



DRESSAGE

The word Dressage (pronounced dress-AHGE) is derived from the French verb "dresser," which simply means "to train." It has come to denote both a training method and a competitive sport. As a training method it prepares the horse for any number of disciplines, from show jumping to western reining. As a sport, competitive dressage challenges horse and rider to strive for ever greater levels of precision and harmony.

THE ART OF CLASSICAL HORSEMANSHIP

Although dressage has its roots in classical Greek horsemanship and was influenced by the knights in shining armor of the Middle Ages, it was not until the Renaissance that dressage was recognized as an important equestrian pursuit. The great riding masters of this period developed a logical training system which has changed little over the last hundred years. What has changed is the reason for the training. The European aristocrats displayed their well trained horses in elaborate equestrian pageants; today's dressage riders test their horses' ability in competition.

Dressage horses can be of any breed, sex, age, color or size. Exceptional basic paces--walk, trot and canter--together with a good temperament and sound conformation are what riders look for in a potential dressage horse. The horse should have athletic paces, be light on its feet and have the scope to take short, springy strides as well as free, long and swinging ones.

Dressage is a sport where competitors pursue the unobtainable 100%; in order to even come close, meticulous attention to detail, in addition to ability, is necessary. Marks may be out of reach because of a lack of talent, experience or technique, but they should not be thrown away for lack of preparation.

The attention to detail starts with good horsemastership. Quality veterinary care, proper feeding and an on-going training program are the foundation. Correctly fitted equipment and good grooming are also necessary ingredients. In dressage the general appearance is much more important than in other equestrian disciplines. The horse and rider which are turned out immaculately, with everything gleaming and in place, make it hard for the judge not to give the benefit of the doubt to the combination which pleases his eye. Dressage is a performance, and, as such, competitors strive to look as beautiful as nature will allow.

Competitive dressage takes place in a 20x60-meter arena, with 12 lettered markers placed at specific points along the rail. Here, horse and rider perform a designated test, a series of movements for which the arena markers serve as reference points. No one seems to know the reason for the peculiar sequence of the letters or when their use was introduced to the sport.

There are different levels of tests in "international" dressage competition. In order of difficulty, they are, the Young Rider Tests, the Prix St. Georges, Intermediaire I, Intermediaire II and Grand Prix. Within the Grand Prix level are the Grand Prix, the Grand Prix Special and the Grand Prix Freestyle--a musical ride choreographed by the rider. Although certain movements must be performed and each performance has a time limit, the competitor can create a program which suits his or her horse and is especially pleasing to the eye.

It is these International tests where we see the most spectacular movements: Piaffe, the highly collected, elevated trot in place; Passage, the suspended trot in slow-motion; Pirouette, a rhythmic turning in place at the walk and canter; Half Pass, a forward and sideways movement at the trot or canter where the horse crosses his legs; Flying Change, a skipping type movement at the canter where the horse changes lead every fourth, third, second and finally at every stride.

It is important to understand that none of these movements are tricks, all are natural and performed by the horse at play. With careful training, the horse learns to duplicate these natural movements, willingly, on command, and with grace, while accommodating the weight of the rider. The trust and harmony which makes this possible are a tribute to the rider's ability and the horse's generosity.

One to five judges, positioned at specific locations around the arena, evaluate the performance from their different perspectives. Scores are awarded on a scale of zero (not executed) to 10 (excellent) for each movement, with some particularly difficult movements earning scores that are multiplied by two.

Spectators tend to base their judgements on general impressions--on how pleasing the performance was as a whole. The judges also take this into consideration when awarding the "collective marks" for paces, impulsion, submission and the rider's position. Scores are tallied and divided by the total possible, and the final score given as a percentage.

These final percentages are somewhat misleading; the winning score may only be a 63%. But keep in mind that the marks are given movement by movement, and are judged against a standard of absolute perfection. The greatest dressage riders in the world today can only hope to achieve a final score in the 70% range.

YOU BE THE JUDGE

As the test proceeds, how the horse moves on straight and curved lines is important. On the straight, the body should be straight with the hind feet following the same path as the fore feet. On turns and circles the horse's body should bend uniformly along the arc in order to create the same path with fore and hind feet. Circles should be round and smooth, turns should be even. Transitions between gaits should be smooth, and the horse should immediately establish a rhythm in the new gait.

When the horse extends or collects its gaits, there should be an obvious difference in the length of its stride. These are also transitions. During an extension, the horse's frame is lengthened and each stride should cover more ground. During a collected movement, the frame is shortened and each stride should cover less ground without any loss of impulsion or energy.

The horse should carry its head in a vertical position, indicating acceptance of the bit, continually feeling for the rider's aids. The horse travelling with its nose stiffly held out in front or over bent is not accepting the rider's hand.

The rider should maneuver the horse through the test without apparent effort, maintaining balance, with the upper body erect but supple and thighs and legs steady and stretched downward. The elbows should be held close to the body, thereby giving the rider the ability to follow the horse's movements and apply the aids imperceptibly.