

The New Rider Tests Explained

Rider-centric tests focus on rider skills, not fancy horses

By Jayne Ayers

Have you ever wondered how your faithful equine companion could compete against those warmbloods that seem destined for an international dressage career? You might have felt outclassed at the shows before you even entered the arena.

Over the years, I have heard many riders lament that they don't feel competitive at dressage shows because they can't afford a horse that has the

"whole package" of temperament, gymnastic ability, and three super gaits. In addition, some adult amateurs know that they are not ever going to be athletic enough to sit comfortably on a really big-moving horse. Or perhaps your breed of choice or your treasured companion is not ideally built for competitive dressage, but you are not interested in making a change.

Committees at both the USDF and

the United States Equestrian Federation have given these dilemmas much thought over the years. Now there may be a way to level the playing field: the new USEF rider tests.

What Are the Rider Tests?

These new tests, developed through the combined efforts of the USDF and the USEF, provide for an alternate type of dressage competition that is far less dependent on the quality of the horse and much more dependent on the skills of the rider. It is our hope that these tests will give competitors on a wide variety of horses a chance to earn top scores and placings.

USEF-licensed/USDF-recognized dressage competitions may offer rider tests, which have been written for Training, First, and Second Levels, beginning this competition year. The patterns are consistent with those in the standard dressage tests, but with more challenging sequences. They require great accuracy and quick responses by both horse and rider. Movements that best show the rider's aids are often placed so that the judge at C has a good view of the interaction between horse and rider. The emphasis is on what the rider is doing rather than on the horse's natural talent.

How They're Scored

To help the judges to focus primarily on the riders, a new scoring system has been developed for the rider tests.

There are no scores for individual movements. At the end of the test, instead of the usual collective marks, there are five scores pertaining to the rider:

- Rider's position
- Rider's correct and effective use of aids
- Horse's response and performance
- Accuracy of the exercises
- Harmony between horse and rider.

The judge awards a mark between 1.0 and 10.0 for each of the above. Tenths of points allow for more differentiation in classes with lots of riders of similar ability.



FOCUS ON THE RIDER: *New tests emphasize correct, effective equitation. JJ Tate rides her Summersby at the 2013 Succeed/USDF FEI-Level Trainers' Conference in January.*

JENNIFER BRYANT

Directive ideas for each of the five rider scores help the judges to assess the rider in greater detail than is required in the regular tests. For instance, the score for **position** asks the judge to look at posture and lateral symmetry, the ability to sit in harmony with the gait mechanics, vertical alignment when sitting and keeping the trunk slightly in front of vertical when posting, and the ability of the hands to maintain a steady, elastic contact with the horse's mouth. Whew! That's a lot to take in and remember—and that's for only one of the five marks.

The directives for **correct and effective use of the aids** pay more attention to the horse's performance. If a rider is truly effective, the horse should perform with the impulsion required at the level, including the collection required at Second Level. Evaluating the horse's contact, bend, straightness, and longitudinal balance helps to determine the rider's effectiveness, as does the correct execution of each exercise, with clearly correct aids. The judge must look at how the aids are applied, not just at whether the horse managed to get the job done despite the rider. The judge must evaluate the rider's preparation for transitions and movements. To earn a good score, the aids should appear light and not too obvious. For a really high score, the aids should be nearly invisible. To quote the USEF Rule Book, the horse "gives the impression of doing, of its own accord, what is required."

Naturally, there is overlap in looking at all these factors when giving the next score, for the **horse's response and performance**. Good basics must underlie every portion of the test. The horse should be active, with a consistent tempo at all gaits, while reaching confidently to the bit. He should react promptly and cooperatively with the driving and bending aids, as well as with the aids to move laterally. He should be in balance, showing the engagement appropriate to the level.

Accuracy of the exercises refers to using good geometry and perform-

ing transitions accurately. However, to earn a high score here, the test must also be ridden with appropriate impulsion. It is always easier to be accurate when going slowly, with little energy. Well-ridden corners are also a part of the accuracy score.

Harmony between horse and rider means more than that both look happy. It must look easy for the horse and rider to meet the demands of the test with confidence and fluency. The judge wants to see correct basics and

well-executed exercises that show good preparation, executed by a rider who adheres elastically to the saddle with independent, soft hands. The rider must show a good understanding of correct technique and training goals through his or her riding skills.

Scoring Methodology

To arrive at the scores for the rider tests, our judges will have to learn a whole new way of evaluating a dres-

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sage test. Unless they have judged the FEI Young Horse tests, they have never had to wait until the end of the test to give their scores and comments. This can be a big change. And judges have spent years being trained to look mostly at the horse, rather than the details of the riding. It will take time, practice, and training for judges to become as good at assessing riders as they are at judging horses. USEF clinics will provide this additional training, and continuing education may well be offered through the USDF "L" program and other sources. We ask riders and coaches alike to be patient during the judges' learning curve. Not every rider strength or flaw is likely to be noted at first.

The Future

There are no plans in place for USDF awards for the new rider tests, but discussion is under way. First, however, people need to get used to riding, teaching, and judging them. In time, these new tests could prove to be a clear favorite of many riders to test their progress. Even higher-level riders could drop down some levels and enter an occasional show just to ride the rider tests, which will provide

Where to Get the Rider Tests

Current USEF members may download the 2013 Training, First, and Second Level Rider tests at usef.org (Disciplines/International/Dressage). You'll need to establish a login using your USEF member number.

The rider tests are also published in the 2013 USDF Member Guide, a hard copy of which was mailed to current USDF members. The Member Guide is also available online at usdf.org (Publications/Online Member Guide).

them with specific feedback on their mastery of the basics.

One of my students has won Great American/USDF Regional Championship titles at First, Second, and Third Levels with scores of over 70 percent. I asked her to try out the new Training Level Rider Test. Although the patterns were easy for the pair, many small things could have been performed better. The rider would not have earned many 8s for her efforts, even after practicing a few times. The rider test provided some clear ideas for homework, which could have the added benefit of improving the pair's upper-level work.

In my experience thus far, I have found that the new rider tests really do test riders' skills. A collegiate director of equestrian studies offered the following feedback, which clearly expresses the main purpose of the tests:

"I wonder if [those who developed the tests] fully appreciate the lovely thing they have done for riders whose passion for dressage can only be lived


out through the use of lesson horses and their instructors. The 2013 Training, First, and Second Level Rider Tests, which reward correct riding and correct training rather than expensive horses with flamboyant gaits, are an encouraging option for showing for dedicated riders who lack the finances or circumstances to have their own horse. The tests offer a viable method of evaluating their progress as tactful, accurate riders and encourage good horsemanship.... I offer a heartfelt 'Bravo!' and thank you for this new tool to use in our students' education along the classical path." ▲

FEI 4 and USEF "S" judge Jayne Ayers, Dousman, WI, served on the USEF/USDF task force that developed the new rider tests. She is the chair of the USEF Dressage Committee, a faculty member of the USDF "L" Education program, and a member of the USDF "L" Program Committee.*



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