

Secrets to Showing Success

Want better scores? Bone up on the basics

By Marilyn Heath

If dressage judges had their wish, all horse/rider combinations would win first place with a score in excess of 70 percent. What fun that class would be to judge! However, the job of the judge is to accurately place the class while evaluating the correctness of the basics and the successful fulfillment of the criteria of the movements, all while giving constructive com-

ments and an accurate and meaningful summary. A tall order!

What, exactly, are the basics in dressage? In this article, I'll explain.

Basics of the Basics

The horse's *gaits*, *impulsion*, and *submission* are the foundation of his correctness as a dressage horse.

The three basic **gaits** are the walk, trot, and canter. Each should show a clear and pure rhythm as well as a consistent tempo.

According to the USDF Glossary of Judging Terms, **impulsion** is "thrust; releasing of the energy stored by engagement. The energy is transmitted through a back that is free from negative tension and is manifested in the horse's elastic, whole-body movement."

The USDF Glossary defines **submission** in brief as "compliance and throughness."

The judge must ascertain what effect the execution of the movement has on the basics. For instance, when the rider asks for a leg-yield, does the horse maintain the tempo and the trot rhythm? Is the impulsion affected? Does the horse move sideways while willingly remaining steady in the contact, or does he come against the rider's hand? How well does the horse fulfill the requirement of the leg-yield? Is the horse parallel to the long side of the arena? Does he look slightly away from his direction of travel? Do his legs cross when viewed from C? Or do the haunches trail, the tempo slow, or the horse become irregular, all of which are faults?

For every movement, in addition to assessing these three basic qualities, the judge considers the training of the horse vis-a-vis the pyramid of training. The pyramid of training is a visual depiction of the general progression of dressage training (see illustration on the opposite page).

Purpose of the Level

In evaluating a horse's performance, the dressage judge must keep in mind what is expected at the level being



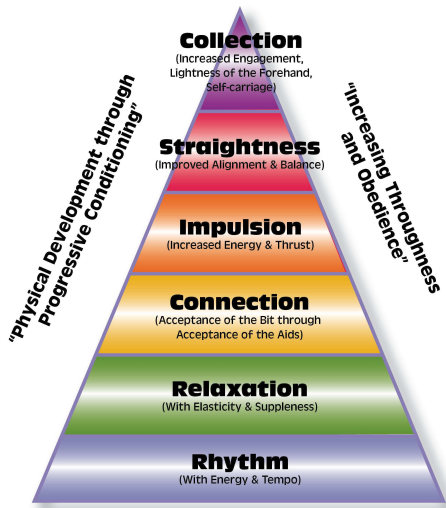
EAGLE EYE: Judges start with the basics in evaluating a horse's performance. Jim Koford shows Rhett at Dressage at Devon (PA) 2011.

Digital Edition Bonus Content



Read the USDF Glossary of Judging Terms.

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The pyramid of training

shown. These expectations are spelled out in the "Purpose of the Level" text on each US Equestrian Federation dressage test sheet. The judge evaluates whether the horse is fulfilling the purpose as stated.

The purpose of Training through Fourth Levels is in the sidebar on page

17. I have italicized the phrases that emphasize the need for achieving the correct basics at the previous level before you move up to the next level.

The purpose of each level builds on the success of the fulfillment of the purpose of the previous level. For instance, First Level introduces leg-yield and lengthening of the stride at trot and canter. The First Level horse is expected to halt from the trot and trot from the halt without intermediate walk steps. This is a natural

progression, provided that the foundation of Training Level has been correctly laid. The same principle holds true at all levels, all the way up to Grand Prix.

Many riders are unsure of when they should move up a level. By being attentive to these purposes and making sure that the requirements are being met, you can ascertain when you and your horse are ready to move up.

I have heard riders say, "I did First Level last year, so this year I am mov-

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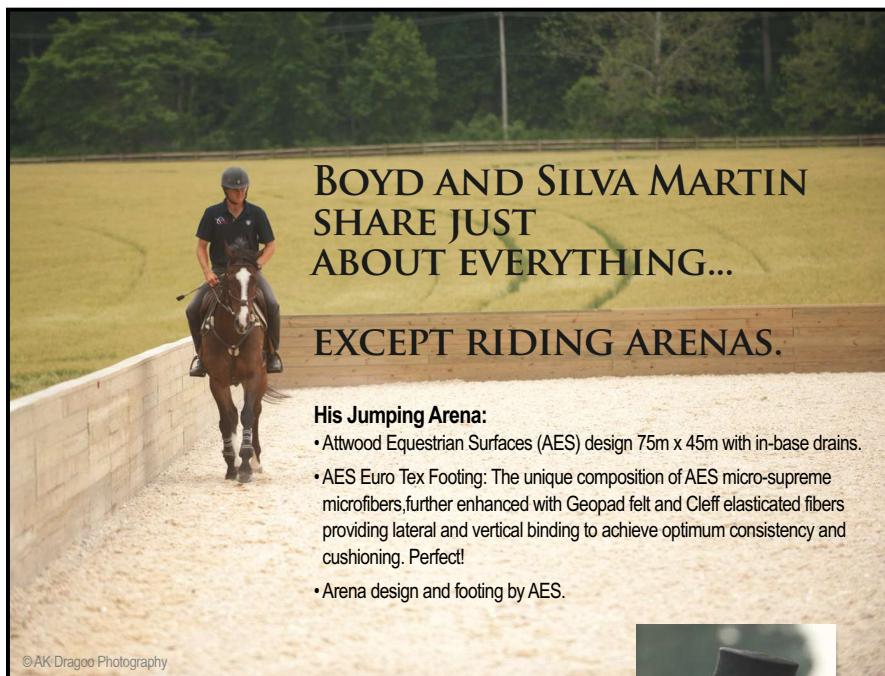
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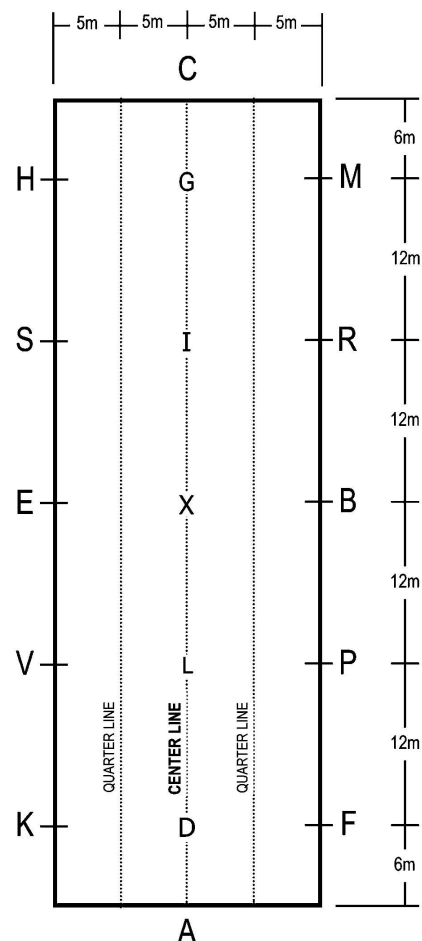
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ing to Second Level.” Or “My horse does flying changes, so I am going to move him to Third Level.” Or “I simply cannot get him on the bit in a snaffle, so I will show him Third Level so that I can show him in a full bridle.” Or even, “I can’t teach my horse to do the stretching circle, so I might as well move to Second Level.”

These comments indicate a lack of understanding of the need for correct basics. For example, have you ever wondered why the 2011 Training and First Level test require a stretching circle at the trot? It is because the importance of the concept of the horse stretching toward the bit cannot be overemphasized. This is an exercise that should remain in your work at all levels.

It is important to work on basics at every level. I once heard a rider com-



STANDARD ARENA: Learn the geometry and the placement and spacing of the letters

USDF ILLUSTRATION

ment, "I will be so glad when I can work on something besides walk, trot, and canter." Well, you will always be working on the walk, trot, and canter, and their variations! All movements and exercises are done in one or more of these gaits, and the quality of the basic gaits should be enhanced through correct training and the resultant development of the horse's musculature.

Directives

Another building block of the basics is the directive ideas, which are listed on the test sheet following each movement. Notice that the quality of the gait(s) is always mentioned in the directives. The quality of a gait refers to

the clarity of the rhythm and its amplitude or scope, elasticity, suppleness, suspension, reach, and range of motion. Straightness is mentioned when the horse is on straight lines, and bend is mentioned when the horse is on a curved line. Other familiar words in the directives include balance, willingness, and tempo. All of these qualities are part of "the basics."

Rider Basics

Correct training begins with the rider. The 2011 USEF tests have three scores for the rider ("seat and position," "correct and effective use of the aids," and "harmony between horse and rider").

The rider should be correct in posture and alignment, with a stable core.

Purpose of the Levels

From the US Equestrian Federation, here is the purpose of each level, from Training through Fourth. I have italicized the phrases that indicate how each level builds on the previous one.

Training Level: To confirm that the horse is supple and moves freely forward in a clear and steady rhythm, accepting contact with the bit.

First Level: To confirm that the horse, *in addition to the requirements of Training Level*, has developed the thrust to achieve improved balance and throughness and to maintain a more consistent contact with the bit.

Second Level: To confirm that the horse, *having achieved the thrust required in First Level*, now accepts more weight on the hindquarters (collection); moves with an uphill tendency, especially in the medium gaits; and is reliably on the bit. A greater degree of straightness, bending, suppleness, throughness, balance and self-carriage is required than at First Level.

Third Level: To confirm that the horse, *having begun to develop an uphill balance at Second Level*, now demonstrates increased engagement, especially in the extended gaits. Transitions between collected, medium, and extended gaits should be well defined and performed with engagement. *The horse should be reliably on the bit and show a greater degree of straightness, bending, suppleness, throughness, balance and self-carriage than at Second Level.*

Fourth Level: To confirm that the horse has developed sufficient suppleness, impulsion and throughness to perform the Fourth Level tests, which have a medium degree of difficulty. The horse must remain reliably on the bit, showing a clear uphill balance and lightness that results from improved engagement and weight-carrying by his hind quarters. *The movements should be performed with greater straightness, energy and cadence than at Third Level.*

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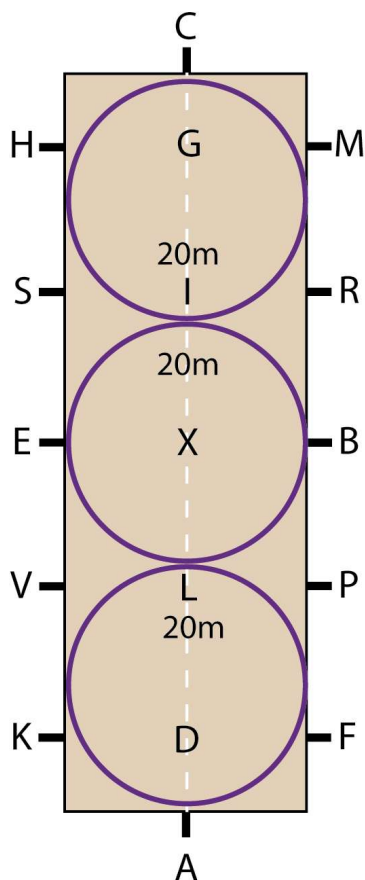
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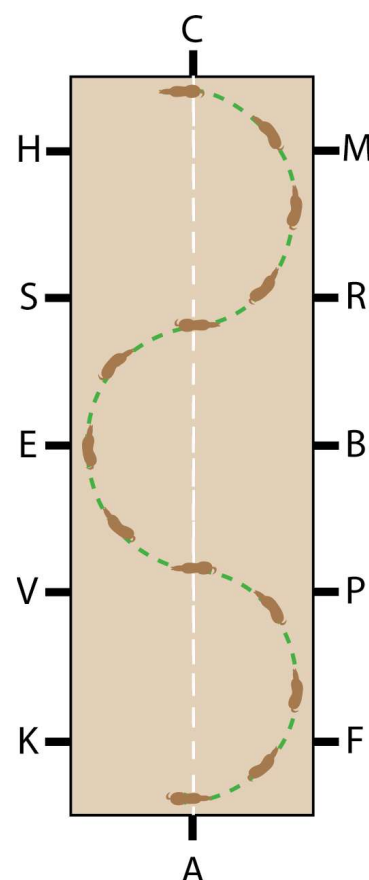
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CIRCLE GEOMETRY: Note the dimensions of these 20-meter circles in relation to the arena markers



THREE-LOOP SERPENTINE: Essentially three 20-meter half-circles with a moment of straightness over center line before changing the bend

She should sit vertically, with weight equally distributed on both seat bones when moving on a straight line, and should not lean inward or outward. She should maintain elasticity and a positive mobile tension without being rigid. With this position and seat, the rider will be able to develop subtle,

tactful, yet effective aids for clear and harmonious communication with the horse.

Geometry 101

The best-trained horse and the most proficient rider will lose points if the test is inaccurately ridden. Start by



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learning the geometry of the dressage arena and how it relates to the standard figures.

A standard arena (see diagram on page 16) measures 20 by 60 meters. The letters are spaced as shown in the diagram.

As you can see in the illustration on the previous page, a 20-meter circle at A or C goes beyond L and I by two meters. Similarly, a 20-meter circle at B or E does not touch L or I. (If it did, it would be a 20 x 24-meter oval.)

A three-loop serpentine follows the same guidelines. This figure consists of three even loops of 20 meters each. The horse should be straight (parallel to the short side) for one horse's length when crossing the center line between each loop (see illustration on the previous page).

Accuracy in dressage is important: correct geometry, size and shape of circles, use of corners, and angle and bend in lateral movements. Accuracy should become habitual so that you

can focus on riding your horse instead of riding the test. (For the same reason, it is important to be very familiar with the test even if you plan to have a reader.)

Basics, Always

The secret to success in the dressage arena is to focus on basics at every level. Be correct with rhythm, relaxation, suppleness, impulsion, acceptance of the bridle, straightness, and bend; and at Second Level and above, collection. When those qualities exist, the movements will become easier to execute, you and your horse will present a harmonious picture, and your scores will reflect your efforts. You will be a happy competitor, and the judge will be a happy judge! ▲

Marilyn Heath, of Naples, FL, is a USEF "S" dressage judge, a USDF "L" Education Program Faculty member, and a member of the USDF Judges Committee. She is a USDF bronze, silver, and gold medalist.

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