For Whom the Bell Tolls

Advance planning—and a few show-ring secret tactics—can help to make your tests polished and stress-free

By J. Ashton Moore

Showing begins at home. Want to know why seasoned dressage competitors so often do well at shows? Because they prepare well in advance. They get the most out of the competitive experience and reduce the pressures by doing extensive planning and rehearsal. They know how to emphasize the positive and hide the flaws as much as possible while in the ring—even including some on-the-fly decisions that can help them salvage points if they get into trouble.

In this article, I’ll show you how to create your own competition plan, and I’ll pass along some clever competitors’ show-ring tips and tricks.

Why Show?

To get the most out of showing, you need to decide why you are doing it. For fun? Because you are competitive by nature? As a learning experience for yourself and your horse? To seek validation that your skills and training are on track?

Showing is an opportunity to get a judge’s advice on how your training is progressing. But keep in mind that the judge cannot know where you are coming from or how much you have improved. It is his job to evaluate you against the general standard. For example, if you have spent months trying to get your horse not to cart you off, and he finally proceeds placidly, don’t be displeased if the judge comments, “Needs more impulsion.” Bask in it, irrespective of the score, for now.

To get the most out of the experience, show your test sheets to your trainer and ask how they apply to you, where you are coming from, your current level, and how it might affect the ongoing work. If you are lucky enough to have an instructor who will go to the show with you, that is the best of all possible worlds. The trainer can give you her observations and compare those observations with the judges’ remarks.

Whatever your reason for showing, a good plan will help you achieve the maximum fun and learning.

Perfect Practice Makes Perfect

There are issues that we tend to forget or skim over when schooling at home. We get busy dealing with our special or problem issues, and we neglect to cultivate good habits. Make precision and accurate geometry automatic so that you don’t have to cope with them for the first time at the horse show.

Make a habit of good corners! Don’t wait until the show to realize that you’ve been riding sloppy corners at home.

Make a habit of crisp turns and beginnings of circles. The endless, unclear drift sideways is pretty obvious to the judge.

Begin lateral work promptly rather than “working up to it.”

Mastering the Test

Decide whether you do better riding the test from memory or by using a caller or reader (there is no shame in...
it!). Some riders find a caller distracting and attention-dividing, while others find the caller a reassurance and help. Either way, learn the tests by heart as best you can.

Train the issues that arise during the test. Begin the test and proceed until something needs fixing. Go back and do that part again. If necessary, make an interruption to school the issue. And again and again.

If your horse anticipates, change the plan and don’t do what he expects.

If your horse is dull or not living in a state of readiness, startle him just before the wanted response. It will make the current attempt abrupt or ugly, but will cause him to live in a state of readiness and recognize later when you give him a heads-up.

Practice the test while talking out loud. Tell yourself what you are going to do next, and where. It is important to do this out loud. It gets you in the habit of planning ahead for each movement, and it helps you learn to look and think ahead. Watch out, though, as it may also accustom you to babble through the test (use of the voice is not permitted in the show ring).

Most of the time, the objective of the test is to fool the judge. Occasionally practice the test all the way through, as though you were in the actual show ring. Figure out what you are going to do and how you will carry on when things are not going swimmingly. Don’t dread what you expect might go wrong; have a plan for minimizing the impression of incompetence or disobedience or panic.

Do the Math

Veteran competitors are able to evaluate the current situation or impending problem as they’re riding the test. They make strategic decisions as they go in order to maximize points and minimize penalties. Here are some examples.

If you are supposed to go across the diagonal in medium trot and you can tell that your horse is just not going to play, you could choose to make a ten-meter circle at the corner marker and kick him on. Take the deduc-
tion of two points for an error and wait for the bell (assuming the judge is paying attention). The math may work out in your favor: If your medium trot was destined to be a 2, 3, or 4, correcting the horse on the circle may make him more ready, and the medium might earn a score of 8 with a two-point deduction, giving you a final score of 6 instead of a 3 or a 4.

I had a friend who was a whiz at this. He rode an FEI-level stallion that would sometimes get balky. If my friend knew that the pirouette on the diagonal was going to stall out, he would go like hell and pretend he thought the movement was extended canter on the diagonal. By the time the bell rang, he had made his point with the horse, and the pirouette afterward often worked. He'd get an 8 for the pirouette, minus 2 for the error—so a score of 6 instead of a 2 or a 3, not to mention the deleterious effect that a bad pirouette would have had on the collective marks. When I judged my friend, if he pulled that stunt, I knew what he was up to but I had to judge what I saw, not what I surmised. And I got a chuckle out of it.

Here’s another example: A good transition performed not quite at the letter will incur less penalty than a frenzied or resistant transition executed accurately. Let’s say your rein back stalls out at three steps but the test calls for four. Your best bet is to smile and play dumb rather than doing battle and making it obvious that it is problematic, which usually results in additional resistance and ugliness.

This can be extrapolated endlessly and needs to be practiced at home so that you know what you’re going to do if a situation arises.

Warm-up Strategy

Find out, through experimentation at home and trials at schooling shows, what kind of warm-up best suits your horse. Some horses do best with an intense, focused warm-up session; others need a more relaxed and casual approach.

A hot horse might need a long and slow warm-up, while a sluggish horse could find short and brisk bursts with frequent rests more motivating. One horse might benefit from a bit of a stroll to interrupt the work, or a minute or two to “hang out” right before the test. Another horse will do better sailing right over to the show ring from the warm-up, maintaining the intensity.

Dual warm-up sessions work best for some horses. One approach would be to warm up an hour (or several) before the test time. Put the horse back in the stable or trailer to relax; then a few minutes before the test, warm back up briefly. Another approach is to do a short warm-up, then hack around the show grounds for a time, letting the horse “sightsee.” Before the test, do a second brief tune-up.

If your home situation suits, ride a simulated warm-up followed by the test. Give yourself a set time in one ring to warm up; then, ready or not, go to another ring and give yourself one minute to go around the outside,
then enter and ride the test. See what happens. Practice or school to deal with the pressures and any issues that arise. Experiment to find the warm-up approach that best suits your horse.

Finally, don’t try to train in the warm-up ring. If you and the horse don’t know it by now, you are not going to make it happen in the warm-up ring.

**Your Time Has Come**

When the steward tells you that you are on deck and it’s time for you to make your way to the show arena, try not to panic. Think about the plan you’ve developed for riding your test.

When the competitor before you makes her final halt and salute, enter the area on the perimeter of the show arena, and go past the judge’s stand right away. If your horse shies or is “looky,” don’t fight with him; it will only add to his alarm. Be sure to pass the judge’s stand in the opposite direction, as well, so that your horse sees it with his other eye.

You don’t have much time before the bell rings, so use it thoughtfully. After the bell rings or the whistle blows, you have 45 seconds to enter the arena. If you are at B headed toward the judge’s stand when the bell rings, does it make more sense to go the rest of the way around the ring or to turn around and go back? Figure it out at home so that you don’t panic when it happens at the show.

Do a couple of halts outside the ring—perhaps slow and casual with a hot horse, quick accelerations and decelerations if he’s dull. If you have time, it is sometimes useful to do a halt outside the ring near the entry gate.

**Test-Riding Tips and Tricks**

Over time, learn what you can do to correct or mitigate problems without being obvious (making a correction in a place where the judge can’t see it is a good start). You want the judge to think that the mistakes are yours alone and merely ineptitude, not a battle with the horse or harsh riding.

Ask yourself: How shall I do this to minimize panic on my part? How shall
I do this so as not to startle my horse. How can I fool the judge into thinking that I’m fine rather than on the verge of incontinence?

Hum. Humming keeps you breathing and can be soothing to the horse. Unless you burst into an aria, humming isn’t noticeable to the judge.

Now for some specific test-riding pointers.

**Entry and center line.** Make the turn into the ring at A from the direction that best sets up your horse for straightness and for the halt.

For straightness, use this trick. Fix your eyes on two points: the judge’s head and an object in the distance. Line them up like rifle sights. This will keep you from staring at your horse’s neck and weaving or drifting down the center line. And you will register the slightest deviation, unlike if you look only at one spot (the judge).

**Halt and salute.** Don’t fiddle with the halt! A crooked halt is penalized less than that one stops and then sahayas from side to side. An un-square halt will be penalized less than a twitchy one; moreover, the judge at C may not even be able to tell that it’s not square.

If your horse doesn’t stand well or anticipates the move-off, then just proceed with the test. Better that the judge thinks that you are nervous and anxious than that the horse won’t stand; don’t advertise it by fighting about it. Some top international riders do performatory halts (or none!) and make up for them elsewhere in the test.

Know how to salute. Don’t clutch your thigh; simply drop your arm straight down behind your thigh. Don’t salute with whip in hand; doing so looks as if you are brandishing a saber. If you are carrying a whip, either salute with the free hand or hook the handle of the whip under the thumb of the opposite hand for a moment.

**Move-off and turn at C.** Don’t take the reins back into separate hands and kick at the same time; it makes for an impression of unbalanced clatter. Take a moment, if your horse allows, to separate the reins and get organized before you ask him to move off. Perhaps vibrate the reins a little to check the contact. Now go. Judges generally don’t begrudge a rather prolonged halt; some are even impressed.

As you proceed, use the rifle-sight trick again. It’s amazing how many entries are ruined by a lateral drift from X to C.

If your horse is horrified by the judge’s stand, turn before C, even though you will be penalized for inaccuracy. Again, do the math. A battle to get to C will be penalized more than an inaccuracy that appears calm (maybe the judge will just think you are nerv-ous, rather than that you can’t steer).

If getting your horse near the judge’s stand is not an issue, aim for a point on the track between C and the corner. Try to touch the track along the short end before the quarter line. Doing so sets you up for the corner, and you might even make it to M or K, thus setting you up tidily for the next movement or figure.

**Figures and patterns.** Give yourself “wiggle room” when possible to compensate for drift or delay. In a change of rein M-X-K, for instance, aim closer to V. If your horse drifts, you have already compensated and won’t end up fighting at the end, missing the corner, or banking the turn. If he doesn’t drift after all, it is a minor inaccuracy that can be adjusted to-ward the end. If it’s smooth, the judge may not notice or care much, or may just chalk it up to minor rider inac-curacy rather than “can’t steer.”

In a leg-yield from D to E, aim to reach the track a few yards earlier than E. If it works, you can let your horse drift forward a bit more to reach E. Again, this strategy helps to avoid last-minute panic and battle. And always look at your goal (the let-ter) from the beginning of the move-ment, not at the last minute.

When it comes to figures, better too small than too large. The judge views a too-large circle or half-circle as an avoidance of difficulty, whereas if it’s a bit too small it appears to be just a mi-nor rider inaccuracy on a willing horse.

Example: start a ten-meter circle by planning an eight-meter circle. If your horse accommodates, you can leg-yield outward in the second quar-ter of the circle and no one will be the wiser. This approach makes the start of the circle look more tidy and con-trolled, and it also decreases the like-lihood of a battle near the center line to prevent the horse from making the figure too large. It also engages the horse’s inner hind leg and allows more stretch of the outside of his body.

We’re told to execute the move-ments when the rider’s body is even with the letter. What goes unsaid is that this doesn’t work for turning onto a line. Turn early! Compensate by rid-ing a few steps of leg-yield if needed. The judge at C will not be able to tell.

**Transitions within gaits.** Better early than late. The impression of a late transition is that the horse is sluggish (at the beginning) or unstoppable (at the end).

In lengthenings and mediums, emphasize the difference. A dramatic giddy-up catches the judge’s attention. Spend the rest of the long side putting on the brakes, if necessary. And at the end, slow down more than necessary for just a couple of strides—again, to emphasize the difference.

**Transitions between gaits.** Transitions often appear rushed and desper-ate. Plan for the transition to happen a little early. It helps you avoid panic when your expectation is not met. Again, do the math. If the transition is a little early, it won’t cost much. If your horse is not quite ready, you’ve given yourself a stride or two to let things sort themselves out and avoid panic.

**Change of lead through the trot.** Most riders can struggle through this, but it is a difficult movement to do well. Change the flexion to the new direction during the first canter; this minimizes longitudinal confronta-tion and falling on the forehead, and gives your horse an early warning and preparation for what is coming. A few too many trot steps but a smooth, balanced performance may get a better mark than a prompt and accurate re-prise with wrenching and constraint.
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Lateral movements. Start the leg-yield or half-pass clearly. Don’t leave the judge guessing whether your initial wandering is an error or just a muddled start.

Start with generous bend (shoulder-in) or a little extra-generous sideways (half-pass) in the first steps. You can cool it as you go, or the horse will lose a little; but the point and the first impression have been made.

Turn on the haunches. This movement is tricky and hard to fake. It is seldom done well. Train at home so that your horse is always in a state of readiness to turn, and with a slight quickening of tempo (to offset the typical tendency to get sluggish). Start the turn a little early so that any drift will be less obvious. A turn on the haunches along the wall is especially tricky. Doing it beforehand so that any drift will be less obvious.

Simple change (change of canter lead through walk). Earlier is better than later. Too many walk steps is better than a hasty scramble with no flat walk steps. A hint of leg-yield away from the new direction as you come into the walk transition can help mitigate the horse’s tendency to fall on the forehand and the new inside shoulder.

Rein back. This is another movement with many elements that is seldom done well. There are many ways to do it wrong. A common fault is to rush the rein back. First show that you can stand quietly before beginning the movement. It gives a bad impression if the horse barely halts and then bounces backward off the rein contact.

Dealing with errors. Go to the judge. Do not look to, or converse with, your caller. It’s illegal for the caller to chat; she may only read what’s written.

Don’t be flustered if you make an error. Everybody does it. Forget it and get on with the test.

Ask the judge for clarification if you don’t understand the instructions or pattern or how to proceed.

Don’t lose points unnecessarily.

Showing Is About Showmanship

Pretend that when something goes wrong, it’s just a fluke of the day rather than something you can’t do.

Make up points where you can. My first Grand Prix horse had no extended trot. I smiled and played dumb, and made up for it in the tempi chang-es and pirouettes and piaffe.

Do the math. Figure out when to start a movement early and take the penalty; it will be less than if a fight ensues at the letter. Figure out when to call it a bust and start over, quietly.

Judges usually don’t penalize harshly for a bit of inaccuracy, a moment of resistance that is recoverable, or the appearance of nervousness or distraction on the part of the rider. They tend to be more punitive of harsh aids, harsh corrections, and signs of temper.

Dressage competition is supposed to be a test of your training plan and progress. It can be mitigated or enhanced by good showmanship. When I was a competitive ballroom dancer and my partner seemed to be wearing concrete shoes, I stood taller, smiled more broadly, and moved faster.

The pianist Artur Rubinstein, when asked how he played some of the more complicated and fast-moving pieces at his advanced age, said something to the effect of “I play the slow parts more slowly.”


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