

Let the Show Begin

Creating the Musical Freestyle

Freestyles are becoming an increasingly important part of competitive dressage. They are mandatory for any Intermediate or Grand Prix rider who has his eye on championship competitions, or for any Junior or Young Rider who wants to earn that valued spot on the Regional Team. But freestyle is not just for the elite of the sport, nor is it just to be competitive. There is room for fun at all levels, as the addition of music can be an inspiration to rider and audience alike. It also gives you the rider both a creative outlet and another way to explore the sport you love.

The purpose of this article is to get you started on developing your own freestyle by providing you with some elementary concepts and how-to's. Part 1, The Artistic Endeavor, covers general information and basic principles you need to create solid choreography. Part 2 is concerned only with Music Selection and Interpretation.

The Artistic Endeavor

There may be some who feel intimidated by the thought of doing their own freestyle, but becoming familiar with a few principles is all it takes to get you on your way.

The Basics

First, **determine your level**. USEF rules state that the horse/rider combination should have received a minimum score of 60% at the top test of the level to be shown (or from one level higher) at a USEF sanctioned show. In other words, if you wish to do a First Level freestyle, you must have a 60% at First Level Test 3 or from Second Level, which you earned on the same horse at a USEF show. A copy of your score must accompany your entry form.

Next, **know the mandatory elements** for the level you wish to show, since they are not always the same as the standard tests. Did you know that turn on the haunches or walk pirouette is not required at any level except for the FEI Juniors? This is important because you may opt not to show that element, especially if it is not a strong one for your horse. To find out what is required, check the score sheets. Many GMOs print them in their omnibus, but if yours does not, obtain score sheets from the USDF by contacting them via phone or through www.usdf.org. Other differences are that the halt and salute can be anywhere on the centerline, and that changes from element to element do not need to be at the letters.

Understand what is meant by **above the level**. As stated in the USDF pamphlet "Musical Freestyle--Rules, Guidelines, and Definitions", movements are leg-yield, rein-back, travers, renvers, shoulder-in, half-pass at trot, half-pass at canter, flying changes, turn on the haunches, pirouettes, piaffe, and passage. Deliberately doing a movement above the level you are showing will incur a severe penalty. For example, showing half-pass at second level would be prohibited, as would an intermediate ride with one tempis. Movements should not be confused with figures (circle, figure 8, and so on) or transitions

(walk to canter, etc.). A first level rider, therefore, would be permitted to perform a canter to halt because it is a transition and not a movement. Likewise a third level rider would be permitted to perform a steep half-pass zigzag, because it is a pattern, not a movement. To add clarity, all possible permitted and forbidden movements and transitions are listed inside the USDF score sheet.

All test requirements and the Rules, Guidelines and Definitions for USDF level freestyles are available online at USDF.org.

The Artistic Score

Freestyles are judged in two parts: the technical execution and the artistic impression. In the technical, the rider has certain compulsory elements that must be performed. There are also marks for Gaits, Impulsion, and Submission. The artistic categories and their respective USDF coefficients are Harmony between Horse and Rider (3), Choreography (4), Degree of Difficulty (2), Music (3) and Interpretation (3). International rules and score sheets are different and may be found at FEI.org

Harmony between Horse and Rider

Harmony goes beyond the technical aspects of the rider and speaks more to the *relationship* of the horse and rider. In a harmonious ride, the horse displays confidence in both the rider and in the demands of the test. He is calm and attentive, and the execution shows ease and fluidity. Because of this, riders must be judicious in how they structure their choreography and that the horse is up to the challenges of the freestyle.

Degree of Difficulty

You must make choices as to what you wish to include for difficulty. These choices will greatly affect the general patterns that will occur, consequently, difficulty should be the first thing the rider tackles when approaching choreography.

One way to address this issue is to review what is expected at the top test of the level. Can you exceed that expectation without doing movements above the level? We already discussed a first level ride performing a transition from canter to halt, as an example, which certainly would exceed what is expected. Doing more than the minimum amount of tempis is considered difficult at both fourth and FEI levels, and performing them in a curvilinear pattern would elevate the difficulty score even further. A shoulder-in that is done off the rail is rated as higher difficulty too.

There is a caveat to all this, however. The movement, figure, or transition must be performed well. The horse must be able to execute with precision and clarity, or you not only risk losing points for execution, but also being penalized under the difficulty category for taking an unacceptable risk. While higher risk usually adds greater interest to the choreography, it is well worth noting that an error will create a deduction for the element, as well as affect the marks for the collectives and for harmony. If you can pull it off, definitely do the greater difficulty. When in doubt, stick with the KIS rule and Keep It Simple.

Choreography

There are many facets that make up the choreography score. They are listed as use of the arena, design cohesiveness, balance, and creativity.

One of the more common criticisms from a judge is that the freestyle is too test-like. So, how can you achieve more **creativity**? First, you should read all the tests from First through Grand Prix Special. This will help you to see how a skill develops through the levels, the viewing angles that work for the judges, how various patterns can flow through the arena, and what particular combinations of elements appear in tests above the level you are currently showing. Apply what you learn from this exercise to expand your arena awareness, as well as give you ideas as to how to show your horse to his greatest advantage. For example, the pirouette can come from a diagonal line, from the side or, as expected at Grand Prix, directly on the centerline. How well does your horse pirouette? If it is very good, perhaps you might consider the centerline. There is also a second reason for this drill. When you are aware of patterns from tests you have not yet ridden, you will be less likely to repeat those patterns exactly (test-like).

Another way to increase your choreographic sense is to watch videos of freestyles. While you may not be able to do movements above your level, pay attention to what the rider is asking of the horse. The signature combination for Isabel Werth and Gigolo was their extended canter directly to a pirouette. What she was emphasizing was Gigolo's great elasticity. Now apply that. Why not ask your horse to do a short diagonal extension directly to a shoulder-in? This kind of connection also creates interest by incorporating a line that is not frequently used. Other lines such as an M-D or H-D extension, or including work on or between the quarterlines can add an unsuspected shimmer to the choreography as well.

After considering difficulty and exploring the creative aspects of choreography, you will be on your way to developing a more unique freestyle that shows your horse well. The next step will be to incorporate your ideas with the music. Before finalizing your plan however, draw a series of rectangles representing the arena on a piece of paper. Now sketch in your patterns. Have you employed good **use of the arena** by making sure all areas of the space have been covered? Are the various elements distributed throughout the space fairly evenly so it is not "weighted" with many elements in the same spot and sparingly in others? Is your directional work fairly **balanced**, or have you repeated an element too many times on one rein (i.e. three shoulder-ins to the right, but only one to the left)? Are your patterns logical, clear and easy to follow, or do they lack **design cohesiveness**? Many riders establish balance and design cohesiveness though the use of symmetrical patterns, but symmetry is not necessary to create the feeling of stability in your ride, providing your design is logical and fluid.

Music Selection And Interpretation

If the category of music selection were combined with how you coordinate your music and choreography, the coefficient would be 6! To make the most of these scores, it is essential to choose music that exemplifies the gaits and is suitable for the horse. It is also

important to pick selections that can coordinate into a cohesive sound, have good editing, and produce musical interpretation.

Determining BPM

There are two basic terms that apply to both music and your horse's gaits. The first is rhythm, which simply means a pattern that is repeated. The rhythm of a trot is 1-2, while the most common rhythm of music is 1-2-3-4. Tempo refers to the speed or rate at which the action is happening. While a very collected Grand Prix horse and a small pony may have the same trot rhythm, their rate of action or tempo will be very different. When you see a freestyle performance where the horse seems to be moving to the music, it is most likely that there is a match between the tempo of the music and the tempo of the horse. Since we are always trying to maximize our horse's performance, we should not alter the gaits to fit the music, but we should find music to fit the gaits.

There are a variety of ways that have been suggested for finding your horse's tempo, such as counting only the inside footfall. The method here employs the counting of the front footfalls on the trot, walk, and passage, and of the lead leg on the canter. First, video tape your horse when he is moving well, then while you are viewing the trot on the video, count the front legs as they strike the ground. This counting of footfalls should be done for 60 seconds (or for 30 seconds, multiplied by 2), in order to get a rough estimate of your horse's beats per minute (bpm).

Next, use a digital metronome, which can be found at any store that sells musical instruments (or you can download one), and set it to the tempo (bpm) you counted. If the ticking of the metronome matches the footfalls, your job is done. If not and your horse seems to be moving faster, adjust the metronome up until it is in sync with the footfalls. If he seems to be moving more slowly, adjust the metronome down until it is in sync with the footfalls. If you get close, but just can't seem to pin down the exact tempo, it could be that your horse's tempo is a bit uneven. In that case, find a spot where he is moving at his best (not lengthenings since they take up such little time in a freestyle) and keep replaying the video in that spot until you find the target tempo.

The procedure you used for trot is very similar to the one you will use for canter. First count the strike of the lead leg for 60 seconds to get the rough bpm, then set the metronome to that count. If the metronome beat matches the footfalls—that's great. If not, move the metronome up or down accordingly, until the metronome and horse are in sync.

For passage and walk, we are back to watching the front two legs. While it is true that the rhythm of the walk is 1-2-3-4, it is not only easier to count just the front two legs, but the result will be in a more common musical tempo.

Don't worry if your results are not close to what another horse in your barn is doing. There is no right or wrong. Tempos come in a large range depending on the size of the horse, impulsion, degree of collection, and so on.

Finding the Right Music

Music surrounds us, so always be aware of it. Explore your own collection of music, enlist friends in the search, and visit your public library to borrow from their resource. Nearby colleges may also have music libraries and listening areas you can use. Tune-in to the radios on the internet while you are working at your computer, and check out the internet stores such as Amazon or iTunes, which have music clips you can peruse. While lyrics are permitted, instrumental music is preferred. Oohs and aaahs and a judicious amount of lyrics are acceptable.

While you are searching for music, pay attention to the beat. To avoid purchasing a song you cannot use, imagine yourself riding as you are listening. Is the speed way too fast or too slow for your horse's tempo? If so, dismiss it; but if it feels close, purchase it as a prospect. Now, set the metronome to your horse's tempo and play it over the music. If it is faster or slower, move the metronome up or down until the beating of the metronome and music are in sync. That is your music's bpm. If it is within a 10 beat range of your horse, the music can usually be altered to match.

Once you have altered the tempo (see Editing), ride to your music, and enlist a ground person to help you determine what looks good. You may have several trot selections that all match the footfalls, but some may make your horse appear lighter, while others make him look rushed, or elegant, or heavy. Choose music that enhances the look of your horse's gaits. There is no way to predetermine exactly what the illusion will be by merely listening to music. Playing the music over your video will give you some indication, but the real test of **suitability** is in the riding.

When you are about to make your final selections, the next criterion is one of creating a **cohesive program**. Is the instrumentation the same? Is the music linked by genre (jazz, classical, folk, rock, pop)? Does it hold together because of a theme (children's music, Broadway, salute to an artist)? The answer should be "yes" to at least one of the above questions. This will put you on the right track for having the sound of an integrated composition and not a compilation of miscellaneous pieces. If the answer is no, you may choose to either continue with your search or compile the freestyle with what you have, while accepting that the program has some limitations. Later, you can always change some parts.

Timing

The time for your freestyle begins on the first motion after the halt and salute, and it ceases on the final salute. Any choreography performed after the maximum time will not be judged, and a penalty will be subtracted from the total score of your Artistic Impression. While there are minimum times for FEI rides (Junior, Young Rider and Intermediate at 4:30 and Grand Prix at 5:30), there are no minimums for USDF levels. The maximum time for USDF, Junior, Young Rider and Intermediate is 5:00, while the Grand Prix is 6:00. FEI riders must also be aware that there is a penalty for music running beyond final salute.

Time restrictions also apply to entry music. Once the bell has rung, you have 45 seconds

until the introductory music begins, and then you are permitted another 20 seconds before you must be in the arena. Your introductory music may exceed 20 seconds however, since the limitation does not include the time on centerline to the halt.

Interpretation

Along with matching the beat of the music to the footfalls, **interpretation** gives the freestyle its dance-like quality. As example, orchestras have a large range of sound, called **dynamics**. Powerful movements like tempis and extensions can be well expressed during a crescendo (building up) or a forte (loud or powerful) sequence, and softer movements like circles or pirouettes during soft or gentle sequences. Occasionally, there is even something unusual in the music that suggests a movement, like a sweeping section that might remind you of a half-pass.

Not all music is performed by full orchestras, however, so if you have chosen Rock & Roll or selections by a small combo, you may not get the same dynamic range you hear from a larger group of instruments. In this case interpreting the **musical phrase** is the most effective tool to employ. Simply put, this means that when you hear a change in the music, you make a change in the move you are doing. Because these changes do not need to occur at the letter, there is plenty of leeway for permitting interpretation. Just be sure that you have continued the movement, such as a shoulder-in, long enough to establish its presence. FEI requires a minimum of 12 meters, but for lower levels a minimum of 18 meters is suggested.

In a perfect world, your freestyle would have music that allows for interpreting through both dynamics and phrasing. For an example, as the phrase changes, there is also a big cymbal crash followed by a forte sequence and, right at the onset of that crash, you begin your extension. Getting that effect will require time, patience, and good homework on the part of the rider, but it is the stuff that causes goose bumps.

Some riders prefer to edit their music first, and then place the choreography into that frame, while FEI riders frequently choreograph first to maximize their Difficulty and Choreography score. A blending of these two approaches usually delivers the best results, and if you plan to do-it-yourself, this might be your best bet in achieving good interpretation. A last option is to have the music composed around the choreography, as a soundtrack is done for a movie. Some riders may be talented enough to do it themselves; they may have friends who are; or they may even hire a professional.

The Blended Approach

You may choose to edit first or do a blend, but in either case, you must have an idea as to how many footfalls it takes for you to complete each part of your pattern and/or cover certain distances. An example would be to count the number of footfalls it takes to do a circle or to get from M to H. Make a list of them. With this information, and the fact that the beats of the music match the footfalls of the horse, you can now actually begin to choreograph on paper while listening, not riding, to the music. Count the number of beats in your musical phrases, and turn them into a chart. See how your list of footfalls can be

matched to your musical phrases.

Now it is time to test your theories by riding some of your patterns and having them recorded. Watch the video while listening to the music. This approach takes a great deal of stress off the horse, because there is not a lot of repetition involved. It also allows you to do the patterns and still concentrate on the execution, without the distraction of trying to stay to the music. When the music/pattern coordination seems to be working in your living room, give it a test run in the arena. Pat yourself on the back if it works; if not, make adjustments. Sometimes, the music can be reedited to get you nearer to the expression you want, or sometimes you may need to modify the pattern. This process of bouncing between music and choreography requires time and patience, but yields excellent results.

Editing

If you wish to tackle the editing yourself, you will need software. There are a number of programs fulfilling a wide range of needs and they can be found in a number of places. Check out computer stores, computer magazines, online search, and instrument music stores to find one suitable for you and your computer platform. The important thing is that before you make any purchases, you should closely explore your needs and then do your research.

Some programs offer audio only, have as little as two tracks, and are downloadable from the web. Others offer audio and MIDI, unlimited tracks and have a multitude of plug-ins. As with anything, the more features, the higher the cost. Whatever you choose, you should at least be able to take music directly from a CD ("ripping"), edit, change tempos, and convert your final freestyle composition to interleaved AIFF (Audio Interchange File Format) so that you can burn your own CD. Also check to see what format your program will accept. If you have purchased MP3 recordings, they may first need to be translated into another format, such as WAV, before your software will accept them.

If you do it yourself, take care. Knowing how to use a word processing program does not make us great authors, nor does experimenting with a graphics program make us artists. The same is true of music software. At the very least, you should have clean editing that avoids long fade-ins, fade-outs, or cross-fades between parts. Avoid abrupt cuts or anything that disturbs the ear, such as pops or clicks created from a poor cut. Also note that long periods of silence or very long sustained notes do not support movement and are discouraged.

Professional Services

There is no definite answer as to whether or not you should consider using a freestyle service. The most challenging part of the design process is finding the right music, so if this is something that you would enjoy exploring on your own, than go for it. You may just want to hire a professional to do the editing. As for choreography, many freestyle designers are aware of the latest rule changes that would affect your design, as well as being practiced at choreographic principles. With some out-of-the-box thinking and good upfront research however, you could do this on your own. If you find that you prefer to

have expert help, you would most likely benefit by getting assistance. Whatever you ultimately decide, you should at least try to start the process on your own. Pride of authorship is a superb reason to do as much of the work as you can.

Author: Terry Ciotti Gallo on behalf of the USDF Freestyle Committee. Terry has had her work represented at the Olympic, World Equestrian, Pan American Games, and World Dressage Masters. Her freestyles earned two World Cup titles. She is the former chair of the USDF Freestyle Committee and currently serves as the freestyle liaison to the USDF Judges Committee.