

# Let the Show Begin

Freestyles are 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. The addition of music can be an inspiration to the rider and audience alike, not to mention that it gives us a creative outlet and another way to explore the sport we love.

You should be encouraged to try your hand at designing your own freestyle. All it takes is becoming familiar with a few principles to get you on your way.

## **KNOW THE TECHNICAL**

First, **establish 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 60% at First Level Test 3 or from Second Level, which you earned on the same horse at a USEF sanctioned show. A copy of your score must accompany your entry form.

Next, **determine 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? To find out what is required, check the score sheets. All test requirements and the Rules, Guidelines and Definitions for USDF level freestyles are available online on the USDF website. <http://www.usdf.org/education/other-programs/musical-freestyle/index.asp>

Understand what is meant by **above the level**. The only permitted movements are those from the standard tests of the same level as the freestyle you are showing. If you wish to include a non-required movement, you may do so as long as it is at your level or below. For clarification, there is a section “Additionally Allowed” on the USDF score sheets. FEI restrictions can be found in the article “Directives for Judges—Freestyle Tests” at [fei.org](http://fei.org). Deliberately doing a movement above the level you are showing will incur a severe penalty.

## **ARTISTIC IMPRESSION**

The five USDF artistic categories are Harmony between Horse and Rider, Choreography, Degree of Difficulty, Music, Interpretation. FEI combines the last two as Music Choice and Interpretation, and for its fifth artistic category includes the collective marks Rhythm, Energy and Elasticity. The coefficient for all FEI categories is 4. USDF coefficients are listed next to their headings.

### **Harmony between Horse and Rider (coefficient 3)**

Harmony reaches beyond the technical aspects 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 make sure that the horse is up to the challenges of the freestyle.

### **Degree of Difficulty (coefficient 2)**

You must make choices as to what you wish to include for difficulty. Because these choices will greatly affect the patterns you design, difficulty should be the first thing you consider when approaching choreography.

One way to address this is to review what is expected at the top test of the level you are showing. Can you exceed that expectation without doing movements above the level? Examples of increased difficulty include executing steeper angles, placing movements in an exposed position (ex: shoulder-in on the quarter line), performing demanding transitions, showing challenging combinations, and demonstrating tempis on a broken line.

There is a caveat to all this however—the movement, figure, or transition must be performed well. Poor execution of attempted difficulty carries a large liability. You not receive a deduction under the technical execution but also under Degree of Difficulty for taking an unacceptable risk, as well as a potential drop in the score for Harmony. Higher risk can add greater interest to the choreography and if you can pull it off, definitely include it. If in doubt, stick to the basics.

### **Choreography (coefficient 4)**

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

We tend to think that creativity supersedes all the other Choreography criteria, but the most important aspect is **design cohesiveness**. The patterns must be logical and easily identifiable. It is your responsibility to make your intentions clear to the judges and not have them guessing as to what you did. When the choreography is understandable, the other criteria are spotted easily. Without this clarity, the entire Choreography score suffers.

This does not negate the need to be inventive. One of the more common criticisms from judges 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. 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. YouTube is full of them. 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. In that, she was emphasizing Gigolo's great elasticity. Now apply that observation. Why not ask your horse to do a short diagonal extension directly to a shoulder-in? This combination generates interest in two ways. First, it makes direct connections of elements and secondly it employs a less commonly used line.

After considering difficulty and exploring the creative aspects of choreography such as combinations or using uncommon lines, you will be on your way to developing a more unique freestyle that shows your horse well. Also know that halts can be anywhere on the centerline and transitions do not need to be at the letters.

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 or are many predominantly in one section of the arena? Do you have directional **balance** or have you repeated an element too many times on one rein, such as 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. Symmetry is not necessary to create the feeling of stability in your ride, but the choreography must still meet all the criteria.

### **Music and Interpretation**

The FEI score sheet combines Music and Interpretation with a single coefficient of 4; the USDF score sheet separates them and gives each a coefficient of 3. The criteria for the Music category are suitability, cohesiveness and seamlessness. Interpretation is measured by how the music expresses the gaits and whether the rider can show musical phrasing and dynamics.

It is always beneficial to understand the standard upon which you will be judged, so the following information is structured to reflect the criteria as they are listed on the score sheet. In the actual preparation of your freestyle, Music, Choreography and Interpretation go hand in hand.

### **Music (coefficient 3)**

Music surrounds us and you need to be aware of it, so pay attention—even while you are listening to the radio in the car. 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. Tune to radios on the Internet while you are working at your computer, and check out the Internet stores such as Amazon or iTunes that have music clips you can peruse. While lyrics are permitted, instrumental music is preferred. Oohs and aaahs are acceptable as well as a judicious amount of lyrics.

Your main goal will be to make choices that enhance the look of your horse's gaits and avoid anything that diminishes him or gives an unflattering impression of his movement. 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. For this you will need eyes on the ground.

When you are about to make your final selections, choose pieces that sound as if they belong together so they give your program **cohesiveness**. Is the instrumentation of the various pieces the same? Is the music linked by genre (jazz, classical, folk, rock, pop)? Does it hold together because of a theme (Broadway, salute to a recognizable 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 tunes. If the answer is no, you may choose to either continue with your search or compile the freestyle with what you have. Accept that the program has some limitations, but continue searching until you find the right mixture.

After you have made your decisions, it is time to edit your music. If you wish to tackle this part yourself, you will need software. Check online for a program appropriate for your computer's operating system. Also check to see what format your software will accept. If you have purchased MP3 or AAC recordings, they may first need to be translated into WAV before your software can import them.

Be careful. Avoid abrupt cuts or anything that disturbs the ear such as pops, clicks or poor music structure. Short fades may be okay, but do not be tempted to use long fade-ins, fade-outs or cross-fades between parts. Long periods of silence or very long fades do not support movement. Good editing is clean in its sound and exhibits **seamlessness**.

### **Interpretation**

Interpretation has to do with the relationship between the music and the movement. Does the music sound as if it is a good match for the gait it accompanies? Is there coordination between the changes of the movement with that of the changes within the music?

Some music gives the illusion of being a canter or a trot simply by the way it "feels". In other words, the **music expresses the gait**. A more powerful way to express the gait is to match the beat of the music to the steps in the trot or the strike of the lead leg in canter.

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.

First, video your horse when he is moving well. While you are viewing the trot, count the front legs for 60 seconds. This gives you a rough estimate of your horse's beats per minute or bpm. Next use a digital metronome, many of which can be downloaded, and set it to the tempo, which is the bpm you counted. (A faster method to determine bpm is to use the "tap" feature of your metronome where you tap the screen every time you see the horse's step.)

If the ticking of the metronome matches the footfalls, your job is done. If not, adjust the

metronome up or down until it is in sync with the footfalls. If you get close, but just can't seem to pin it down, 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 tend to be quicker) and keep replaying the video in that spot until you find the target tempo. For fun and to help you ride a consistent tempo, try playing the metronome at your target tempo during your normal training.

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 making adjustments if necessary.

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.

Now you are prepared to search for music that will match the horse's footfalls. For the easiest method, use the tap feature of your metronome by touching the screen on every beat of the music. Test your accuracy by playing the metronome to the music. You may need to make adjustments. If the music is within a 10 beat range of your horse, the music can usually be altered to match.

If you have chosen to do your own music editing, your software might be able to alter the tempo of the music to match your horse. Once you have altered the tempo, ride to your music, and enlist a ground person to help you determine **suitability**.

Once you can express the gait, you are half way to good Interpretation. The other half is phrasing and dynamics. When an orchestra plays, we normally hear a large range of sound from very loud to very soft. That is called **dynamics**. Powerful movements like tempis and extensions can be well expressed during a crescendo (building up) or a forte (loud) sequence, and softer movements like circles or pirouettes during soft or gentle sequences. Occasionally, there might even be something in the music that indicates a movement to you, like a sweeping section suggesting a half-pass.

More importantly, you should aim to interpret musical phrases. Simply put, **phrasing** means that when you hear a change in the music, you make a change in the movement you are doing. Because movement transitions 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. A minimum of 12 meters is required, but for lower levels a minimum of 18 meters is recommended.

### **Editing**

In judging terms, Music is everything that happens *before* the show since it deals with selecting and preparation, in other words, whether you have chosen what is suitable for the horse, created a cohesive program and have edited seamlessly. Interpretation is considered everything that happens *at* the show because it depends on your ability to execute your plan by staying with the beat and making it to your musical phrase.

Despite the judging difference, editing and phrasing are go hand and hand. You may prefer to edit your music first, and then place the choreography into that frame. If you are

doing the editing yourself and are a novice, this might be a good strategy since you can keep your edits to a minimum and have a greater likelihood of producing a seamless composition.

FEI riders frequently choreograph first to maximize their Difficulty (coefficient 4) and Choreography score. They then give the more difficult job of editing the music to match the choreography to a professional.

Another alternative is to take a blended approach. Here, you do a little editing before and some tidying up later. 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 cover certain distances. An example would be to count the number of steps it takes to do a trot circle or to get from M to H. 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 to your edited music.

Test your theories by riding some of your patterns and having them video taped. Now 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 during a mounted session. 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 in the pattern. For instance, if you wanted to do an extension from H but the music came earlier, turn down the quarter-line instead.

Sometimes you can get close but not close enough. In this case, it might be possible to reedit the music to get you nearer to the expression you want. This process of bouncing between music and choreography requires time and patience, but yields excellent results.

### **Time Limits**

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 all levels is 5:00, with the exception of the Grand Prix which is 6:00.

Time restrictions also apply to entry music. Once the bell has rung, you have 45 seconds to cue the sound booth. When the introductory music begins, you are permitted 20 seconds before you must be in the arena. This limitation does not include the time it takes to go up centerline to the halt, so the entry music may actually go beyond 20 seconds.

Exit music is not permitted.

### **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.

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