

Guidelines for Judging Dressage Seat Equitation Classes

The purpose of these guidelines is to assist in the development of a uniform standard for judging Dressage Seat Equitation (“DSE”) classes, Dressage Seat Medal Semi-Finals, and Finals classes. Many Dressage judges may lack experience judging group classes and/or classes focused on the seat and aids of the rider rather than on the performance of the horse. These guidelines are intended to enable judges to develop their own system for judging Dressage Seat Equitation classes and are not intended to be all-inclusive or to contain absolute rules.

I. Guidelines for rider position

Even when reading the texts of the “masters” there are varied opinions regarding the correct position of the rider. Below are suggestions of what judges might want to watch for. Keep in mind that the goals of correct riding are the security of the rider, the ability of the rider to positively influence the horse, the unity of the rider with the horse in motion. To be effective rider must have a correct position and weight distribution. The rider’s seat should match the movement of the horse at each gait. The judge should also consider the directives of DR117 from the current USEF Rule Book:

DR117 The Position and Aids of the Rider.

1. All the movements should be obtained with imperceptible aids and without apparent effort of the rider. The rider should be well-balanced, elastic, sitting deep in the center of the saddle, smoothly absorbing the movement of the horse with his loins and hips, supple thighs with the legs steady and stretched well down. The heels should be the lowest point. The upper part of the body should be tall and supple. The contact should be independent from the rider’s seat. The hands should be carried steadily close together, with the thumb as the highest point and a straight line from the supple elbow through the hand to the horse’s mouth. The elbows should be close to the body. All of these criteria enable the rider to follow the movements of the horse smoothly and freely.
2. Not only the aids of the hands and the legs but also of the seat are of great importance in dressage. Only the rider who understands how to contract and relax his loin muscles at the right moment is able to influence his horse correctly (compare DR102.2, DR108 and DR115.3).
3. The effectiveness of the rider’s aids determines the precise fulfillment of the required movements of the tests. There shall always be the impression of a harmonious cooperation between horse and rider.

II. Overall judging thoughts

- The rider should give the impression of being partnered with the horse, rather than being purely robotic.
- In judging equitation, the judge must watch the rider. The horse is only a vehicle that allows the rider to properly execute the requirements of the class.
- The judge should not be influenced by the body shape or attractiveness of the rider. An attractive appearance must also be workmanlike and effective.
- The judge must not get too wrapped up in any one detail and be conscious of his or her own pet peeves and personal dislikes; always keep the overall picture in mind.
- The judge must keep in mind that although transitions are very important in a Dressage Test, it will be impossible to see every rider perform every transition when the class is working as a group. It may be difficult for many judges to be comfortable with the fact that they will not see every movement of each rider as they do in a regular Dressage class.

III. Scoring

- The first job is to compare one rider with another for an overall placing, deciding which rider comes closest to the ideal. In placing the class, each rider must be given a final score. These scores are recorded by USEF and USDF and can serve as the basis for qualification for the USDF Dressage Seat Medal Semi-Final classes.
- It is not necessary to put a score in each box on the DSE score sheet. The score sheet can be used in a manner that suits the judge's methodology, provided however that a final score must be arrived at for each rider. Score sheets will not be posted, however the judge can make comments to the riders at the end of the class, as time allows.

IV. Suggestions on conducting a class

- The judge must consider where to stand to have the best view. This might be in the middle, near one end looking toward the other where two-thirds to three-quarters of the ring is in view, outside the ring at one end near a corner (the advantage of this view is being aware of rider straightness), or on the outside on one long side.
- If the class is too large to work safely in one group, the judge could have all the riders walk and trot one direction of the ring, then pull aside the better riders, work the rest of the class as required, pull in any riders that should be in the top group, and excuse the remaining riders. The judge can then work the top riders to evaluate them.
- A judge should not hesitate to "work" a class, however judges should keep in mind the time restraints of the show and not to overwork riders and their horses. This can be done by requiring more changes of gait and changes within the gait as well as individual work.
- When asking for individual work, be very specific. Do not expect riders to be "mind readers". The judge must make sure he asks for only those movements required at Training and First level (See DR 133). Suggested patterns for use in DSE, Dressage Seat Medal Semi-Finals and Finals classes (ranging in difficulty from easy to hard are posted on both the USDF (www.usdf.org) and the USEF (www.usef.org) websites and available for judges to use as desired.
- Not all riders need to be asked to ride an individual pattern. It might be the top two or four, or perhaps to help the judge decide between very closely matched fourth and fifth placed riders. In the case of the cases of Semi-Finals and Finals classes, it is suggested to have no more that the top 10 be asked to do an individual pattern (i.e., top eight for placing plus two additional).
- In the case of very small classes or very clear divisions of competency, no individual patterns are necessary.
- A rider may reverse direction any way he or she chooses unless directed by the judge.
- When the judge asks for individual patterns, he may have the riders line up in the middle of the ring, or at one end where they are less liable to obstruct the judge's view. As with regular test judging, remember that the judge must evaluate what she sees at that time.

V. Thoughts for evaluating position

► **Basic picture:** Ear/shoulder/hip/heel vertically aligned, heels level or slightly down; the front and back of the rider's trunk should be of equal length; straight line from elbow to horse's mouth.

LEGS:

Good:

- ✓ Centered under body
- ✓ Heels level or slightly down, iron on ball of foot with weight evenly distributed
- ✓ Adequate angle at the knee joint.
- ✓ Thigh rotated in and inside of calf lying close to and lightly on horse's side
- ✓ Quiet

Minor Faults:

- ✓ Slightly forward or back
- ✓ Stirrups too short so that the use of the leg is restricted
- ✓ Stirrups too long so toe is down or there is no flexibility to ankle
- ✓ Slight movement to legs
- ✓ Stirrups uneven
- ✓ Uneven weight in stirrups
- ✓ Stirrup leather twisted
- ✓ Stirrup on toe
- ✓ Bracing on stirrup
- ✓ Unnecessary lifting of heel to give aid
- ✓ Swinging legs
- ✓ Knee off saddle
- ✓ Toe pointed out excessively so back of calf and heel are on the horse
- ✓ Toe pointed in excessively with all of weight on outside of stirrup
- ✓ Rigid ankles

Major Faults:

- ✓ Any of above taken to extreme
- ✓ Thigh or knee coming up
- ✓ No contact with horse's side
- ✓ Lower leg gripping
- ✓ Spur held in side or constantly poking into the horse
- ✓ Loss of stirrup(s)
- ✓ Stirrups too long or short, if taken to an extreme and thus affect the rider's alignment
- ✓ Stirrup on "home"

SEAT & UPPER BODY:

Good:

- ✓ Sits centered on the horse
- ✓ Sitting in deepest part of the saddle.
- ✓ Good upper body control relative to the movement of the horse.
- ✓ Hip motion well controlled by rider.
- ✓ Shoulders balanced over the hips
- ✓ Head balanced over shoulders with chin level
- ✓ Rider looking over horse's ears

Minor Faults:

- ✓ Sits slightly to one side
- ✓ Slightly ahead of the motion
- ✓ Slightly behind the motion
- ✓ One shoulder or hip higher or lower
- ✓ One shoulder or hip further forward
- ✓ Slight rigidity or stiffness
- ✓ Rounded back
- ✓ Excessively swayed back
- ✓ Collapsed chest
- ✓ Loss of rhythm with horse
- ✓ Chin down

- ✓ One ear lower than other
- ✓ Tension in buttocks, back, or shoulders

Major Faults:

- ✓ Any of the above taken to extreme
- ✓ Extreme crookedness
- ✓ Unable to sit in saddle
- ✓ Excessive motion

HANDS & ARMS:

Good:

- ✓ Soft fist
- ✓ Knuckles facing forward, thumb on top
- ✓ Hands angled slightly inside vertical, slightly apart
- ✓ Upper arm hanging relaxed on or slightly in front of the vertical
- ✓ Elbow near or slightly in front of waist
- ✓ Straight line from elbow through hand to horse's mouth
- ✓ Arms following motion of horse's head and neck, thus maintaining elastic contact

Minor Faults:

- ✓ Hands too high
- ✓ Hands too wide apart
- ✓ Hands too low
- ✓ Flat hands
- ✓ Elbows too far back
- ✓ Elbows straight
- ✓ Slight rigidity or tenseness
- ✓ Loss of contact with mouth
- ✓ Lack of following arm

Major Faults:

- ✓ Any of the above taken to extreme
- ✓ Hanging or pulling on mouth
- ✓ Hands constantly busy
- ✓ Major rigidity or tension in arms and hands

USE OF AIDS:

Good:

- ✓ Aids subtle
- ✓ horse reactive to rider's aids
- ✓ Correct timing of aids
- ✓ Correct use of half halts

Minor Faults:

- ✓ Lack of preparation/poor half halts
- ✓ Aids obvious
- ✓ Inappropriate use of whip
- ✓ Inappropriate use of spur
- ✓ Horse resisting

- ✓ Above or behind bit
- ✓ No bend
- ✓ Incorrect diagonal or lead quickly and quietly corrected
- ✓ Break in gait quickly and quietly corrected
- ✓ Horse lacking relaxation, impulsion, rhythm, suppleness, and balance

Major faults:

- ✓ Any of the above taken to extreme
- ✓ Lack of relaxation, impulsion, rhythm, suppleness, and balance caused by rider
- ✓ Wrong lead uncorrected
- ✓ Break in gait poorly corrected
- ✓ Loss of control or unsafe riding (getting too close to other riders)

VI. Suggestions for developing methodology

One judge's method is to dictate plusses/minuses to the scribe--for each gait or exercise in each direction. Some judges use their own shorthand to be more specific. Some judges have the ability to write nothing while the class is in motion and can remember well enough to make their notes and give scores at the end.

VII. Suggestions for numerical scoring

90-100	Excellent	No major position flaws. Exceptional basics. The judge should describe this rider using only superlatives. The judge must not be afraid to use this score when it is appropriate.
85-89	Very Good	No major position flaws. Very good basics. This rider might have one of the minor flaws listed above to a minor degree. Ideally most of the winners will receive scores in the 80's.
80-84	Good	The judge would be comfortable putting this rider on a trained horse and know that the horse will be comfortable with this rider. The rider may have a few minor flaws, but they are not detrimental to the horse. Ideally most of the winners will receive scores in the 80's.
70-79	Fairly Good	This is the range for the average rider with no major design flaws or mistakes, who lacks suppleness or unity with the horse or the excellent rider who had one major mistake like a wrong lead uncorrected.
60-69	Satisfactory	This is the range for the mediocre rider, with several minor position flaws but no major flaw (i.e., very good position, except for the spurs poking in the horse's side all the time).
50-59	Marginal	This rider has several minor position flaws that are not abusive to the horse, or this rider sits correctly but the inappropriate use of aids causes the horse to do poor transitions and be above the bit.
49 and below	Insufficient	This rider has major position faults and/or rides the horse in a detrimental manner.

VIII. Differences between judging a Dressage Test and an Equitation Class

Dressage Test

The horse's performance is scored.

The details and precision are important.

The judge is able to view every moment of the ride.

The judge will see every transition and the transitions are very important.

In the General Impressions, the Position and Seat scores directly relate to the scores given throughout the test.

The quality of the horse's gaits influences the overall score.

Equitation Class

The rider's position and seat are scored.

The overall impression is important.

The judge will view each individual only occasionally.

The judge will see few transitions from each rider.

The performance of the horse is important only as it relates to the rider's seat and aids.

The quality of the horse should have no influence if the rider's seat and aids are not seen as having a detrimental effect on the horse's movement.

Compiled by the USDF Dressage Seat Equitation Task Force