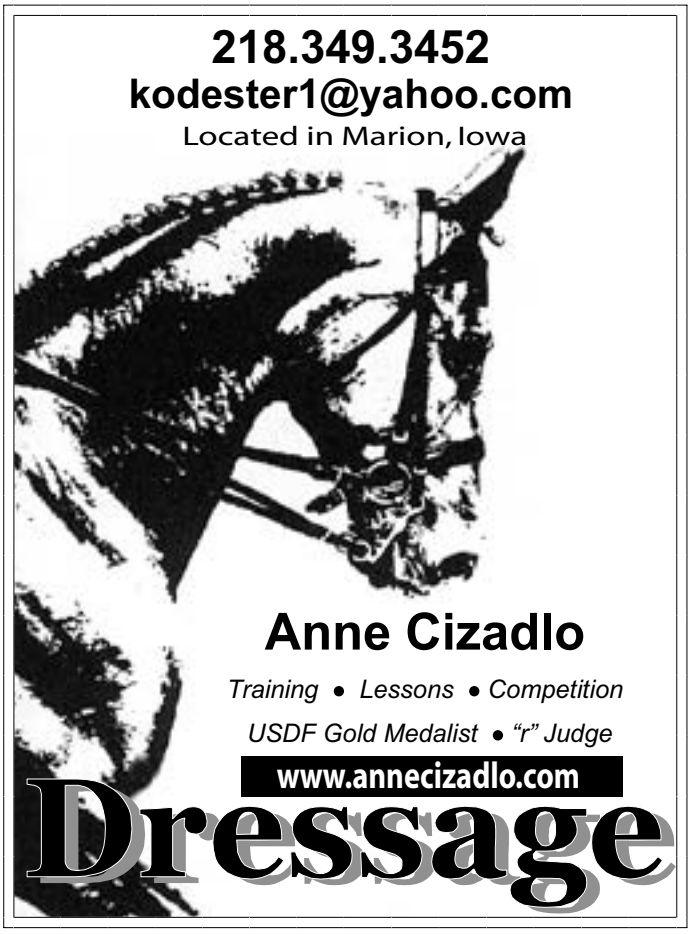
by Anne Cizadlo

I literally just finished judging the dressage phase of the Catalpa Corner Event today *(photo above)* when I sat down to write this article. With so many eventing dressage tests fresh in my mind, let me jot down some simple ways to increase your score in any dressage test, either for an event or a regular dressage show. These tips are geared mostly for novice riders, although there are some gems of wisdom that can be applied to any test.

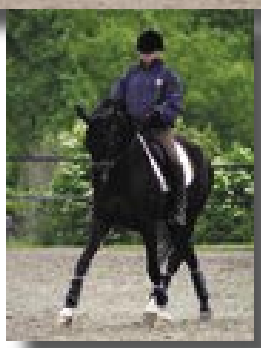
1. You don't get any credit for making up your own pattern. This statement seems simple enough, but stay on the path described in the test. If you are making a 20 meter circle, make it 20 meters in diameter. If it becomes 18 meters, the judge has to make a judgment call: (a) did you not understand where a 20 meter circle goes or (b) are you unable to make your horse get to the appropriate points on the circle? We are pretty good at coming up with the correct response, but in EITHER case, you won't score higher than a "6" because you just simply are not on the path. If you don't understand where the circle goes, then you probably are lacking in understanding about how to get there as well and, if you are unable to get your horse to the appropriate place, then your aids are ineffective. Too many mistakes in this category will also limit your rider score on the collective marks to a "6" or lower as well.
2. You also don't get ***extra*** credit for making the exercise too difficult. For example, if your circle is too small or if the leg-yield can't stay on the appropriate line then judges have to ask questions about the rider's understanding or effectiveness. Again, if you are not on the prescribed path, we don't know if you can't steer or are unable to steer, both of which are going to be faults.
3. We notice all the details. Details such as skipping a corner here or there is not going to sway us to give you the higher number when we are caught between a couple.
   a. When we judge, we come up with a score based on the quality of the essential movement in the scoring box. For example, if a circle is the primary move of the scoring box, then the circle is what we are mainly concerned about. Let's say that your circle had good energy, good bending and was the right size, but the trot was a little on the forehand or the horse tossed his head once on the circle. Now we are debating about a 6 or a 7 for the circle. What will more than likely tip us over the edge one way or the other are the strides before or after the circle, especially if there is a corner or a short side involved. The horse with the traits listed above that blasts through the corners on the short side with his rider pulling his head into counter-flexion will get the "6." The rider who maintains the horse's balance and bend through the corners (as if the corners were being judged in their own scoring box) will get the "7." Don't be sloppy in the corners and on the short sides; we are watching you!
   b. The other details that don't come directly into play but will probably earn you a point one way or the other somewhere in the test are the attention to detail in your appearance. Riders that come in with floppy hair or saddle pads that are crooked give the impression that they just galloped here from the barn. Have someone in the warm-up give you a "once-over" before you trot down centerline. Make sure your stirrups are even, the pieces on your bridle are tucked in, your saddle is straight, the pads don't look like they are about to pop out the back side of the saddle and that your horse doesn't have shavings in his tail. Use a really clean saddle pad. Wear gloves. Look professional. It helps.
4. Take time when you are in the ring to think about what you are doing. Take a mental check about the speed (are you going too fast or too slow?) Is your horse balanced as he travels around or just flinging himself through the pattern? Remember that dressage is like a dance routine. We want to see that the dancers have some idea of the appropriate footfalls. If you make some mistakes and lose track of each other some of the time, we are expecting that. But when the horse and rider are



only concentrating on the pattern and not about the gracefulness of the steps, then you are only dropping your own score. Imagine a ballet where the ballerinas went and did the steps of the routines as quickly and sloppy as they could just to get it finished. What if they had no regard to the music or beauty for the audience? Some dressage tests have that appearance. The horse frantically flings his legs around with no assistance from the rider. Teach your horses to dance at home. And don't let him step on your toes! (Or lean in on the corners!)

5. Some riders are trying to dance but their partner is not interested in dancing. This creates another picture where there is a struggle. Struggles are not necessarily bad in the long run if you take the show experience and learn from it. When you are at home, does your horse struggle and fight with you or did you turn up the heat at the show and he decided that he didn't want to dance under that much pressure? Remember we can all get along with our friends really well until we have to spend a week in the car with them! Only then can you determine your really good friends from your acquaintances. Is your horse a really good friend or just an acquaintance? In either case, you need to lay down the ground rules ***before*** you get to the show to prevent any show ring spats.

At the lower levels of dressage and eventing dressage, a large aspect of judging involves the harmony between the horse and the rider. That translates into how well they get along. If the rider is bouncing or pulling, then they are not getting along so well today. If it looks smooth and easy, then they are getting along quite well. If every time the rider closes her fingers on the reins the horse opens his mouth, then they are not getting along so well. Once the horse and rider are getting along and both parties are cooperating with each other, then judges start to look at the dressage details, such as the horse being on the outside rein or being equally flexible to both sides or staying a little in front of the vertical during his work. Don't be too concerned about those details if you have to yank on his head to get him to slow down.



Spend some time practicing your test at home and realistically judge your performance yourself. Or have a friend judge it and see what her impression was of the performance. Then switch places and judge her test. You will be able to point out obvious pieces that will improve your score with one try. See you in the show ring!

Anne Cizadlo is an FEI rider who resides in the Cedar Rapids, Iowa, area.
Originally from Duluth, MN/Superior, WI, she returns to that area for clinics several times each year.
She also teaches regular clinics near St. Cloud, MN; Aberdeen, SD; Fargo, ND; and Delano, MN.

A licensed United States Dressage Federation "r" dressage judge,
Anne regularly judges dressage shows and horse trials in the Midwest.

Anne's recently deceased Swedish Warmblood gelding, Vodka, helped her to achieve her Grand Prix USDF Gold Medal in 2007.

Anne's newest horse, Lord Luschi, is a six-year-old Oldenberg gelding, pictured above.
Photos are by Angi Meyers.

Anne is available for judging, training, competition, clinics, and private lessons.
If you are not near the Cedar Rapids, Iowa, area, contact her for information about her clinic locations and dates. She is available in the Midwest from April through December, and in the West Palm Beach/Wellington area January through March. kodester@aol.com / 218-349-3452