Judging Self-Carriage

Have you ever looked over your dressage test sheet and noticed the judge’s comment that your horse was in need of “better self-carriage”? How about remarks like “heavy on the hand,” “balance should be more uphill,” “leaning,” “needs engagement,” “on forehand,” or a host of others pertaining to a lack of lightness?

If you’re receiving these kinds of comments on your tests, then it might be time to explore in detail what the judge is seeing and what you are feeling that could be improved.

In this article, I’ll explain what self-carriage is, how it relates to your horse’s balance as he progresses through the levels, and how you can improve it.

Self-Carriage Defined

Even as early as Training Level Test 1, the concepts of engagement of the hindquarters and lightness of the forehand are mentioned in the Impulsion and Submission boxes of the collective marks. The idea behind these concepts is that the horse should never lean on the reins for support; nor should the rider be using strength to hold the horse together.

Self-carriage is defined as “the state in which the horse carries itself in balance without taking support or balancing on the rider’s hand.” Or, as I tell my students, the horse should be doing more work than the rider!

Is My Horse in Self-Carriage?

So how does a rider know if the horse has the self-carriage appropriate to the level? If your horse is carrying himself, he should not feel heavy on the reins. Ideally you’ll have a light but consistent feel of his lips in your fingers. The reins should form a straight line to your horse’s mouth, never hanging. But be aware that having the reins too long and the horse trundling along on his forehand might also produce something like this feel, so a few more criteria must be part of your assessment of his degree of self-carriage. As you ride, ask yourself:

Is my horse responsive to small aids? He needs to respond promptly and correctly to adjustments in bend and flexion, changes of tempo, and clear transitions. This is what’s
referred to as being “on the aids” with willing, alert cooperation.

**Is he moving with enough energy and in a suitable tempo?** Your horse needs to operate with enthusiasm and energy in a consistent and appropriate tempo. Neither strolling nor running provides the basis for taking the weight onto the hindquarters, even to the degree expected at Training Level.

**Is he elastic and adjustable?** The feel in your hands needs to have an element of elasticity to it. The entire picture of horse and rider together should have the harmonious, elastic appearance of operating as one unit.

You should be able to lengthen and shorten your horse’s frame at will. For example, at Training Level we test this with the “stretching circle”; at Fourth Level, with the “very collected canter.” Horses not in an appropriate degree of self-carriage for their level have difficulty with both exercises.

If all of the things I’ve mentioned are consistently in place in the exercises for the level you are showing, then your horse is probably in good self-carriage. Naturally, as you challenge him with more advanced exercises, it will take a while to find self-carriage again in the new, more uphill balance. Along the way, he may become heavier in the hand, block the thoroughness, or offer a whole host of equine objections to an increase in the work expected. This is natural, but the goal of the training is to rediscover the harmony.

**The Judge’s View**

How does a dressage judge assess self-carriage? By observing a complex set of details, which vary in accordance with the horse’s conformation and change from level to level. A thorough understanding of what to look at and what to look for can take a long time to develop, with judges improving their eye for it over years of practice. But there are a few guidelines.

First, the contact must appear light and elastic, with the rider’s arms and hands following the mechanics of the gait without undue effort. There are many versions of incorrect contact,
and nearly all of them compromise self-carriage.

At all levels, the judge wants to see that the topline of the horse’s neck is arched forward and upward, and that the “under neck” muscle is relaxed and not braced. Any time the horse appears “pulled together” or with the neck too short or braced underneath, there is probably a contact problem. Active resistance, an open mouth, a face behind the vertical, a poll that is not the highest point, or even a rider who appears to be working too hard—all of these are warning signs that there may be a lack of self-carriage.

Next, the direction of the thrust of the whole horse as it moves in trot or canter must be appropriate for the level. At Training and First Levels, the thrust should be straight ahead and not “downhill,” dumping onto the forehand. The direction of thrust becomes slightly uphill at Second Level and becomes progressively more uphill in subsequent levels.

Determining the direction of thrust is not always easy because it entails

The New England Dressage Association proudly presents a Symposium featuring:

CARL HESTER

This will be Hester’s only U.S. East Coast appearance in 2017

The New England Dressage Association (NEDA) is thrilled to announce that Olympic Gold medalist Carl Hester MBE, is coming to New England for the first-time ever to headline the 2017 NEDA Fall Symposium.

- To be held at Pineland Farms, New Gloucester, ME — a state of the art, heated facility
- Seating is limited for this exclusive event
- NEDA members will be able to take advantage of early bird sales before registration open to the public.
- Join NEDA today for maximum benefits
- Opening date for auditor registration for NEDA members is May 31, 2017
- General registration opens July 1, 2017
- Check www.NEDA.org in for more details and demonstration rider information

Check the NEDA website for updated information www.neda.org
Safeguard their Health with Sweet PDZ Stall Refresher®

FORWARD REACH WITHOUT ENGAGEMENT: Engagement requires bending of the joints of the grounded hind leg. A “daisy-cutting” hunter like this one may reach well under its body with its hind legs, yet lack engagement.

assessing the horse’s balance when in motion. It takes practice. Even a horse with its hocks trailing might be in a level balance, depending on its conformation. A chunky pony with limited gaits might actually be in Training Level self-carriage, even if it does not earn high marks for gaits or impulsion.

Some people are surprised to learn that discerning the degree of uphill balance and self-carriage in a higher-level horse is actually an easier task.

Looking for the uphill balance and collection needed for self-carriage at Second Level and beyond requires an understanding of, and an eye for, engagement. Engagement is produced by the bending of the joints of the hind leg that is on the ground. This bending allows for upward thrust as well as forward thrust when the leg is straightened. The hind legs should operate well under the horse’s body, but this alone will not produce uphill balance. Think of a free-moving, “daisy cutter”-type hunter as an example of forward reach without engagement.

To complete the picture of what the judge is looking for in assessing self-carriage, the horse’s back must be observed. The back muscles should appear to contract and relax in the rhythm of the gait while the top of the croup undulates—what is known as the “swinging back.” In higher collection, this swinging is more subtle, perhaps because the horse is in a more compressed package.

The Icing on the Cake
So it seems that perhaps self-carriage, rather than being an element of performance, is really the outcome of correct basics at all levels of training.

A horse in self-carriage is what dressage is all about. Nothing warms the heart of an experienced judge more than seeing a horse at any level that performs in harmony with its rider and, as the US Equestrian Rule Book states, “gives the impression of doing, of its own accord, what is required.”

Jayne Ayers is an FEI 4th dressage judge, an FEI and US Equestrian Young Horse judge, and a US Equestrian DSHB and dressage equitation judge. She is a past chair of the US Equestrian Dressage Committee and is a faculty member of the USDF L Education Program. At her Hearthstone Farm in Dousman, WI, she teaches dressage riders at all levels and coaches for competition.