

Lessons from the “L” Program

Our training series continues. This month: session B and the directive ideas on the test sheet

By Janet Foy with Fran Severn

In the previous two articles in this series (July/August and September 2014), we explored session A of the USDF “L” program, which addresses the fundamentals of dressage judging (July/August) and equine biomechanics (September). This month we move on to session B, which concentrates on how judges develop a score for each numbered movement on the dressage test sheet. For riders, understanding what judges look for can help them evaluate their approach to their training and how they ride a test.

The “L” program teaches judges to

use a formula that provides a standard methodology for arriving at a score:

Basics + Criteria +/- Modifiers = Score

The purpose of using this formula is to provide as much consistency and objective evaluation as possible in what is inherently a subjective process.

Reading a Score Sheet

All US Equestrian Federation dressage-test score sheets have the purpose of that level clearly stated at the top of the inside page. For example, the purpose of Training Level is “to

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

Often, riders are not clear about the definition of the terms. Confusion and misinterpretation can lead to incorrect training, poor performance, and lower scores. So let’s go through the terms used in the Training Level purpose.

Rhythm is synonymous with “purity of the gait.” The USDF Glossary of Judging Terms defines rhythm as “the characteristic sequence of footfalls and phases of a given gait.” That means a clear, four-beat walk; diagonal, not lateral, steps in a clear, two-beat trot; and a three-beat canter. Deviations from these correct rhythms mean lower scores. Incorrect rhythm affects not only the score of the movement, but also the gait—which then affects the collective mark for gaits.

Contact is defined as “the reins are stretched so that they form a straight line, not a loop. ‘Correct contact’ or ‘acceptance of contact’ is determined by the elasticity of the connection between horse and rider.”

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.

USDF GMOs apply to host the “L” program. Sessions are held over a series of weekends and are a combination of classroom lecture and practice evaluation of demonstration horses and riders.

For more information about the “L” program and for the calendar of GMO-sponsored “L” programs, visit usdf.org and select Education / “L” Education Program.



2011 Training Level Test 3

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

All trot work may be ridden sitting or rising, unless stated.

Halts may be through the walk.

Introduce: No new requirements

Average

READER PLEASE NOTE: Anything in parentheses should not be read.

				Coefficient	
	TEST	DIRECTIVE IDEAS	POINTS		TOTAL
1	A	Enter working trot			
	X	Halt, Salute Proceed working trot			
2	C	Track left			
	HXX	One loop			
3	Between A & F	Working canter left lead		2	
4	B	Circle left 20m			
5	HXF X	Change rein Working trot			

THE REST OF THE TEST: If you study only the pattern and don’t know the purpose or the directive ideas (shown: part of Training Level Test 3), you won’t fully understand what the judge is looking for

At First Level, the purpose of the level is expanded. The text refers to the purpose of Training Level, then adds that the horse “has developed the thrust to achieve improved balance and throughness and to maintain a more consistent contact with the bit.”

Throughness is a visible articulation of well-developed biomechanics. The definition here refers to “the supple, elastic, unblocked, connected state of the horse’s musculature that permits an unrestricted flow of energy from back to front and front to back, which allows the aids/influences to freely go through to all parts of the horse (e.g., the rein aids go through and reach and influence the hind legs).”


Also at the top of the test sheet is a listing of the movements and skills that are introduced in that test. For example, First Level Test 1 introduces 10-meter half-circles in trot, 15-meter circles in canter, and lengthening of stride in trot and canter. First Level Test 3 introduces 10-meter circles in trot, change of canter lead through trot, and counter-canter.

Identifying the purpose and movements of the test provides riders with a way to gauge the level of development they should have achieved or be working on when they show at that level. Riders who are not able to perform these movements should not be riding that test.

Basics Are the Foundation


The basics are the fundamentals on which all dressage training is based. The goal of dressage is a “happy athlete.” This result comes from harmonious training that leads to both mental and physical development of the horse. At all levels of dressage, this refers to the quality of the gaits; the horse’s gymnastic ability and physique, including the suppleness of the back, correctness of the contact, impulsion, and straightness; and the horse’s attitude and ridability.

Many riders are tempted to overlook the need to spend the time and patience to work on these traits in their eagerness to move on to more


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interesting and exciting movements, like lengthenings. But if those fundamentals are not well-developed, the quality of the more advanced movements will be mediocre at best and incorrect or strained at worst.

Criteria are the directive ideas that are listed on test score sheets. The directives are the features of each movement that are evaluated by the judge. Many competitors pay little attention to the directives, concentrating more on memorizing the pattern of the test. But how well the horse and rider meet those directives is what determines a large percentage of the score.

Further underscoring the importance of concentrating on the basics, some seemingly simple movements have coefficients, which increase the score by a factor of 2. The test writers assign movements coefficients to underline their importance in demonstrating that the horse and rider have developed the physical attributes (on the part of the horse) and the understanding of the horse's movement and

use of aids (on the part of the rider) that are appropriate for that level. High scores in coefficient movements are indicators of the horse's ability to learn and perform more demanding movements with quality.

For example, while many riders think of the walk portion of a test primarily as a time to regroup for the second half of the ride, there is actually a lot going on from the judge's perspective—so much so that the walk is given a coefficient of 2.

The directive idea for the free and medium walk is: "Reach and ground cover of free walk allowing complete freedom to stretch the neck forward and downward; quality and regularity of medium walk; willing, balanced transitions; straightness on diagonal." In both free and medium walk, "reach and ground cover" indicate that the horse is tracking up (with the hind feet correctly stepping in front of the hoofprints of the front feet). In the free walk, the pace is relaxed but not shambling. In medium walk, more energy is expected; judges look for a "marching" rhythm.

Similarly, the "stretchy circle" is far more than just convincing the horse to drop his head while trotting in a circle. The directives for this coefficient movement call for "forward and downward stretch over the back into light contact, maintaining balance and quality of trot; bend; shape and size of circle; smooth, balanced transitions." Other coefficient movements are transitions from canter to trot, which demonstrate whether the horse is relaxed, supple, and balanced. Most scribes will report that the most frequent comments on Training and First Level tests focus on tension in movements, lack of bend, inconsistent gaits, and lack of impulsion—all basics.

Modifiers are the secondary parts of a movement, such as whether a corner is ridden correctly. For example, the directives for the "entry" movement on the test sheet are "straightness on center line and in halt; immobility; quality of trot; willing; balanced

transitions." A horse that halts with the haunches off center line or that bobs his head after halting may have performed "enter working trot; halt; salute" but has not met the directive ideas of straightness and immobility and will be scored accordingly. Going back to the directive for the walk, straightness is expected on the diagonal, meaning that the horse and rider are moving with focus and purpose, with the horse's body moving straight along the line of travel.

Three Vital Terms

Three terms that appear frequently in the directive ideas, particularly at lower levels, are *balance*, *willing*, and *quality*.

Balance is probably the word that appears most often. The USDF Glossary of Judging Terms defines balance as "relative distribution of weight of horse and rider upon the fore and hind legs (longitudinal balance) and the left and right legs (lateral balance)." In an unbalanced state, the horse is less able to respond correctly to the rider's aids and is less able to be supple and relaxed. This leads to the horse's hollowing his back, for example, and shifting his weight to the forehand.

At Training and First Level, judges want to see that the hind legs are thrusting and pushing the horse over the ground with equal and level weight. An off-balance horse might drop a shoulder on a circle or carry the haunches to one side on a straight line. At Second Level and above, collection and engagement become increasingly important. The hind legs have to carry weight and not just push. At Second Level, there's some leeway in judging the consistency of the engagement; but by Third Level, the horse should clearly be uphill.

Willing is a term that appears in Training Level and is used in judges' comments at all levels. It replaces the term *submission*, which some thought implied forcing a horse's cooperation. "Willing" indicates the ideal of mu-

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tual cooperation. Judges will reward a horse and rider who share a harmonious partnership and who look as though they are enjoying themselves.

At all levels and with all movements, quality is vital. Both the trot and the canter are judged by general impression. It's the "wow factor" that turns a trot into "A Trot." Judges want to see a horse that is elastic, showing good freedom of the joints, is reaching and is supple, and has the physical ability to perform the movements of the test. Again, it goes back to spending time on the basics; good training enhances the athleticism.

Examples of Scoring

Let me give you two detailed examples of how a dressage judge arrives at a score.

The leg-yield. If the horse goes around the short end with an "8" quality trot but is head-wagging and very low in the poll, and then the leg-yield has little crossing, and the rider cuts the corner and does not get to X, here is what happens:

I start with an 8 for the trot. Then I would deduct 2 points for the contact problems, so now I have a 6. Then the essence of the movement is the crossing of the legs, and there isn't much, so I now go to a 5. And if the accuracy—that's the modifier—is also poor, I could stay at a 5 for the score or go to a 4.5.

What about a "6" mover that is very well trained, shows good crossing, stays parallel, and is accurate? I'd give a 6 for the trot, plus 1 for good training, then another plus 1 for the crossing and another plus 1 for the accuracy, for a final score of 9.

Single loops. Training Level Test 3 introduces loops, which demonstrates the progress horse and rider are making in developing correct bending. In the loops, we want to see a correct bend in the corner; then as the horse approaches the quarter line, the rider should straighten the horse and at X start bending in the direction of the loop. The rider should car-

ry that bend to the next quarter line, where she would again straighten the horse and then bend him in the direction of the corner. Done correctly, with balance and impulsion, the loop perfectly situates the horse to flow into the canter, which is the next movement of the test.

Putting It All Together

Along with the scores evaluating the directive ideas, there are the collective marks, which consider the gaits, impulsion, willingness, rider's position and seat, use of aids, and overall harmony between horse and rider. These will be explained in the final part of this series. ▲

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Meet the Expert

Janet Foy, of Colorado Springs, CO, is a USEF "S" judge and an FEI 4* dressage judge. She is a member of the USDF Judges Committee, a faculty member of the USDF "L"



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