First Look: The 2019 USDF and US Equestrian Dressage Tests

What’s new and different for national-level competitors? Here’s a preview—and why we hope the changes will help horses, competitors, and judges.

BY JEANNE MCDONALD

TESTING, TESTING: Before they are finalized, proposed test revisions are evaluated extensively. A camera crew films the educational On the Levels series that helps riders master the requirements of the new dressage tests.

VICTORIA TROUT/USDF
Important events happen every four years: Olympic Games, World Equestrian Games, presidential elections...and the release of new dressage tests!

The US national-level dressage tests (Introductory through Fourth Levels, plus the Four-Year-Old test, the Developing Horse Prix St. Georges test, and the Developing Horse Grand Prix test) are revised on a four-year cycle. The 2019 US Equestrian and USDF dressage tests take effect December 1, 2018, replacing the previous 2015 versions. Here’s a look at what’s changing, and why.

**How the Test-Writing Process Works**

The national-level US dressage tests are written by the US Equestrian and USDF Test Writing Working Groups, whose members are experienced dressage judges and competitors. FEI 5* judge Gary Rockwell, who also chairs the USDF Judges Committee, served as the chair of the US Equestrian Test Writing Working Group for the 2019 revisions. Besides myself, he was assisted by fellow working-group members Jennifer Baumert, Dr. Hilary Clayton, Lilo Fore, Janet Foy, Christopher Hickey, Mike Osinski, Kristi Wysocki, and Lois Yukins.

I headed the USDF Test Writing Working Group, and I extend a huge thank-you to members Gary Rockwell, Marilyn Heath, Christopher Hickey, Natalie Lamping, Gwyneth McPherson, and Kristi Wysocki.

During the four years between test revisions, the test writers evaluate the current tests and gather feedback from competitors, trainers, and judges as to how the tests could be improved. In this recently completed test-writing cycle, we received some excellent suggestions—although only 76 members of the American dressage community weighed in: 29 riders, 24 judges, 20 trainers, and three high-performance athletes.

**Why Change the Dressage Tests?**

The committee’s goal in modifying the tests every four years is to ensure that the training of the horse is progressive both within the level and from level to level, and that it is based on the pyramid of training (see illustration at right).

For instance, to try to help maintain the quality of the horse’s walk from the very beginning of training, we have added from Training through Third Levels a double coefficient (x 2) for both the medium walk and the free or extended walks.

In the past, double coefficients were not applied the first time a movement appeared in the tests. While the test writers tried to make the tests both shorter and less demanding in general, we decided to put more emphasis on certain key movements by adding double coefficients (score x 2). This may occur the first time a movement is seen in a test. In several cases, we now have double coefficients not just the first time a movement appears, but as in Third Level, on every flying change in each test.

Some modifications to the US Equestrian tests have been influenced by the *Fédération Equestre Internationale* (FEI). For example, the FEI has changed the way the transitions are scored after extensions. Accordingly, we modified the transition scores in the Second through Fourth Level tests, and in the Developing Horse Prix St. Georges and the Developing Horse Grand Prix tests, to include within the transition-score box the collected trot or canter from the last transition until the next movement starts, as the FEI does now.

**Highlights by the Level**

Here are some of the specific changes that have been implemented at each national level for the 2019 edition of the USEF dressage tests.

**Introductory Level.** When both riders and judges have found the previous tests to be successful, little is changed when effective December 1, 2018, the prerequisite score to ride a freestyle will be 63% at the highest test of the selected level. The change to rule 129.9 was approved by USEF on August 27, 2018. Contact USDF at MusicalFreestyle@usdf.org with questions.
the tests are revised. But to save show organizers time and to help ensure the welfare of the horses, we have shortened the Intro C test. The final movement had the horse trotting for too long, so now the final halt is at X, not all the way to G.

Training Level. Almost all agreed that the 2015 Training Level Test 1 was flowing and clear to ride and judge, so there are no changes to this test.

Test 2 remains the same, with one exception: The transition to medium walk now happens at F rather than between A and F. This change should improve both the stretching trot and the transition scores, as so many competitors made abrupt transitions at A instead of using the corner to prepare for the transition.

To clarify the important aspect of an exercise in Training Level Test 3, the previous shallow loop is now a full three-loop serpentine. This change was made so that the rider has to show truly supple changes of bend. We also decreased the difficulty of Test 3 by removing the canter-diagonal-to-trot transition at X; now, both canter-trot transitions happen at the middle letter of the short side. In addition, the trot-walk transition is now “before” K, not exactly at the letter.

First Level. The test writers received a lot of negative feedback that the short diagonals for the trot lengthenings were difficult to memorize. In response, we have kept the same patterns for Tests 1 and 2, but all trot lengthenings now begin at the corner letter and end at R, S, V, or P. First Level Test 3 maintains the full diagonal lengthening, as it is progressively more difficult.

Test 3 has changed significantly: The leg-yield counter-change (K-X, X-H) has been removed, and the 15-meter canter circle is no longer immediately after the canter depart. The movements are still in the test, but they occur in a different order to make it easier to develop the balance for the counter-canter loops.

Second Level. There is a major change in the canter work in Second Level Test 1. Judges suggested (and trainers approved) introducing the simple change of lead in separate parts. Rather than requiring a true simple change (canter-walk-canter), the new 2019 version of Second Level Test 1 asks for a canter-trot transition from counter-canter at one letter, followed by a transition to walk at the next letter, followed by a canter depart to the new lead at the next letter, in both directions. The reason for this change is that too many horses were falling into many trot steps before walking, with a loss of balance. We hope that this change will help the training progression.

Second Level Test 2 now contains the canter work from the 2015 version of Second Level Test 1—the serpentine with simple changes over the center line—but to help shorten the test, the 10-meter canter circles have been removed entirely. The trot and walk work were revised, as the walk previously occurred so early in the test that the remainder of the test was too long and tiring for the horses. Now the walk is balanced between most of the trot work and the start of the canter work. Finally, we took one of the medium trots on the diagonal out of the early trot work and have shortened it to the ending on center line D to I, with the halt at G.

Second Level Test 3 has not changed.

Third Level. Third Level is the beginning of true dressage training. The committee agreed that the 2015 tests flow well and are easy to judge, so Tests 1 and 3 remain unchanged except for the addition of double coefficients to each flying change.

However, statistics show that Third Level Test 2 has far fewer rides than any other test; so to help shorten that test, the trot half-passes have been removed, as the renvers movement demands the same ability to move the horse’s shoulders in balance.

Fourth Level. We made a small change to Fourth Level Test 1, mostly at the request of judges, who previously had to give four scores at the end of the walk work within about five seconds! I believe that riders, too, will be happier with more distance to walk to the canter depart and then on to the medium canter.

There are no changes to Test 2.

We listened carefully to competitors, who felt that the 2015 version of Fourth Level Test 3 was too long and tiring for their horses. Test 3 has been shortened from 32 movements to 22, which should also make the judges happier.

USDF: Your Source for Dressage-Test Information

Need to master the new 2019 USDF and US Equestrian dressage tests? The USDF offers plenty of resources, from the instructional On the Levels video series to a handy app. For a look at what’s available, see page 63.

JUDGE’S-EYE VIEW: On the Levels films demonstration horses and riders from multiple angles so viewers can see exactly what the judge is looking for.
In Test 3, the medium canter on the diagonal has been replaced by the extended canter, and the extended canter on the long side has been removed.

In a further effort to simplify Test 3, the halt/rein back/forward four steps/rein back has been simplified to a simple rein back of four steps.

Developing Horse Prix St. Georges. In the walk work, the length of the extended walk has been shortened by one letter and the length of the collected walk has been lengthened by one letter, so that judges see a bit more collected walk.

More significantly, based on feedback from US Equestrian national young-horse coach Christine Traurig, there is a major change to the Developing PSG canter work. The five-loop serpentine has been replaced by 10-meter true-canter/counter-canter half-circles, as in Fourth Level Test 3.

Developing Horse Grand Prix. This test is unchanged from the 2015 version.

Test Directives and Purpose

It is paramount that riders and trainers read and understand the directive ideas and purpose of each test. All of these have been carefully rewritten with the goal of making it clear to riders and trainers what is expected in each movement.

A Team Effort

The USDF and US Equestrian test writers, assisted by USEF staffer Hannah Niebielski and USDF staffer Sharon Vander Ziel, worked countless hours to develop tests that lay out a logical, clear, fair progression for the training of the dressage horse. Foreign national federations including those in Canada, Mexico, and South and Central America have recognized the quality of our tests and have been using them for years. I hope that you enjoy riding and judging the new tests. Please help us to improve them further by sending your feedback to testfeedback@usdf.org.

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