

# Lessons from the “L” Program

*Our training series concludes with a look at the “rider” collective marks*

By Debbie Riehl-Rodriguez with Fran Severn

In the previous articles in this series, faculty members of the USDF “L” Education Program explained key points of the “L” program—equine biomechanics, judging methodology, and the collective marks for the dressage horse—and how you can apply them to your own riding, training, and showing. This month, in our series’ final installment, I’ll examine the collective marks for the rider and the “further remarks” area of the score sheet.



**FOCUS ON THE RIDER:** Two collective marks evaluate the rider’s position and use of the aids

The 2015 United States Equestrian Federation dressage tests, which were released December 1, 2014, included changes to the collective marks. Specifically, the rider-focused collective mark for “harmony” has been removed. Harmony was always considered in the collective mark for submission; now it is exclusively found there. (For more details on these changes, see “Clinic: Lessons from the ‘L’ Program,” December 2014/January 2015.)

This change leaves only two “rider” collectives: *rider’s position and seat* and *correct and effective use of the aids*.

## Rider’s Position and Seat

These may be the easiest elements of a test to evaluate objectively, and perhaps the easiest for the rider to adjust and improve. With correct equitation and a correct and effective seat, you can properly apply the aids and communicate with your horse. He, in return, can respond willingly, easily, and in balance.

In formulating the score for this collective mark, the judge first evaluates the rider’s posture and alignment according to the following criteria:

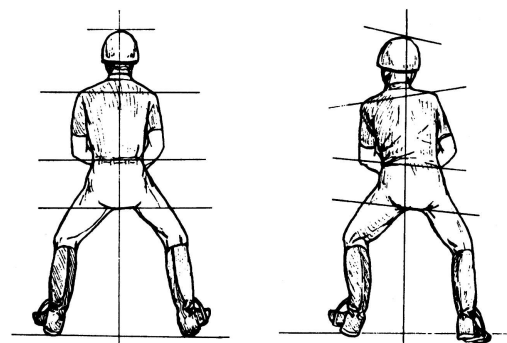
- Posture; shape of the body
- Symmetry
- Stability
- Elasticity
- Following the mechanics of the gaits.

The criteria are presented in a specific order because each one is influenced by the element that comes before it. I’ll look at each one in detail.

### Posture; shape of the body.

Because the collective marks reflect the basics that every rider needs, these criteria should sound familiar: Your ear, shoulder, hip, and heel should be aligned vertically (in the rising trot, your upper body is slightly ahead of the vertical, which I’ll discuss further in a moment). A second imaginary line should run from the bit through your hands to your elbows, which should be bent and resting lightly against your lower ribs.

Like a horse’s conformation, our basic structure is what we’re born with, and every rider’s body type is different. The challenge is to learn how to maximize your physical abilities to compensate for any aspect of your physique that may be less than ideal for dressage purposes. If you are in a general balanced range, it’s a good start. You’re able to begin to be effective with your aids, and you can refine that effectiveness.



**SYMMETRY:** A laterally balanced rider’s weight is distributed equally over both seat bones (left). Uneven lateral balance results in multiple areas of asymmetry throughout the rider’s body and forces the horse to compensate (right).

**Symmetry.** Symmetry refers to the rider’s lateral balance—how evenly you sit on both seat bones. It’s possible for a rider to appear correct when viewed from the side but to be weighting one seat bone more than the other. The symmetrical rider appears equally aligned when viewed from the front or behind (see illustration above).

When your weight is distributed equally in the saddle, you’re better able to maintain your balance. Uneven lateral balance can negatively impact the horse because it forces him to compensate. Most asymmetrical riders slide to the outside of the saddle and “collapse” the inside hip, which causes the hip to push the leg to the outside. As a result, the rider can’t turn or keep the horse’s weight balanced correctly.

**Stability.** Good posture and symmetry lead to stability. A stable rider sits securely in the saddle by virtue of her body position and balance. This security comes from proper weight distribution through a stable core. You can maintain proper posture without rocking from side to side when your horse is moving. Many posture faults—elbows or toes out, weight uneven in the stirrups, and using the reins for support, among others—happen when the rider tries to compensate for poor stability.

Perhaps the best way to improve all of these factors is lunge lessons. When you don’t have to worry about your hands or gaits or steering, you

can focus exclusively on your position and balance. This should be done either with an instructor or a ground person with a good eye.

**Elasticity** comes from good development of the previously mentioned elements. The rider is relaxed while maintaining a steady contact with the horse's mouth. An elastic contact is actually a positive, mobile tension that develops without the rider's becoming rigid. Think in terms of a bungee cord, which simultaneously holds and gives.

Mechanically, your hands should be quiet and placed close together with thumbs on top. The difficulty for many riders is the ability to relax the elbows and shoulders so that the arms can move fluidly to maintain the contact.

**Following the mechanics of the gaits.** This refers to what the rider does when the horse is in motion. After all, a rider can sit prettily and in the center of the saddle when the horse is standing still, but stiffen and fail to follow the motion when the horse moves.

A good example of following the mechanics of the gaits is the rising trot. A rider who posts up and down like a pogo stick will land behind the motion, be off balance, and may well end up "posting with her hands," with her hands moving up and down with her upper body instead of maintaining the desired straight line from bit to elbow. In addition, a less-sensitive horse will react to a too-straight rider by showing less response to the aids.

To follow the mechanics of the gaits in the rising trot, your upper body should be very slightly in front of

the vertical, with your base of support between your knee and your heel (see illustration below). This position allows you to stay with the horse as he moves forward; when you come down, you'll be in the center of the saddle, not behind the motion.

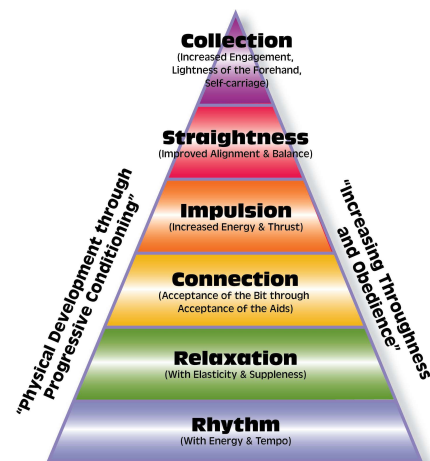
In all gaits, horse and rider should appear to flow together as one coordinated unit. In the walk, your hands follow the movement of your horse's neck. In the trot, your body matches the up-and-down and forward movement. In the canter, you keep control of your hips while your hands and arms smoothly follow the movement of his head and neck. This ideal is possible only if the whole package—posture, symmetry, stability, and elasticity—is in place.

## Correct and Effective Use of the Aids

The second collective mark that applies to the rider is **correct and effective use of the aids**. The judge looks for a rider who performs the movements using subtle, tactful, and effective aids. The overall impression should be one of clear, consistent, cooperative communication. This stems from well-developed basics that follow the pyramid of training (see illustration above).

Using the aids correctly and effectively is a natural segue from "following": First we learn to follow the horse's motion passively; then we can begin to learn to influence the horse.

If you cannot follow your horse's

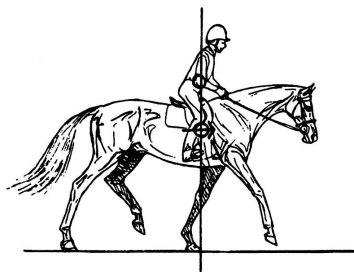
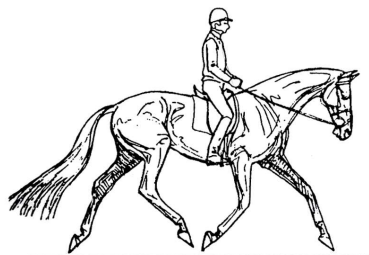


*The pyramid of training*

motion, your aids are not as effective. Judges often see riders pulling too much, throwing away the outside rein, riding with rigid hands, and demonstrating a lack of understanding of how to prepare for a transition or movement. All of these faults are attempts to compensate for what's missing. It all goes back to refining and mastering the basics of posture and balance.

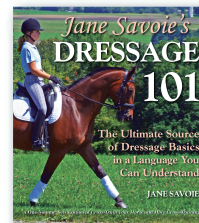
The patterns in the dressage tests are intended to help evaluate the correctness and the timing of the aids. The execution of each element shows how well the rider prepared for the movement and how well the aids were applied. The pattern is designed so that each movement is a natural progression from the one that comes before it. You can take advantage of that by understanding how the pattern helps you and your horse prepare for the movements.

For example, in Training Level Test 3, you ride a single loop in trot from H-X-K, then develop left-lead canter between A and F. The loop allows you to supple and loosen your horse's bend. By the time you reach K, he is already bending and balanced



**UPPER-BODY POSITION IN TROT:** *In the sitting trot (left), the rider's body is vertical. In the posting or rising trot (right), the upper body should be slightly in front of the vertical to enable the rider to stay with the horse's motion. In the illustration, the rider's upper body may be slightly more forward than would be considered ideal for dressage.*

Horse and rider illustrations from *Jane Savoie's Dressage 101* by Jane Savoie. Used by permission of the publisher, Trafalgar Square Books (HorseandRiderBooks.com).



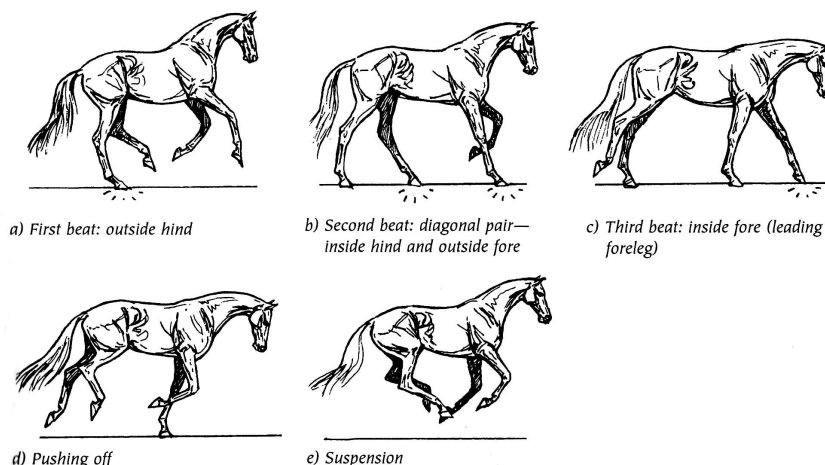
to the inside so that he is prepared to step easily into the canter as he approaches the next corner.

Timing is an important part of effective use of the aids. Many riders don't realize that *when* you apply an aid—at which point in the stride—is critically important. Your timing and emphasis on a particular phase of the stride greatly influence your horse. Applying an aid at a random moment prevents an immediate, seamless response.

Correct timing requires an understanding of the footfalls of the gaits. It is amazing how many riders do not know the sequence of footfalls, the movement of the legs, and the patterns of movement of each gait. Most people know how many beats are in the walk, trot, and canter; but a surprising number do not know the sequence, particularly for the canter. Riders need to constantly be aware of what legs are moving and which leg(s) is on the ground at any given moment.

As an example, let's look at the canter (see illustration above right). Most instructors tell students to ask for the canter by moving the inside leg forward and the outside leg slightly behind the girth. But they rarely address *when* to do this. But mistiming the aid means the horse will run into the canter, toss his head, and go hollow while trying to respond; or pick up the incorrect lead.

Let's say you want your horse to strike off in the right-lead canter. The sequence of footfalls means that the outside hind leg—in this case, the left hind leg—is the first step. That's the leg that will push off into the gait. The correct moment to apply the



CANTER FOOTFALLS: Three beats plus a moment of suspension. The illustration depicts a horse in left-lead canter.

canter aid—moving your outside leg (your left leg, in this example) slightly behind the girth and applying slight pressure—is when your horse's outside hind leg is off the ground (or the inside hind leg is on the ground). This timing allows the horse to prepare to push off with the outside leg into the desired lead. The transition can be seamless, effortless, and flowing.

Another way that judges evaluate a rider's use of the aids is by the accuracy with which the test is ridden. The judge wants to see transitions and movements happening where indicated in the test, and figures and other elements executed with accurate geometry. Particularly at the lower levels, these don't always happen as planned. A common mistake occurs when the rider tries to stick with the pattern at all costs, forcing a movement or transition to happen when the horse isn't ready.

If you have to choose between performing a movement at the designated

letter even though your horse isn't properly prepared, or sacrificing a bit of accuracy in order to execute the movement when the timing and balance are right, opt for the correct moment. The transition itself is what dressage judges refer to as the essence of the movement. The accuracy of where it is performed is a modifier—a secondary factor in the score for that movement. The judge would rather see a correct, lovely transition a stride or two early or late than a sloppy, unbalanced movement. If you find yourself making these compromises regularly in competition, work on your timing in your schooling at home. (For more on essence of the movements and modifiers, see "The Judge's Box: The Essence of Dressage," December 2014/January 2015.)

That said, precision is important and can make or break a movement score. A talented horse ridden in a sloppy test may lose to an "average" horse with a spot-on pattern. The most common inaccuracies are:

- Turns down center line that are not proper or prepared and that come either too soon or too late
- Riding into corners when the figure called for is a circle
- Making corners in three-loop serpentine
- Egg-shaped figures instead of 10-meter circles.

You can get away with poor geometry a little bit, especially if there is

## How to Audit an "L" Program

All dressage enthusiasts are welcome to silently audit sessions A through C of the "L" program. USDF membership is required only of those who wish to enroll as participants.

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For more information about the "L" program and for the calendar of GMO-sponsored "L" programs, visit [usdf.org](http://usdf.org) and select Education / "L" Education Program.



only one judge. But a judge at “C” can easily spot center-line errors, including inaccurately sized half-circles. Poor geometry is just giving away points.

## Further Remarks

The last part of the collective marks is **further remarks**. This section is the main way that a judge can communicate outside the limits of scoring and give comments and observations that don't fit elsewhere. It's also the first thing (after the overall score) that many riders look at when they receive their test sheets.

As a judge, because I know the importance of the further remarks to the competitor, I use this section to comment on the most important issues in a positive, instructive way. For example, this is where I'd explain that the inaccuracies in a test are giving away points. A judge needs to emphasize the good qualities of the test while giving direction and suggestions about areas where the basics are missing or need work. I try to summarize the main points of the test at a level that the competitor will understand. My comments to a child rider will be different than those to an adult, although the remarks for the child are also directed to his or her instructor.

## The Goal: Be a Better Judge of Your Own Riding

With so many scores and comments on each test sheet, it's easy for riders

to feel overwhelmed. They may skim through it all and just look at the final number without understanding what's behind that score. But each number, each circled directive, each comment is there to help guide riders to recognize their strengths and find the holes in their training that can be addressed. They are honest evaluations by an impartial observer who wants to see them improve as much as they can. That's what the “L” program is all about—teaching future judges and all students

of dressage how to assess their riding and move forward with competence, confidence, and understanding. ▲

*Fran Severn, of Salisbury, MD, is vice president of the Peninsula Dressage Chapter of the Potomac Valley Dressage Association. She and her Dutch Warmblood, Landmark, ride Training Level and are schooling First. When not at the stable, she writes about horses and travel.*

## Meet the Expert

**D**ebbie Riehl-Rodriguez, of Golden, CO, is a USEF “S” judge, an “R” sport-horse judge, and a member of the USDF “L” faculty. She has earned her USDF bronze, silver, and gold medals as well as numerous Horse of the Year awards on horses she has trained herself. She is an active competitor as well as an instructor and trainer.

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**Kathy Connelly** is a highly respected international dressage rider, trainer, coach, “S” judge, and USDF Honorary Instructor. She represented the United States at the World Cup in Sweden, and was the highest placed Grand Prix rider on the U.S. Bronze Medal Team at the North American Championships. She is known for her amicable personality and non-intimidating training style. Kathy's success is evident through her work with both U.S. Team riders and amateurs, who have won many titles. She trains amateurs at every level. In addition, she has served as coach at both the World Equestrian Games and the World Cup, and as coach of the Individual Silver Medalist at the Pan American Games, a U.S. Champion at the North American Young Rider Championships, and the United States Silver Medal Young Rider Team in Australia. She is the Vice Chair of the USET High Performance Dressage Committee and has served as a USET Olympic and World Games Selector. She has provided live commentary internationally and nationally, for events such as the 2010 World Equestrian Games and the 2013 and 2014 US Dressage Finals.



Betsy Steiner

Kathy Connelly

**Betsy Steiner** is also a USDF Honorary Instructor, as well as an international dressage rider, trainer, and coach. Betsy has represented the United States at the World Equestrian Games in Stockholm, Sweden in 1990, as well as providing commentary for videos of the 1995 World Cup, the 1996 Olympic Games, and most recently the 2014 World Equestrian Games Trials at Gladstone. Her book *A Gymnastic Training System Using the Mind, Body, Spirit Approach* has sold over 16,000 copies in the U.S. and U.K., and has been translated into German. She holds the prestigious honor of being the only US author to have her book approved by the German FN. She is also the creator of *EQUILATES* — a sport-specific Pilates-based exercise and body awareness program for the equestrian. Betsy currently trains her own horses and students in Frenchtown, NJ, and Wellington, FL.

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