

# Panel of Experts: Ask the Inspectors

By Suzanne Vlietstra

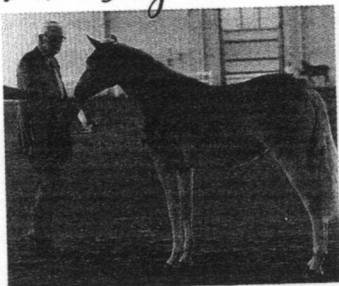


**T**he American Haflinger Registry has an inspection and classification program for evaluating our horses and how closely they adhere to the Registry's written breeding objectives. Horses are inspected by a panel of three expert Haflinger judges, compared to written standards, and then given numerical scores in ten different categories. The highest-scoring horses are awarded a gold classification, and so on. Less than four percent of the Haflingers presented for inspection are awarded the gold ribbon.

The AHR program is similar to keuring inspections used by many European horse breeds, but our program is voluntary and not required before the Haflinger produces offspring. However, our panel of experts agree that the Haflinger inspection and classification process is a valuable tool for evaluating horses and making breeding decisions in the best interest of the individual, and the breed.

Our panel of four experienced Haflinger inspectors answered a set of questions designed to help horse owners understand some of the nuance and details of preparing and presenting their animals for inspection. *Here's what they had to say:*

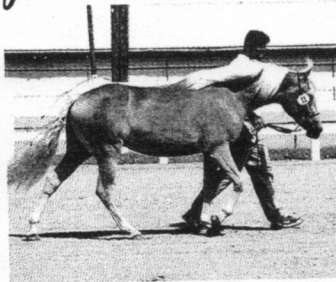
Dave Ayers



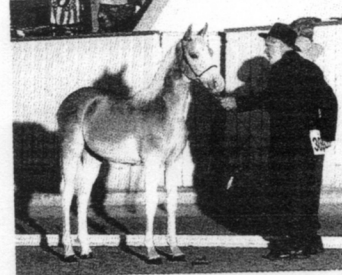
Nicole Cable



John Dunkel



Ray Miller



**How did you get involved with Haflingers, and with being an American Haflinger Registry inspector?**

**DA:** I started in 1986- we'd had Belgian drafts but my dad had two heart attacks and couldn't harness the big horses so he wanted Haflingers. We showed our hitch- up to 8 horses- until four years ago when my hands quit working. We still support the breed and my wife Aileen and I have 14 Haflingers now.

I've been an inspector since 1998 or 1989. The most important thing the registry does is maintain standards by quality breeding. I want there to be Haflingers for my Grandkids to enjoy so being an inspector helps keep it all going. As inspectors we put our time and money into educating ourselves and being accepted around the world for our standards and for our US horses.

**NC:** I started training driving horses for Hendershot Haflingers about ten years ago and it really opened my eyes to what Haflingers could do. My specialty is carriage driving; I'm an "R" judge with ADS and USEF.

I've been an AHR inspector about 5 years. I enjoy looking at good horses and I like the panel idea where we can discuss different aspects of a horse and add various opinions about a horse. We pool our experience to help compare to the breed standards.

**JD:** I've been in Haflingers about 35 years; my grandfather got me started in the breed, and I've been a Haflinger inspector for more than ten years. I was asked to become an inspector; people respected my eye and opinion about the horses.

**RM:** I bought my first Haflingers in 1983 because we didn't have a real big barn and the Belgians were just too big! And you can't have just one Haflinger so... pretty soon it was what we did.

I've been an inspector since 2008. I really like the breed and wanted to know more about them. I've been involved with and interested in Haflingers for a long time, and becoming an inspector was part of that process.

**Do you see changes in the quality of the Haflingers you have inspected?**

**DA:** Yes, in a good way. People have become more educated and present their horses better. Now we very seldom inspect a horse that is less than silver quality.

**NC:** Yes! I've seen huge positive changes in Haflingers in a short amount of time. In carriage driving, they used to be almost ponies in a horse size and were not competitive, and now they compete and win. They're more refined, with longer legs and good motion in a horse size- they're much more athletic and competitive in driving and even dressage with horses now. The AHR Inspections are a big reason why- it gets people together to discuss the future of the breed.

**JD:** As the breed evolves in this country the quality at the top also gets a bit larger. This is two-fold; not only does the market demand progressively better horses but also at one time we inspected a larger variety of horses from all walks of life but now we see mostly the best from serious breeders and eventers.

**RM:** Yes, for the better. We're getting away from short little drafty horses. They're taller and more of an all-around horse with better gaits.

## **Why should a Haflinger owner have their horse inspected?**

**DA:** We have so many new buyers, the inspection and classification system helps them understand the relative quality of the horse, and helps people plan smart breedings and maintain the breed standards using an understandable numeric rating.

**NC:** It's a tool to evaluate your horse, and a way to see stronger and weaker points of the horses. Then you can work around some of the weaknesses in showing and breeding.

**JD:** First, it's the only process to compare our horses to a world scale, to see how we match up in quality. Next, it's a breeding tool to see what could be improved. Third, inspections help build a better horse- a better breed- for everyone. Fourth, for performance horses it helps create a correct, sound horse, the most useable horse.

**RM:** The American Haflinger Registry inspections and classifications are an important breeding tool to improve the Haflinger breed. It's a great selling tool, too, and can help reassure someone new to the breed about the quality of a Haflinger.

## **Describe your ideal Haflinger inspection:**

**DA:** A horse that meets the written standards for our breed is my ideal Haflinger. Our breeders are becoming more sophisticated, and they're producing higher quality horses, consistently. I like to evaluate a horse that has been worked with so it stands decently, is well-prepared, and moves freely when turned loose. People should show their horse to best advantage: alert without being obnoxious, and stay out of the inspector's way. People need to learn how to present their horses. Some horses don't move well loose, but it makes a lot of difference because we want to see the horse moving as natural and realistic as possible, not forced.

**NC:** I want to inspect a horse that's ready and prepared! This doesn't just come together in a couple weeks. Practice everything so the handler and the horse move well together. Hire a runner if you need to and remember if the horse has an off-day, you can always re-inspect. It's a lot of prep! First things I notice are athleticism, a sleek body with a pretty head and good movement, and then good motion behind from their motor, with a proud attitude.

**JD:** The ideal Haflinger is athletic, has clean, dry bones, moves freely and drives from behind, has a strong loin, and embodies the Haflinger type, charm, and breed standards. A perfect inspection doesn't exist but ideally, the horse is well-fitted, healthy, energetic, well-mannered, stands quietly, moves out well and forward and shows energetic, even a bit flamboyant movement in the presentation. It's OK for the horse to show off! Horses should look like they do on a cool day moving freely and naturally. The biggest mistake is to present the horse worn down.

**RM:** Ideal: great color, nice body structure, proportionate head, poll freedom for flexion, slim neck, no bulky lower line to the neck, pronounced withers, hindquarters with a slightly sloping croup but not steep, ideal size about 59." Legs are so important: good flat knees and strong hocks to push. Temperament: stand, listen, then work with some get-up-and-go. I'd rather have a little more energy to show than a deadhead. I like a horse to look awake, with a look-at-me attitude, not lollygagging along.

### **Describe the movement/way of going you like to see in a Haflinger:**

**DA:** I want to see them use their hind end, elevate their front end a little so they have free-swinging extension and are elastic in their back. It all depends on how well they use their hip, loin, and rear end to drive from behind, in any gait. People seem to forget that without a motor, your car won't drive anywhere and it's the same with a horse. Just breeding a Haflinger taller isn't enough: it needs to be correct to move well too.

**NC:** The horse should engage its hock, reach up underneath itself, and push forward which frees the front end to extend. Their back should be rounded for strength, not hollow, and they should really use their motor well.

**JD:** Every horse needs to be able to drop their loin, engage their haunches, push from behind, and have a free range of motion in their shoulder and hock, and travel straight and correct. It all starts with power from behind.

**RM:** Walk and trot energetic, a bit elevated, light on their feet, not a ground-pounder. The horse should work from his hindquarters, with a loose swinging back. Some knee action is desirable.

### **Are there any trends in our breed that concern you now?**

**DA:** Well, I think owners are better educated as to real quality, but sadly we've lost a lot of good breeders that produced good horses. Breeding the exact same way year in and year out won't improve the quality of your herd, and we need to have good choices all the time.

**NC:** No, I think we're going in the right direction. Breeders are producing what people want: a do-it-all horse to please the whole family. The horses are a little bigger and basically they can do it all.

**JD:** No, not like ten or more years ago. People have gotten smarter. There's more focus on correct movement which is positive- it creates better Haflingers for the market.

**RM:** Not really. People are paying attention- better preparation... owners care. Our Haflingers are becoming more versatile by design. I'm looking forward to the upcoming inspections.

### **How do you think U.S. Haflingers compare to those in Europe?**

**DA:** I'm certain our very best horses are as good or better than the best in Europe. In the US we've had a handful of breeders that have imported better babies. And in the US, we have choices how we can plan breedings so that helps our quality to keep improving, but if we're not careful, we can mess it up more often too!

**NC:** Haven't been overseas yet specifically for Haflingers, but I see them driving internationally now, and they are definitely competitive.

**JD:** The top horses in the US are as good as the top horses in Europe, but then we have a lot of drop off. With mandatory testing (inspections) in Europe, the quality is deeper. Our bloodlines aren't as diverse, so they have a deeper pool of top horses.

**RM:** Haven't been, but we're right up there... our quality is comparable, at least with the top individuals.

## What kind of timeline and program do you follow to prepare a Haflinger for inspection?

**DA:** It depends on the individual horse on any given day. You need to understand your horse's strong and weak points to prep them well and tone them where they need it. A horse that's been in steady work should be able to be prepped in a month.

When I'm fitting a horse, I work them some way- round pen, driving, under saddle, whatever can be done- to break a sweat for 5 out of 7 days a week which seems to clean their pores and help them develop condition and a good coat. I feed for what the individual needs, and that gets them ready without too much effort.

**NC:** If the horse hasn't done much, it takes maybe six months from scratch to get them in great condition, their coat good, and that's enough time to practice what they'll do in the inspection. Less time if they are fit, but it doesn't happen overnight.

The routine depends on the horse. Start by carefully evaluating what you have to work with, and start by recognizing the horse's weaker issues. Use a round pen to help get them muscled up, and riding and driving if you can too.

**JD:** It completely varies with the horse, but six weeks for a horse in good condition to start is reasonable. Feeding is dictated by the condition of a horse; it's easier to start with the horse a little heavy, then work and fit the horse to distribute muscle well.

On exercise, mix it up if you can: ride, drive, round pen, and so on. I mostly use the round pen because it's pretty easy to control their pace, but it's all beneficial. I usually start a horse with about 10-15 minutes of work per session then gradually increase it as the horse gets its wind to about 45 minutes a day. I usually work them 5 days a week, and then give them a little mental and muscle vacation for a few days before the inspection to help them present fresh.

**RM:** It all depends on the starting condition and training of the horse, but 8-10 weeks is reasonable. Work in the round pen, ride, drive... whatever you can do.

For feeding, I keep a regular time schedule for meals, feed at the same time each day. Minerals can help the hair coat but don't overdo it. I like Nutri-Glo, it seems to help with haircoat and digestion. Too much protein can make a neck heavy, so I like about 12% protein feeds.

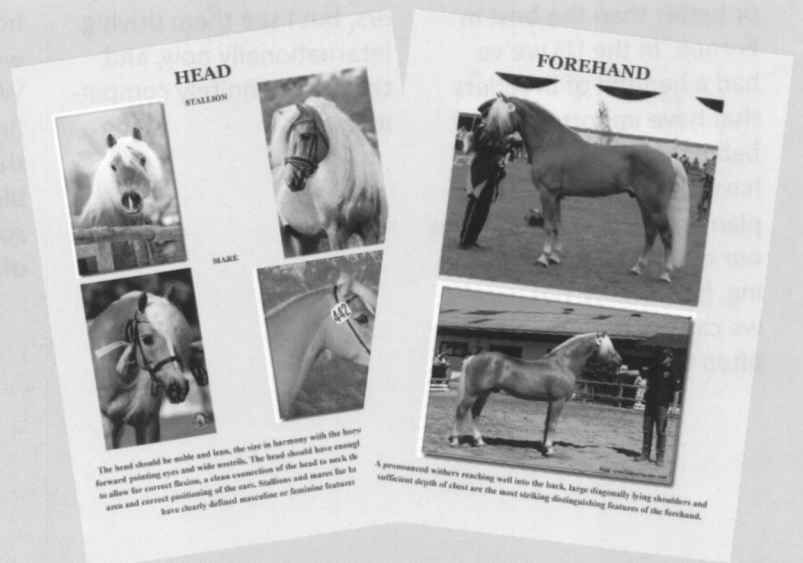
I let a horse down the last few days before an inspection to keep them fresh. You want them bright for the inspectors. I usually give them a day or two off before the inspection. Trucking to the inspection can tire them out, too, so watch for that.

I was a farrier for 24 years and thought they all needed shoes, but now if they have good feet I let them go barefoot, or maybe just use aluminum plates in front. It all depends on the horse.

## Want to learn more about the judging criteria on inspection day?

The Inspection and Classification Committee has published Breeding Objectives Judging Packet. Fully illustrated, this pamphlet gives detailed descriptions and photo examples for each item on the Inspection Scorecard. Don't miss out on this useful tool - available to all!

Download your copy today at  
<http://haflingerhorse.com/documents/JudgesPacket.pdf>



### **Any preparation tips you can share with us?**

**DA:** My biggest secret is to start with a quality horse and feed them well in advance of the inspection to make a happy, healthy, fit horse. Make sure they get enough protein, make sure their legs are tight and ready, like a race horse. But being fit is not the same as being thin; a horseman should know the difference. We used to do clinics before inspections which helped newcomers be more successful: I'd like to see that happen again.

**NC:** Know your horse's flaws and work around them: know what you can and cannot change.

Horses should be clipped and clean for presentation, and the handler should ask "If someone's judging this horse for a score it carries for the rest of its life, have I done my very best to prepare and present it?" Inspections are not the same as showing as a group in halter- we're not comparing one horse with another, we're comparing them to a written breed standard that is very specific.

**JD:** Start with the horse a little bit fat, maybe fifty pounds, and then condition them into fitness and don't confuse thin with in-shape. I have in mind what they need to look like when we're finished, and I search for a little change and evolution every day. There's no magic wand for this, only methodical preparation.

Feed depends on the area and the horse, but I like to add some oil for their coat and a mineral supplement. I also feed several meals a day, and I like hay with more alfalfa in it. Protein pellets help finish a horse's topline, and I often add a cup of soybean pellets twice a day.

**RM:** Get your horse used to the measuring stick, and used to having a string around their legs for the cannon measurement. Practice everything you'll need to do in the inspection, at home first.

### **What are some common presentation problems you see in inspections?**

**DA:** Sometimes handlers transfer their own tension to their horse. Help your horse show well by prepping him deliberately so you can both be confident at the inspection.

**NC:** A general lack of preparation. The horse needs to be crisp, to have a presence. I'm a tough inspector, but the new normal for scores is higher as we get to inspect better horses. Keep up with your horse on the triangle. You're on stage with your horse so be proud and straight and keep your horse standing alertly.

**JD:** This presentation is about the horse. It's not a showmanship class. It's about making the horse look as good as it can possibly look. The horse should be forward, athletic, and the handler should be able to present the horse in such a manner that it shows the horse off. Should be able to walk with impulsion. Be able to trot freely and move off the hind end and free off of the shoulder. I want to see the horse stand straight, be loose-limbed, and ideally have an overtrack in their step at the walk. Stay between the horse's poll and wither when you move with them, and really practice a lot to get good gaits. Video your practice sessions, and watch videos of experienced handlers presenting their horses too.

**RM:** Overshadowing and moving the horse too much. Try to relax! Pay attention to how your horse is showing. I'm not looking for perfection when they run, so don't overshadow them for movement... let them show what they can do without being chased down.

### **What changes, if any, would you like to see in Haflinger inspections and classifications?**

**DA:** I wish we could be faster, but the three inspectors do need to confer. It just takes time. Our discussion is important.

On performance testing: I'm not sure we're ready for that. A 90-day performance test like the Friesians do would be interesting but cost prohibitive. I would support the idea of professional handlers.

**NC:** I'd consider the idea of a single handler presenting all the horses like some other breeds do. Also, just because a horse scores high in-hand doesn't mean it's the best horse for everything, so I'd like to see Haflingers think about a performance aspect to the inspections, because that tells the rest of the story. I'd also like to see them shown barefoot if I could because I can see their true, natural gait.

**JD:** If I could change one thing, it would be how long it takes. If horses are well-prepared and well-presented, it goes a little faster.

**RM:** It would be great to always have good footing for inspections- nice to be indoors so we know the horses will get a good chance to show themselves off. Performance evaluations are an interesting idea, I think that would be something to consider.

### **Do you have some words of wisdom for those bringing their Haflingers to an inspection?**

**DA:** Prepare as best as possible, read the specs and follow our breed standard- it's a good one! Inspections are a tool to use, but they're not a horse show. It's important for people to know they can come back again if they need to. We don't want to tear horses down, we want to help the horses get the very best score they can. Relax and help your horse show off to get his best score.

**NC:** Do your preparation work, be organized!

**JD:** If you don't know something, ask. Even if you have shown other breeds, find out how things are done here.

If people aren't familiar with inspections, they may want to find someone to fit and handle the horse that knows what they're doing. It's too bad when a horse loses points because the handler didn't know what they were doing. A good handler will not gain points, but they shouldn't lose any, either.

**RM:** Have your horse looking as good as he can, relax and do your job and don't get too worked up about it. Enjoy your good horses!

**Join us in Ashland, Ohio, in July and in Hanford, California, in September for the 2019 AHR Inspection and Classifications! For more information, visit [haflingerhorse.com/inspection-and-classification](http://haflingerhorse.com/inspection-and-classification)**