Overview
This manual is designed as a set of guidelines with proven philosophies and teaching materials for USDF certified instructors and instructor candidates and to help in the creation of a more uniform system of classical dressage instruction throughout the United States.

This manual should serve as a reference for teaching topics covered in the USDF Instructor Trainer Workshops. It will serve as a resource for theory and practical application of dressage instruction. It is hoped that use of this manual will increase the number of USDF certified instructors applying a correct approach to teaching and learning.

Successful teaching and training ability of a well-rounded dressage instructor must be based on theoretical knowledge and its practical application in the realistic everyday environment. Historically, this concept has been true for every teacher and trainer from the time of de la Gueriniere in the 18th century to current times. It is the legacy and responsibility of today’s dressage instructors to understand and fulfill this tradition.

Knowledge Required of a Dressage Instructor

The instructor must always provide a safe environment for lessons, training and care of the horse and must maintain a constant awareness of all aspects of safety for both the horse and the rider.

The instructor should be free of ego, having only a genuine desire to impart knowledge to the student and to approach the training process using only humane techniques that demonstrate true respect for both horse and student. The instructor should maintain an open mind, provide a good example through his or her work and be committed to furthering his or her own education.

A dressage instructor’s theoretical knowledge should include:
- Basic first-aid knowledge for both horse and human
- Familiarity with all aspects of care that help to maintain serviceability
- Lameness diagnosis and treatment
- Principles of conditioning and fitness
- Shoeing – both simple and corrective to achieve correct balance in the feet, which contributes to correct movement and therefore affects the gaits of the horse
- The proper selection, fit, use and care of tack
- Biomechanics of the horse and rider
- Conformation and the temperament and movement required in a dressage horse
- Understanding of the gaits and paces
- Awareness of equine psychology
- Knowledge of human psychology, particularly related to learning
- Understanding and approaches to different learning styles
- Knowledge of teaching methodology
- Pyramid of Training
- Lunging theory and skillful application
- Development of the correct and effective seat and position
- Understanding of the concept of balance in the horse and rider
- Ability to recognize and assess training problems, to prioritize them accurately and address them successfully

Qualities of a Dressage Instructor

Certain aspects of personality and character are essential to the dressage instructor. Patience and self-control enable the instructor to best train both the student and the horse. The highest standard of ethical and moral responsibility will
guarantee that training will always be free from abuse in any form and that the instructor will maintain integrity in every situation.

Humility and the freedom from false ambitions will keep the instructor realistic and clear in helping the student to establish correct goals. Poise, confidence, enthusiasm, and calmness are critical in creating a positive learning experience for the student. The ability to project voice and feeling is essential in having good communication skills. And last, the dressage instructor’s sense of humor is invaluable in making the entire learning process enjoyable and successful.

Beyond personality or character traits, the dressage instructor must possess an ability to relate to different types of students. The instructor must be able to correctly instruct students with considerably different physical abilities, psychological factors, ages and goals.

An attitude of adaptability is also essential. Frequently issues such as bad footing, unsoundness, unsuitability or unfitness of horse or rider, parental pressure, fear and even unpredictable weather requires the dressage instructor to be able to modify lessons.

An absolute adherence to safety in all activities with horses should be the instructor’s highest priority. Being able to foresee and prevent unsafe situations and provide leadership to students will help the instructor avoid unnecessary risk or accidents.

Professionalism is another hallmark of a good instructor. A good instructor focuses his or her complete attention on the rider and does not allow unnecessary interruptions. There is no grandstanding or playing to the audience in the lessons. Appropriate professional dress is the rule and there is no smoking, drinking, or eating during a lesson. Absolute honesty as to realistic expectations for both horse and rider is essential. A knowledge of business, accounting, and legal aspects of the industry is necessary.

What the Student Can Expect from the Instructor

- Respect for the student
- Practical and theoretical knowledge of dressage
- Courtesy, punctuality, appropriate dress
- Full attention to the student
- Clarity with appropriate firmness
- Genuine interest in the student’s improvement
- Riding experience beyond the level of teaching
- Communication skills
- Constructive criticism and encouragement
- Use of correct terminology
- Demonstration of a true love and respect for the horse and dressage

Qualities of a Good Dressage Student

The dressage instructor cannot claim sole responsibility for the character of the student; however, it should be the objective of every dressage instructor to impart certain critical perspectives to the student. Through discussion and by modeling, the following qualities may be taught: Students must have an open-minded, positive attitude, with a genuine desire to learn. They must develop an acute awareness of their physical and mental capabilities, be able to acknowledge them, and, with the instructor’s help, establish clear goals to further their abilities. They must be respectful of the instructor and demonstrate self-discipline. Ultimately, the student assumes the responsibility to fully comprehend and carry out the instruction of the teacher.

School Horse

The quality of the school horse is critical to the student’s learning process. School horses must have good temperaments. They must be tolerant of riders who are learning and who make mistakes. Ideally, they should range in size from 15 to 16.2 hands and have good working gaits that are correct and relatively comfortable. School horses need to be re-schooled
at times in varying degrees by the instructor in order to maintain a reasonable level of correct training. To optimize learning, students will benefit from having a variety of horses to ride as they progress. Diverse school horses will allow the student to experience a range of gait quality, throughness, lateral and longitudinal suppleness, acceptance of the contact and on through all the criteria of the Pyramid of Training.

The student on his or her own horse comes to the instructor with an individual focus. The instructor must determine how shortcomings in the training relate to the student’s current ability or to mental and/or physical resistance in the horse. Even with an advanced student, benefit can be derived from riding horses other than one’s own. Too often students develop distinct habits that relate to their own horses and which need to be addressed through riding less-familiar horses periodically.