

A Judge Takes Your Questions

Q&A from the USDF Judges Committee

By Debbie Riehl-Rodriguez

Here's the latest batch of dressage-competition questions that were submitted to the USDF Judges Committee. Thanks to all the USDF members who sent questions. If you have a question for a dressage judge, e-mail it to editorial@usdf.org and you may see it answered in a future issue of *USDF Connection*.



STAND OR SIT? Both are acceptable for judges

Q If a judge gives a score of 8 and comments "Good" or leaves the comment box blank, why is the score then not a 9 or a 10? What would it take to make it a 10?

A According to the definitions assigned by the US Equestrian Federation to each number in the 0-to-10

scale of marks, 8 is "good," 9 is "very good," and 10 is "excellent." (Note that 10 does not mean "perfect"!)

What may limit the score for a well-executed movement are the quality of the horse's gaits and amount of brilliance with which it performs. At times there may be a certain aspect that could be improved to bring an 8 up to a 9, but to do so might require a lengthy explanation that is not feasible during the fast-moving dressage test. Therefore, the judge may opt to leave the comment box blank.

The horses that typically receive the most marks of 9 and 10 are the top international competitors. The reason is that the quality is so good on top of the correctness of their training. However, even an average mover could conceivably earn a top score for the so-called non-brilliant movements, which include halts, rein backs, turns on the haunches, and transitions.

When I judge, I love to reward good work with high scores. Some judges may feel less secure about giving high marks, but we are striving to teach our upcoming judges to use the entire range of numbers, both high and low.

Q Why does the horse produce foam in his mouth, and why does it sometimes happen only on one side of the mouth? Does foam (or lack thereof) affect the judging?

A I posed this question to someone who is an expert in this area: renowned equine-biomechanics expert Dr. Hilary Clayton.

According to Dr. Clayton, the foam that we see is frothy saliva. When a horse is relaxed and flexing at the poll, he salivates. Gentle chewing introduces little bubbles of air into the saliva and makes it frothy, just like frothing milk



GOOD SIGN: Froth indicates a relaxed, flexed poll combined with gentle chewing on the bit, a sign of acceptance of contact

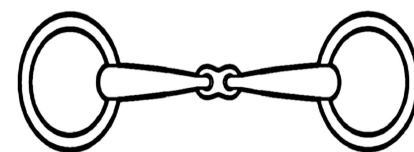
or whipping cream. As the horse gently moves his jaw, some of the froth escapes between his lips and forms white "lipstick." The froth tends to escape when the jaw is relaxed, so it may not be seen on one side if the horse is stiff on that side and has his jaw clamped. So dressage trainers and judges regard foam on the lips as a good thing because it indicates that the horse's jaw is relaxed and salivating.

Copious amounts of stringy or slimy saliva are not regarded as a good sign, however, as it may indicate a problem in the horse's mouth.

Q How does a French-link bit work on the horse's mouth as compared to a regular snaffle?

A I'll start by saying that, as a judge, I have no preference regarding bits except to see that the bit is fitted properly and that the horse is relaxed and quietly chewing, as described above. Personally, I have had good luck with French-links in that the horse seems to accept the contact on each rein more evenly.

For the specifics regarding the bit action, I went back to Dr. Clayton. Here's what she told me:



French-link snaffle

The French-link bit has a U-shaped profile when it lies on the horse's tongue. The single-jointed snaffle, in contrast, has a V-shaped profile. The French-link allows for more room for the tongue and better accommodates the shape of the tongue.

The problem with some French-links is that the center piece can be too wide. Ideally the link in a double-jointed bit should be narrow so as to avoid having the joints lie over the bars of the mouth.

Q How do dressage judges stand regarding Western dressage?

Currently, Western dressage is not allowed in any USEF-licensed/USDF-recognized dressage competition, but it is becoming increasingly popular in unrecognized (schooling) shows as well as some breed shows. I was one of the judges at the 2012 Morgan Nationals, and we had an entire day of Western dressage. (Western dressage is a USEF discipline for the Morgan breed only.)

There are several websites you can access to learn more about what is required, as there is more involved than just a Western-pleasure horse riding a dressage test pattern. My own opinion is that, when ridden correctly, it will be a benefit to the Western horse, enhancing his freedom of movement and increasing his suppleness.

Q Why do some judges stand when they return the rider's salute while others remain seated? Is sitting disrespectful?

When a judge stands as the rider comes down the center line at the beginning or end of a test, it is basically a courtesy to acknowledge the rider. Standing is not required in the rules, and it is not disrespectful if the judge does not stand.

Standing and sitting twice during every test, at the average dressage show with 50 to 60 rides per day, means that the judge gets up and down approximately 120 times a day. This can be very hard on a per-

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son's knees. Also, some judge's boxes have low ceilings that do not allow the judge to stand upright. Many male judges acknowledge the rider by removing or tipping their hats.

Why are full bridles required at the higher levels of competition when we're told that well-schooled horses don't need them?

Actually, full (double) bridles are no longer required; per the USEF dressage rules, a rider may compete at any level in a snaffle. However, for certain USEF high-performance qualifying and championship classes, a double bridle remains mandatory. For specifics, refer to DR121.4 in the USEF Rule Book (online at usef.org).

It is important that a horse be able to perform properly in both a snaffle and a double bridle to demonstrate correct acceptance of both.

What is the most important element at Training Level that would earn you scores of 70 percent and best prepare you for the next level?

There is no single element that will guarantee a competitor high scores. Dressage tests are written to evaluate a combination of correct basic work. Per the USEF rules, the purpose of Training Level is to confirm that the horse is supple and moves freely forward in a clear and steady rhythm, accepting contact with the bit.

A score of 70 percent is quite high and becomes progressively harder to achieve as you move up the levels. It is more challenging for some horses to attain that score, especially if one or more gaits lacks correct rhythm, which is the first requirement in the pyramid of training. The next levels of the pyramid, suppleness and correct contact, can contribute to improving the rhythm and add quality to the horse's work.

If you are able to score in the mid- to upper 60s and have developed your horse's ability to lengthen his strides, maintain rhythm and balance on smaller circles, and perform leg-yields, then you should be ready to

move on to First Level. Note, however, that each test of the level becomes progressively more demanding, which is why it is so important to develop a solid foundation by following the requirements of the pyramid of training. My suggestion is to work to improve your scores a little at each show by using the comments on your tests to direct your efforts. If you do achieve a 70, then you can feel very proud of your accomplishments!

What is the biggest pet peeve among judges?

I think that every judge would answer this question differently. I can only give you my own thoughts here, but I hope that other judges will agree with some of what I have to say.

A judge's first responsibility is toward the welfare of the horse. It can be very discouraging to see a horse that is being punished by the rider—not with spurs or whip but because the rider lacks the ability to properly communicate with the horse. This was one of the reasons that the rider collective marks were changed in the 2011 USEF tests: to emphasize the importance of the rider's ability to influence the horse properly. We are looking for harmony between horse and rider, which can be achieved only if the rider has an effective seat and the ability to aid the horse correctly. Of course, sometimes things don't go as well at the show as we would like, but the judge can tell when the proper basics have not been established and must score accordingly.

Another aspect that judges would like to see improve is the geometry and accuracy of figures. Riders do not realize how many points they lose needlessly. Take time to study your test patterns thoroughly. Walk through the tests on foot in your arena. Make sure that you know exactly where your circles should be. Plan transitions so that they happen when your body is as close to the letter as possible while gauging your horse's attentiveness so that you know exactly when you need to aid. A slightly early

transition is better than one that is late due to lack of preparation or resistance. A rider needs to be able to “read” how the horse is feeling that day in the test and to strive to be as accurate as possible.

I myself dislike it when I see a rider attempting to put the horse on the bit by “seesawing” the reins, which causes the horse’s nose to wag from side to side. It is fairly common among novice riders in an effort to keep the horse’s head down. My suggestion is to learn to develop a proper connection by teaching the horse to stretch over the topline and seek the contact. The horse should move from the inside leg to the outside rein while showing an elastic contact and swing through the back. Even in Introductory Level tests, the horse should show a degree of acceptance of the bit and bend.

Yes, this is all easier said than done, but that’s what learning to ride is all about! I think we all want to do justice to our horses, and with time and patience your efforts will pay off. ▲

Debbie Riehl-Rodriguez, of Golden, CO, is a USEF “S” judge, an “R” sport-horse judge, and a member of the USDF “L” faculty. She has earned her USDF bronze, silver, and gold medals as well as numerous Horse of the Year awards on horses she has trained herself. She is an active competitor as well as an instructor and trainer.

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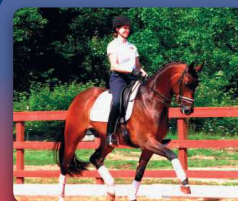
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