

# Equitation FOR Education

A fun alternative to the traditional test, dressage-seat equitation is for riders of all ages

BY AMBER HEINTZBERGER







Long a staple of hunter/jumper shows and a handful of others, equitation classes are relatively new in the dressage world. The advent of the US Equestrian Federation Dressage Seat Medal program in 2002 renewed interest in dressage equitation, in which, unlike in ordinary dressage competition, the focus is on the rider only, and competitors ride in group classes instead of in individual tests.

Olympian and noted youth-dressage advocate Lendon Gray, of Bedford, NY, is a big believer in the value of equitation in an equestrian's education. Dressage-seat equitation is one-third of the competition at Lendon's Youth Dressage Festival, held each summer in Saugerties, NY. (The event also includes a dressage test and a written test, with such fun optional extras as freestyle and Prix Caprilli—a dressage test with jumps.)

But although hunter-seat equitation is largely associated with youth (think the prestigious Medal and Maclay finals), dressage-seat equitation is not just for kids. It's open to riders of all ages (junior, young-rider, adult-amateur, and open divisions may be offered), giving competitors the opportunity to get valuable expert feedback about their position in the saddle.

Sounds like a slam-dunk winner, right? It is—but not all dressage shows offer equitation classes, in part because entries tend to be low. We think dressage-seat equitation is a great addition to any rider's or show's roster; so for this article, we asked experts to explain what it's all about and how to compete in this format to your best advantage.

### Equitation: The Foundation

Dressage-seat equitation competition isn't about posing prettily. In dressage, to make it to the top, a correct and effective position is essential in order to properly influence the horse.

"Dressage is a sport where the quality of the horse, the suppleness, and the balance is part of the game," says Gray. "Very often, the person who doesn't ride so well but has a lovely horse can do well; so the rider who sits well and rides well isn't rewarded, while the one not taking position and seat carefully is rewarded too well. But often, when that rider moves on from that wonderful horse, they hit a brick wall."

It's much easier to learn a skill correctly the first time than to relearn it. With her Dressage 4 Kids program, Gray strives to promote correct equitation to instructors and riders alike, hoping to instill proper basics and "muscle memory" in youngsters.

"I feel someone needs to encourage students to take position seriously. That's my goal: to make it important, espe-

GOOD FOUNDATION: Ten-year-old Asia Ondaatje  
Rupert on the Welsh/Arabian pony Shazdam

COURTESY OF BRAH ONDAATJE



## Our Sport's Medal/Maclay

**T**he US Equestrian Federation offers a Dressage Seat Medal program for junior riders (those under the age of eighteen).

Riders compete in designated Dressage Seat Medal semifinals classes, held at each of the nine annual Great American/USDF Regional Dressage Championships. The top two riders in each division (thirteen and under; fourteen to eighteen) qualify to advance to the annual USEF Dressage Seat Medal Finals, held at a major USEF-licensed/USDF-recognized dressage competition in the late summer.

The top two finishers in each Medal Finals division are named the year's Dressage Seat Medal Finals national champion and reserve champion.

Section DR 132.2 of the USEF Rule Book (online at usef.org) contains complete eligibility and other details.



MEDALIST: 2010 USEF Dressage Seat Medal Finals  
13-and-under national champion Anna Campbell (TX)

cially from the beginning, because it is so hard to break bad habits!" Gray says.

Even the most accomplished dressage riders need to check their equitation, Gray asserts: "I have such admiration for [longtime student and 2008 Olympian] Courtney [Dye] because, even after she'd gone to the World Cup, if I hadn't seen her for a while, she'd come back and the first thing she'd ask is if her position was OK. She'd always check if her hands

are correct, her leg position is correct...every rider should be thinking that way. That shouldn't be unusual."

## Equitation Competition Explained

"Dressage-seat equitation is run just the same way as an equitation class: walk-trot-canter as a group in both directions, with the opportunity for the judge to add things, as specified on the judges' sheets," explains fellow dressage-eq

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advocate Jayne Ayers, of Dousman, WI, an FEI “I” dressage judge for more than a decade and a US Equestrian Federation-licensed judge for almost 30 years.

“Individual workouts are not common in regular shows but are required at the national finals, and are optional but often used at the semifinals held in each USDF region at the Regional Championships shows each year,” Ayers says. (See “Our Sport’s Medal/Maclar” for more on these championships.)

## Practice Makes Perfect

In addition to building core strength through lunge lessons and practicing riding without stirrups, Ayers suggests that aspiring equitation competitors watch videos of top international riders and then compare the footage to videos of themselves riding.

Group riding practice is essential, Ayers says. “Your horse may get excited cantering with six others if he is not used to it,” she cautions. “Practice following vocal commands for changes of gait, and get comfortable riding off the track or away from the walls of the arena. Stay safe at all times: Assume all the other horses would like to kick yours, so don’t crowd another horse.”

“It’s interesting how dressage horses can warm up with twenty horses going different directions, but put them go-

## Know the Rules

The US Equestrian Federation Rule Book (online at usef.org) contains information on dressage-seat equitation attire and saddlery, conduct of the classes, general rules on entering, and more. Refer to section DR 132.

“Rules change frequently—often yearly,” says dressage judge and USEF Dressage Committee member Jayne Ayers. She advises competitors to “stay current, and review them before the show.”

ing in a line and they get very hot,” Gray concurs. “Even if I have one kid doing the equitation, I’ll get eight or ten people together for them to practice.”

If your barn at home doesn’t offer many opportunities to ride in a group, try entering some flat classes at local hunter shows or 4-H shows. Dressage schooling shows, even though you won’t be riding in a group, will give you valuable judges’ feedback and arena time.

To prep her students for dressage-equitation classes, Gray has them school patterns, which are different from dressage tests.

“That is what I hope they’ll meet in that class—that the judge will give them something a little different that tests

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HARMONY: Junior rider Audrey Jones (TX) and Rondo del Rey

their use of the aids a little more than rote movements in a test; for example, doing leg-yields from different places or picking up canter on the long side instead of in the corner.”

### What the Judges Are Looking For

From the judge’s perspective, the dressage-seat equitation group-class format works well because “the judges can stand in different parts of the arena and see the rider from all angles,” says FEI “I” judge Janet Foy, of Colorado Springs,

CO. “This gives us much more information. It is also easier to compare the riders when they are all in front of us. If the judges have a discussion, which sometimes we do, as to ‘who is the best,’ then having the riders side by side really works to their benefit.”

As a judge, Foy explains, “First we look at the position design. Does the rider have a classical position? Does the rider sit in the middle of the horse, or is she crooked? Second, we look at how well the rider can influence the horse. We would like to see harmony, correct preparation for the movement, and classical aids. The gaits of the horse do not really matter that much; but if the horse is very stiff, crooked, and fighting the contact, it will not help the rider’s ability to present the movements with harmony.”

Ayers adds that judges want to see correct posture, including the classic ear-shoulder-hip-heel alignment. The rider should be positioned over the horse’s center of gravity, with hips and shoulders level. She should sit firm and deep in the saddle, with quiet hands and a stable core that’s neither stiff nor gripping. Her hands and arms should follow the motion of the horse’s head and neck, Ayers says.

The rider should sit with her weight distributed equally over both seat bones when the horse is traveling straight, and with her inside seat bone weighted when riding a circle

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or lateral movement or any movement in which the horse is bent, Ayers says. She should sit each gait comfortably, including lengthenings. Judges want to see the rider moving in harmony with the horse and presenting a pleasant picture of cooperation and teamwork between horse and rider.

The USEF spells out the judging guidelines for dressage-seat equitation on its website at [usef.org/documents/disciplines/dressage/DSMGuidelinesJudging.pdf](http://usef.org/documents/disciplines/dressage/DSMGuidelinesJudging.pdf).

As in most types of equine competition, a little showmanship know-how can give an exhibitor that extra edge. In dressage-seat equitation, you can help to stand out from the crowd (and stay safe) by paying attention to what's going on around you and by striving not to get caught in the middle of the pack. Give any excitable horses a wide berth, and don't run up the tail of any plodders.

Or, as Foy puts it, "Don't get stuck on the rail, and don't run over the judge!"

Gray advises riders not to focus on their bad habits while they are in the equitation ring.

"Say my hands are too high," she explains. "If I focus on keeping my hands down the whole time, it's going to show: The tension is going to creep in. Don't expect to fix something while you're in the ring. When you see the kids working so hard to keep their position, you can tell. Relaxation is such an



**ADULT COMPETITOR:** *When she's not working as the USDF Region 8 director, Fern Feldman (shown riding her Connemara pony, Fidelio, at Dressage at Devon) competes in dressage-seat equitation*

important part of a rider's ability to stay with the horse."

For more tips on boosting your scores, see "7 Ways to Improve Your Equitation Scores" on the next page.

## Getting Adults Involved

Gray acknowledges that there aren't yet many adults participating in dressage-seat equitation.

"There's a two-part component here, and one is the judge," Gray says. "If any class is going to take off, the judge

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## 7 Ways to Improve Your Equitation Scores

**Q**uick tips from judges and dressage-seat equitation experts Jayne Ayers, Janet Foy, and Lendon Gray:

1. Get comfortable with the patterns. Practice, practice, practice!
2. Focus on making all transitions smooth.
3. Take lunge lessons to hone your position.
4. Show good ring manners by being respectful of other competitors. Don't cut off other horses.
5. Smile!
6. Set yourself apart: Avoid getting stuck behind a slower horse or on the rail.
7. Present a pleasing picture: spotlessly clean and well-groomed horse, clean and well-fitting tack and riding apparel, tidy hair, and shiny boots.

has to take it seriously. It would also be nice if it's a little bit of a challenge. I've seen a class where they walk-trot-canter in both directions and that's it. You can do a very short and challenging individual performance—maybe turn down the center line and do two changes of lead through the trot. It's challenging and takes very little time.”

The feedback aspect is important, too, Gray notes. “Some people go in the equitation class, and when it's over nobody knows anything, so they wonder why they bothered,” she says. “If the judges—and I don't mean all of them—would take the time and take it more seriously, I think the classes would really take off.

“I put the challenge out to the judges to make it interesting and challenging,” Gray continues. “A lot of judges hate [judging equitation] because they're not used to it—to sit and watch the class without adding up sixteen numbers is new to them, and they're uncomfortable with it and don't want to do it. It's a little bit of a vicious circle getting the judges on board.”

### Getting Everyone Involved

Preparing for and competing in a dressage-seat equitation class can be a great opportunity for riders of all ages who have worked hard on their position, who don't have that fancy horse, or who are just starting out in the sport. If you want to help this program grow, encourage show organizers to add equitation classes to their rosters, and then give them a try! ▲

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