

NEW TRAINING SERIES

# Lessons from the “L” Program

*Improve your riding, training, and show scores with help from the “L” faculty*

By Trenna Atkins with Karen McGoldrick

**N**ow the standard for educating prospective dressage judges, the USDF “L” Education Program has been admired by other nations for its excellence in teaching everything from judging methodology to horse and rider biomechanics and evaluation of the gaits and movements. We’ve come a long way since the “L” program’s founding in 1989:

to compete or to become a licensed judge. More than one participant has said, “Every competitor should have to go through the program before competing.”

At the 2014 USDF/USEF Young Rider Graduate Program, FEI 4\* judge Janet Foy, a member of the “L” program faculty, said: “Sections A, B, and C are 100 percent necessary for anybody who wants to train a horse.”

Auditors pay reduced fees and don’t have the stress of having to answer questions from the instructor. These sessions are aimed at Training, First, and Second Levels, but all levels of riders benefit.

USDF group-member organizations (GMOs) around the country regularly host “L” programs. If you have a chance to attend any or all of the three sessions open to auditors, be sure to take advantage of the opportunity. I promise that you will learn something new that gets your brain cells fired up, and you will also have a chance to interact with others in your community in a noncompetitive and relaxed atmosphere. (For more about auditing the “L” program, see “How to Audit an ‘L’ Program” at right.)

Realistically, however, not every USDF member lives within easy distance of an “L” program, and sometimes life gets in the way of our plans. Knowing this, the faculty members of the USDF “L” program decided to encapsulate some of the program’s most important lessons in a series for *USDF Connection*. We hope that the information helps you to become a more educated dressage rider, trainer, competitor, breeder, owner, or spectator. And, of course, we hope it encourages you to audit the “L” program!

## ABCs of the “L”

The “L” program is divided into two parts. Part 1 is open to silent auditors. Part 2 is open only to those participants who wish to graduate from the program. Graduates “with distinction” are eligible to enroll in the United States Equestrian Federation’s (USEF) judge-training program to earn an “r” judge’s license, the first formal rung of the dressage-judging ladder in the US.

### Part 1: A Judge’s Perspective

- Session A: Introduction to judging and biomechanics
- Session B: Judging criteria for gaits and paces, movements and figures
- Session C: Basics and collective marks—gaits, impulsion, submission, and the rider.

### Part 2: Candidate Evaluation

- Session D1: Judging full tests in each of the levels
- Session D2: Judging full tests in each of the levels
- Session E: Scribing and sitting with judges
- Final examination.

## How to Audit an “L” Program

**Y**ou must be a current USDF member—group, participating, or education—to be eligible to audit sessions A through C of the “L” program. Participating membership is required only of those who wish to go on to part 2 of the program.

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](http://usdf.org) and select Education / “L” Education Program.



THEORY INTO PRACTICE: “L” program faculty member Trenna Atkins leads a classroom session

working hard to keep up with technology and to incorporate it into the program through the use of additional visual aids, which makes the learning more clear and more fun.

The program’s curriculum is so strong that today its three core sessions (called A, B, and C) are a must-audit for any serious student of dressage, regardless of whether you aspire

In this series, we'll be focusing on the information presented in sessions A, B, and C.

## Introduction to Judging

We begin session A by talking about the responsibilities, concerns, and expectations of a future dressage judge. We also talk about the special skills that go into the process of judging.

A discussion of the USEF rule book is next. The rule book is the main reference for our sport. Judges need to know the rules that affect the rider while in the dressage ring, and it is helpful if the competitor knows the rules, as well. The rules cover such topics as rider attire, tack, whether the horse must be braided (no), how long the rider has to enter the arena after the bell rings (45 seconds), what to do if the judge's tent blows down (the judge can stop the competition and allow the rider to resume the test or start over), and many more.

The discussion usually gets very animated when we begin talking about errors and how judges should handle them. Many of the "L" program participants have their own experiences to share, and we go over what the USEF rule book has to say about counting errors and how to proceed if you have to ring the bell.

Another section is devoted to a discussion of how the judge comes up with a comment and a score in a systematic way. If the judge has a methodology, then he or she can evaluate the rides more consistently.

The "L" program helps future judges to develop a methodology using a simple formula:

**Basic + Criteria +/- Modifiers = Score**

In the next article in this series, we will explore the basics in greater detail. For now, however, know that *basics* are about the purity and quality of the gaits, and about the quality of the impulsion and the submission, in each test movement. *Criteria* of the movements are defined in the USEF rule book. Each USEF test sheet lists what are known as *directive ideas* for each movement. The directives list for the

competitor key things that the judge is looking for in each movement, including basics and criteria.

*Modifiers* are smaller details that are secondary to the "essence," or main part, of the test movements—things like a corner that is not ridden correctly.

How does the judge communicate his or her rationale for the scores to the rider? By dictating comments to the scribe, who records them on the test sheet. The comments have to be concise, but using certain words helps to convey the ideas better.

The "L" program teaches prospective judges to use specific language in formulating the comments. The USDF Judges Committee created the USDF Glossary of Judging Terms (published in the annual USDF Member Guide and also available on the USDF website) to help riders and trainers better understand these comments and the meaning of the specific terminology.

If the comment is "Should have more elasticity of the stride," we hope that the competitor refers to the Glossary of Judging Terms to learn what the judge means by "elasticity." The same holds true for another frequently used comment, "Needs more engagement," because engagement has a

## Judging Resources from the USDF

**U**SDF's online educational program, e-TRAK, is free and available to all current members (log in at [usdf.org/e-trak](http://usdf.org/e-trak)). The online resources include a video library and many articles about judging and biomechanics previously published in *USDF Connection*. USDF also provides a recommended reading list. So no matter what the weather or where you live, there are wonderful learning opportunities available to USDF members.

—Trenna Atkins

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clear definition of “increased flexion of the lumbosacral joint and the joints of the hind leg during the weight-bearing (stance) phase of the movement, thus lowering the croup relative to the forehead.” In other words, the horse’s hip joints must be more involved in order for him to find a better balance—even at the lower levels, in which we are asking only that the horse carry himself in a level balance.

It is easier to understand dressage intellectually first before you have to put it into practice. If you take the time to really evaluate what you are trying to do by reading, observing, and watching reference material (such as e-TRAK, USDF’s online database), you will be much more prepared for your dressage training, lessons, and

shows because you will better understand what is being asked of you.

Here is an example of how judges evaluate a movement. The leg-yield is a lateral movement introduced at First Level. The USEF rule book spells out what you are trying to achieve and what the leg-yield should look like:

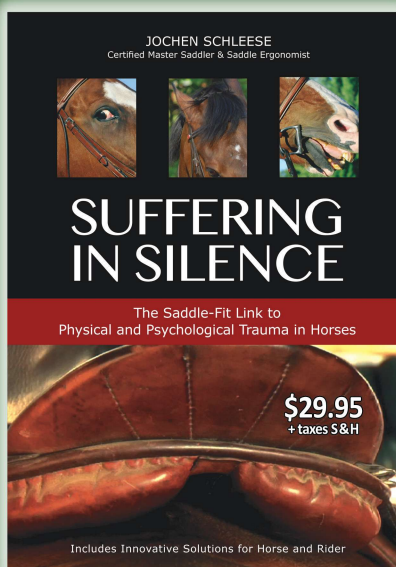
*Leg-yielding. The horse is almost straight, except for a slight flexion at the poll away from the direction in which he moves, so that the rider is just able to see the eyebrow and nostril on the inside. The inside legs pass and cross in front of the outside legs. Leg-yielding should be included in the training of the horse before he is ready for collected work. Later on, together with the more advanced movement shoulder-in, it is the best means of making a horse*



### Digital Edition Bonus Content

Get a “Taste of the ‘L’ Education Program A Session” in this video with “L” program faculty member Lois Yukins.

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*supple, loose and unconstrained for the benefit of the freedom, elasticity and regularity of his gaits and the harmony, lightness and ease of his movements.*

Then we discuss the directive ideas on the dressage test sheet, which highlight areas that the judge will be looking at: "Quality and consistent tempo of trot; alignment of horse, balance and flow in leg-yield."

To further explain how judges evaluate movements, session A of the "L" program goes on to a detailed discussion of equine biomechanics (which I'll cover in the next article in this series). Using our leg-yield example, the biomechanics section contains examples of how the horse moves in the leg-yield, along with mistakes that can happen and why.

### A Competitive Advantage

Having a better idea as to how the judge evaluates your performance and arrives at a score is, as we've discussed, helpful to all dressage enthusiasts who

want to learn to be better trainers, riders, and spectators. What's more, riders of all levels and experience can gain information from the "L" program that, on a very practical level, could add points to their dressage scores. ▲

*Next: Biomechanics.*

*Karen McGoldrick is a USDF-certified instructor/trainer through Fourth Level who teaches and trains at her Prospect Hill Farm in Alpharetta, GA. She is the author of the novel The Dressage Chronicles and its newly released sequel, A Matter of Feel (TheDressageChronicles.com).*

## Meet the Expert

**A** USEF dressage judge since 1987, Trena Atkins, of Coupeville, WA, joined the USDF "L" faculty in 2003. A computer user since the 1980s, she enjoyed making videos and presentations for her own dressage students. From there, she says, it was an easy step to her becoming involved with the "L" program's use of multimedia. She collects videos, edits content, and sets up teaching presentations that have been developed by the entire faculty.

In 2012, Atkins received the USDF Volunteer of the Year award in recognition of her contributions to the "L" program.



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