

From the Judge's Perspective

by Anne Cizadlo, "r" judge

Dressage is an Olympic discipline. Starting with that idea, we can say that dressage can classify as a highly athletic sport. As with any sport, the key to success in competition comes from perfecting the techniques and skills required to perform at the level of the competition in which you compete. As with any Olympic sport, there are multiple levels of competition which lead to the pinnacle. Dressage is no different, and these levels start with small, local schooling shows which build up to regional, national and international caliber competitions.

At any level of the sport, as with any level of any sport, it would be expected that a competitor practice the skills required at the competition prior to entering the competition. You wouldn't enter an archery competition without first spending many hours at the shooting range practicing your techniques. You would probably invest in good equipment, maybe even multiple pieces of equipment to assist your accuracy in a variety of situations. You would probably take lessons to learn better and more efficient form as well as do exercises to build up appropriate strength to sustain your accuracy throughout the competition.

All too often, I see riders who don't take the time to examine the "big picture" that is required when attending a competition. Most people can get the right clothing and such, but there is more to the "picture" of competition. We can start with how the horse is presented. A spit-shined horse looks much more attractive right off the bat than one who looks like they had to hurry to put those last 6 braids in the mane or they would be late for the class. Horses that have dull coats or fetlock fuzz or even hair under their chin almost look like a man coming to a job interview without first getting a haircut and a shave.

Make sure that your tack fits, and is clean and straight. A saddle pad that is tilted one way or sliding out from under the rider's leg as the test progresses because they didn't attach the pad to the saddle make the rider appear sloppy and careless about the performance. Even if all else seems in place, the judge will often wonder if the saddle fits appropriately if the pad is sliding around. Try not to let the ends of your bridle parts flop out of their keepers. Try not to let your tack get so stretched out that every buckle is on the top hole. This often gives the appearance that the browband is pushed up against the horse's ears, which may be uncomfortable for him.

Assuming that you have the "look" fairly clean, now it comes time for the meat of the performance. Judges like to see braided manes so that we can see the muscular development of the horse's neck. The neck is not so important itself, but it can give valuable clues to the training that the horse has had. If the under neck muscle is large and bulging out, then we know that the horse is

often ridden with, or allowed to, carry his head up. This muscle doesn't develop on a horse that is kept "on the bit" with a rider who is very careful about how she allows the horse to travel. It isn't good enough to try to keep the horse "on the bit" just in the test. Even when faced with two identically obedient horses, both "on the bit" and balanced in the test, in the end, the horse with the correct muscling (proving that he carries himself like this all the time, not just here at the show) will come out ahead of the horse that is just doing it for the show.

Judges are impressed with horses and riders who come into the ring looking polished. The polish comes from practicing daily what is expected in the performance arena. Horses that breeze through by the skin of their teeth, don't have the same flair that a horse doing this same workout every day does. When horses and riders make it look easy, it **is** fairly easy in the ring. They did all the hard work at home, day after day, before they ever got to the show.


It is important to have a routine when you work at home. Look to your trainer at home to help you with that routine. Take notes from your lessons. Your trainer should, over time, give you guidance through the routine that you need to practice daily on your own and then duplicate at the horse show. Do your lessons feel like you are still working on one specific item each session? Then your skills at that level are not solid enough to form a routine! Don't consider going to the show until you can get through the routine!

A typical routine would include a warm-up of stretching exercises at the walk, trot, and canter, then a set of trot work which would include your lateral exercises relative to your stage of training and some lengthening and shortening of the strides, again based on the stage of training, and possibly some transitions. The final set would include canter, with appropriate bending, lateral work and again the changes in the stride lengths relative to the level of training. After those three sets, you should still have enough strength and stamina to go out and ride the test. Too often, I see riders cut their warm-up short because they want to "save" their energy and strength for the competition arena. This can mean danger once you get in there and things fall apart. And don't fool yourself! The judge can see when you get tired!

Riders often start to lose control of their position when they get tired. If the horse isn't fit enough, then he is going to lean on the rider for support at the show as well. Both scenarios are going to produce phrases like "balanced on the forehand" on your score sheet. Remember, the key to staying balanced is strength. This applies to horses and riders and gymnasts and figure skaters. If you are cutting your warm-ups shorter and shorter throughout the weekend to save your stamina, that is a wake-up call! Go home and work on your stamina!

If you have only one horse to ride, stamina can be an issue. Consider cross-training. There are many other strength-building avenues out there for riders. Simple aerobic training, swimming, yoga, pilates, dance or weight-lifting are all options. I spoke with a rider who recently started working on kettle bell training, and she feels a difference in her core strength already! Another rider recently started Zumba dance class and can already feel a difference in her aerobic fitness. Is time an issue? Then research some types of strength training that are shorter in time and more intense (like the kettle bell training.) Or, if you need a class to stay motivated, then sign up at the local gym to attend pilates or yoga. It all helps build your stamina for riding. This will, in turn, make you not feel like cutting that warm-up short at the show and you will have better preparation for the competition.

Riding is a full-time job. The more effort you put in, the more it shows in the performance arena.



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Dressage

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