins and outs of the event, as well as some of its history.
5. **Cover more than just the event.** If I'm spending Association dollars to travel to an event, I'm going to get more than one story. Before I travel, make arrangements to capture at least one additional story every day I am on the work trip.
6. **Get to know the people in the press office and make them your friends.** The press/media office is your go-to for not only a place to stash your equipment safely, but to rest your weary feet. Respect the people who work there – they've been at the scene since setup day and probably arrive way before you and don't leave until after you do. They can be your best friend if you offer a fresh Starbucks or something other than concession food and might even help you locate sources.

7. **Scope out the areas around your hotel, the venue, the press center, etc., in advance** as much as possible. Where is food available, and during what hours and days? Are there restaurants, drugstores, food markets, laundromats, etc., within walking distance? Pull up Google Maps and request walking directions for an estimate of how long it will take for you to get from point A to point B. Don't assume you'll have a car. At some events, there is little to no parking available for accredited media. It's more common to stay in official media hotels and get to and from the venue in event-provided media shuttle buses.
8. **Equipment details.** As a photographer there are three things I always check before I leave. Do I have an extra battery for my camera(s)? Do I have extra batteries for my flash? Do I have extra cards for my images? I also make sure that everything is fully charged before I venture out.
9. **Bring snacks.** Lunch hour and breaks are hard to come by at major events. Bring snacks you can easily eat between interviews. (And gum or mints!)
10. **Introduce yourself to the official photographers.** It's the second thing I do when I get to a show after checking in and securing my credentials. I assure the photographers that I'm there for editorial purposes only and will not be scab-selling my photos. If you will be purchasing photos later for editorial use, make arrangements with the photographer's business manager.
11. **Attend the press conferences, but don't give away your best stuff.** Always take the time to attend the press conferences, if the management sets one up. For one, it's a sign of respect for not only the winners, but for the management. Two, it's a great way to listen to the interviewees and get the general information, without asking them to repeat it many times. Ask your own questions to contribute but save some for one-on-one time. You don't want your coverage to be a mirror of everyone else's.
12. **Invest in comfortable, practical, versatile clothing** that can straddle the line between not getting ruined in the dust or mud of a horse show and looking somewhat professional. Pack layers and good rain gear. Jeans and t-shirts feel miserable in hot, humid conditions; technical fabrics wick moisture and dry quickly. Don't leave home without comfortable walking shoes, a good hat, sunglasses, and sunscreen.
13. **As a writer, ask these questions.** Do I have my tape recorder? Do I have my small computer? Do I have a pad and pen? Do I have my Fast Facts (with the information about my contact if needed)?
14. Don't over-represent yourself to an editor. Be honest about your understanding and knowledge of the event so the editor knows what to expect from you or what they need to educate you about.

15. **If you're part of a team covering an event, don't lament if you don't get a plum assignment.** Things change, during the course of a show, and sometimes the plum assignment has to be reassigned. When that happens, the plum is likely to go to the person who had a good attitude rather than to the person who pouted.
16. **Get their digits.** When you're conducting a one-on-one interview, make sure you ask for your source's phone number for any follow-up questions. Even if you already have their number in your contacts, ask again, because you never know when someone has a new number.
17. **Don't be an ugly American.** Be polite to the press officers, who are always harried, overwhelmed, and tired. At international events, even ones held in the US, officials are often not American. Europeans are more formal than we are. Greet people when you arrive and leave; don't just walk up and say, "Are the results available yet?" Say please and thank you.
18. **For major events, like the Olympics.** I start my packing at least a month ahead of time. When you pack last minute it's very stressful. So, I start figuring out early what I need, and I make a check list. Then I choose a place to put everything as I organize it. About a week ahead of time I pack everything and then 1 or 2 days before I unpack everything and repack everything to see if I really need everything I have packed.
19. **If you didn't do #14...fake it till you make it.** The subjects of your interviews are passionate. That means they might expect you to know every horse they've shown or stud they've stood. If you don't know, research it after your interview.
20. **Network before you go.** AHP is a great place to meet reporters and photographers who routinely cover an event that might be new to you. AHP members are generous people who are more than happy to share tips and tricks and etiquette for a particular event, including attire. Just ask.
21. **Keep your eyes and ears open.** You might be there to cover an event, but that doesn't mean you should only focus on that. Take some time to walk around everywhere you have access to – the barns, the warm-up arenas, vendors, etc. Listen to the conversations and see the trends. This is a great way to get more story ideas to pitch later, or to go ahead and grab so you have them in your wheelhouse. Don't feel like you are relegated to only attending the event you're covering and nothing else. You don't have to hang out in your hotel room, attend as much as you can. If there's an ice-cream social, jump on in! If a big sale is happening, attend (just make sure you don't raise your hand). Get out and about. It's fun to experience, a great way to immerse yourself in the discipline, and sometimes free food!

22. **Be adaptable.** Schedules change, sometimes with little notice. Monitor your texts and e-mails as well as the notice board in the press room and any social-media pages used for communication among accredited journalists. Roll with it as best you can. Commiserating with other journalists about the lack of communications and other complaints is almost a mandatory activity at big shows.
23. **Accreditation for major events is different.** When I say major, I mean things like the World Cup, Pan Am Games, Championships, World Equestrian Games and any assignment that involves international travel and where you will be for over a week. Unlike the normal events we cover, those events sometimes require you to apply over a year before they begin. So, make sure you reach out early to find out the deadlines and that you meet every deadline. If you don't, you won't get accredited.
24. **Pick up the phone.** If you're doing event coverage remotely, don't expect that professionals or non-pros will be checking their email to respond to your queries. Text them to set a time for an interview and call.
25. **Save a little something for later.** When you're writing your event coverage each night, don't empty your notebook for the web piece.
26. **Do your homework.** If you're unfamiliar with a discipline or event that you're about to cover, take time to do your homework before you arrive. Also, follow along with the results, read the press releases and know the scores so you're in the know, regarding who is leading, who has a good chance to win, etc. It's OK if you don't know everything. Sometimes that can give you an advantage. But you want to go out there feeling comfortable and ready to jump in on the conversation at every chance.
27. **Be proactive.** You may be told to request all interviews through the press office, but if you really want to interview that top rider, get her/his mobile number and contact her/him directly. The press office can help facilitate contact with someone you don't know, but things can and do slip through the cracks.

28. **Packing your equipment.** I have multiple bags that I bring with me. The difference depends on whether I must bring my long lens. But know where you put everything. If I'm doing an event without my long lens then I bring two cameras, one video camera, a flash, diffuser and three lenses. I always pack the same way so that I know where everything is. I use a second bag that I can put on top of the bottom bag with the accessories I might need on the job. These include a shoulder harness, lighting, microphone, chargers and other miscellaneous items. Then I decide which I need in the way of tripods and monopods. For local jobs that I can drive to, I'll bring a sturdy tripod. For jobs that I fly to, I have a special tripod that folds down to a foot and a half. If I really want to tighten what I take, I can also convert it to a monopod, but in most cases I'll bring a monopod as well. When bringing my larger lens, I will decide where I want that lens to go before deciding on my packing. If anyone wants me to show them how I packed for this trip I have my equipment here.
29. **Read past coverage.** Inform yourself both on the event's history and on the way assigning publications typically handle event coverage.
30. **Brush up on a few phrases in other languages.** If you're covering an international event like the World Show or the NRHA Futurity, you're going to have international winners. You need to be able to introduce yourself and ask at least one question in Spanish, French, Italian and German.
31. **Go the extra mile.** You're attending this event to cover it for a print article. But don't think that's the only thing you can do. As the editor if they want a quick web write-up after completion of the day (and be sure you get it in as quickly as possible) or ask if they'd like for you to do some tweets or video. We're in the age of Backpack Journalism, meaning it's not just about writing a story for a print magazine, but you should also think of web pieces, social media pieces and branching off for other works.
32. **Leap at any opportunity.** I was toiling away in the press room at the 2018 World Equestrian Games when a press officer shouted: "Anyone who wants to interview the German dressage team, come to this location in five minutes." It was a spur-of-the-moment informal press conference, and I dropped everything (except my camera and recorder) and ran. I was one of only 2 or 3 English-speaking journalists to get a few minutes "alone" with the team, including gold medalist Isabell Werth. It's far better than a formal press conference with 100 journalists in the room and the riders up on the dais.

33. **Know the airplane you are taking.** Smaller planes have very small overhead bins and for those you cannot fit certain bags. I have a special bag designed by ThinkTank that has been sized to fit in the overhead bins. Even though I have to fight with the steward to prove my bag fits, in the end it does fit and they let me bring it on board. For larger planes, where you can fit a normal size overhead bin bag, I always take my ThinkTank bag that has four wheels because it saves my back especially for long trips.
34. **Work your connections.** When finalists are set, ask people you know in the industry about the horses and rider so you can present informed questions to winners.
35. **Respect the procedures laid out in the media credentials release you signed.** Don't jump the line and steal interviews from the staff that has been there since 6:30 a.m. Don't shoot photos where you're not supposed to be. That's a good way to get your credentials revoked.
36. **Be social.** If you are planning to do some social media coverage of an event, make sure you know the official hashtag(s) and the official handle(s) of the event. You don't want to be tweeting with one hashtag, only to find another media outlet is using a different one. If there are any questions, or no official hashtag, don't be afraid to ask your fellow journalists what they plan to use, so there's some consistency.
37. **Keep your eyes open.** It's a horse show. Everybody you want to talk to is on the grounds...somewhere. You'll spot riders, grooms, coaches, and judges walking around the trade fair, getting coffee, and eating meals if you look around. Don't barge in on their lunch and expect an interview, but it could be your opportunity to politely introduce yourself and request an interview for later.
38. **Thieves Lozenges and Inner Defense.** There are two products I bring on every travel trip. Because of them I often stay healthy while others are suffering. Thieves Lozenges is a young living all natural product that is great when you start to feel something coming on, like a sore throat. Inner Defense is a supplement made from essential oils and it has saved me more times than I care to share. I know a ton of people I've introduced these products to that also swear by them. Finally, you must sleep and if you aren't able to get 8 hours a night, you need to get solid sleep for whatever time you can. Here are two things I do if I think I won't fall asleep. I boil bananas and or banana peels and drink the juice before I go to bed or I take an all-natural product called Sleep Essence that I take an hour before going to bed. It gives me a solid 4 hours of sleep and I wake up feeling good. Many times, at major events and depending on how many assignments you have, sleep is a precious commodity. Do whatever you can to stay healthy, so you can function at your best.

39. **Don't take over the media room.** It's there for your use, but don't take up more space than you need or impose upon the event's staff. Get out of the media room. It might be nice and cozy (or have A/C), but the real stories come from the barn aisles, the warm-up pens and the show arena. Exit your comfort zone.
40. **Download and sort your photos the night of the event.** I learned this one the hard way. No matter how late an event is over, I download the photos then sort them into folders with the name of the event, the name of the rider and the name of the horse before I go to bed. I also take a photo of the shot sheet.
41. **No press relations? No big deal.** Sometimes you might cover an event that doesn't have a media room or any one person who is the point person. Prior to arriving, look to see if there is a contact person. If it's a horse show, that might be the show secretary or manager. If it's a conference or seminar, check with the organizers. Don't feel like you're alone on the island. Just realize that you might have to carry your things with you at all time.
42. **Start writing the story before the competition has finished.** This feels weird, but if you'll be on a tight deadline to file, you can't wait until after the medal or awards ceremony to fire up your laptop. Know who the top contenders are, monitor the standings carefully, and begin crafting your report as the results take shape. Adjust the angle and rework the lead (and results info) as needed when it's over, but by then it's almost more a matter of editing than drafting.
43. **Share accommodations and have fun.** I often work with a few other equine journalists because we each have different strengths. One may be good at finding and organizing the details of the event. Another may be good at finding accommodations. And still another might have friends in the area who can offer advice. There can also be sharing items with others or to help when something you need breaks or gets lost. The buddy system never hurts. And it's always nice to be able to find some time to enjoy the location you are at even though that is not always possible. The pictures you take or the stories you write will bring you back to those moments, even though at the time you might have been exhausted.
44. **Treat the event staff like family.** Bring donuts or snacks. Leave a positive impression, because maybe they'll hire you for their coverage in the future.
45. **Get the numbers.** When you check in with the press office, ask for a photographer's back number list. That list – provided to the official photographers – will have the show numbers of all exhibitors as well as the names of the owner and exhibitors. It probably won't include contact information, but it will give you a good start on identifying horses you take photos of in warm-ups.