

Strategies for Training for a Good Performance

By Anne Cizadlo

There are several things that dressage judges look for in a performance that strongly affect the overall score. There are the obvious things, such as the quality of the horse's gaits, his natural athleticism, the correctness of his training and the accuracy of the test pattern. One of the most important underlying factors of a performance, however, is the quality of the execution. Have you ever wondered how the top riders can take an average quality horse and still win the class? It's an easier answer than you might think.

When the experienced professional takes an average quality horse into the show ring, she knows that she can't win the class on the quality of the horse alone, so she is going to concentrate on the quality of the performance instead.

First, let's examine the method by which a judge comes to a score. Now, most judges can come to this within a matter of seconds, but the method is similar for all judges. Let's say that we are taking our average horse in a First Level class. The movement that we will examine reads as follows:

- | | |
|-----|--------------------------|
| C | Track right |
| B | Turn right |
| E | Turn left |
| A | Down centerline |
| D-R | Leg-yield right |
| M | Working canter left lead |

The leg-yield movement starts after the left turn at E, includes a corner, then a turn down the center line, then a leg-yield, then a few strides on the rail before the canter depart. The leg-yield is the primary movement. If our average horse shows average balance, average impulsion, average crossing, and average obedience, then we should give the movement about a 6, meaning "satisfactory."

How can we bump that "6" up to a "7"? The rest of the movement, including the straightness on the long side before the corner, the balance and fluidity in the corner, the balance and bend on the turn to the center line, the straightness on the center line, the accuracy of the leg-yield



Attention to detail in one's riding leads to higher scores, thanks to "modifiers."

and the straightness on the long side after the leg-yield on the long side are all "modifiers."

The judge will take into account the score of the primary movement, but then consider the modifiers to take the score up or down a point. So, our average mover who performed an average leg-yield with very good straightness in all the right places and good bend on the turn onto the center line may now get a "7" for that movement. If the rider can keep up the quality of the modifiers (the details) then she can accumulate a bunch of "7" scores in the test and do quite well overall.

Take in contrast the horse that fell off the rail before the corner, made the turn in counter flexion onto the centerline then swung his haunches around before starting the leg-yield. This horse, although he maybe started at a "6" for the actual leg-yield, showed disorganization and lack of control before the leg-yield, may be taken down to a "5" for that movement.

This shows how two leg-yields, both equal in quality in themselves, can produce scores that will clearly separate

the winning horse from the horse on the bottom of the class. If the first rider continues her test with that attention to the details (going in the corners, making sure that the horse is truly straight and balanced at all times throughout the test) then the score will certainly reflect that attention to detail in the final score.

One way to test yourself in practice for these situations is to try to ride some test patterns from tests at a higher level than you intend to show, or even two levels higher than you intend to show. See if you are able to control your horse on tougher patterns. For example, if you are planning on showing First level next summer, practice some Second level patterns to see how intricate your control is over your horse. When practicing those Second Level movements, perhaps the haunches-in isn't the highest quality, but can you make that 10 meter circle? Can you maintain the canter on a three-loop serpentine without changing leads or breaking to the trot? If you can't, then perhaps you don't have the control of your horse that you need to turn those "6" scores into "7" scores at First Level.

Judges and trainers around the world recommend that riders school a level or two higher than they plan to compete. Once you get in the competition arena, however, don't forget the precision that you need to have to perform those higher level patterns! Ride your First level test with the precision of a Third level test. Ride with the same attention to detail, just show easier movements (leg-yield rather than half-pass) in a more appropriate frame for the level. Ride your Third level test with the precision of a Prix St. Georges test and I guarantee that you will have a higher score. A First Level test means that the movements are easier, but we don't want to see any less attention to detail than we see at a much higher level. Lower level means less challenging, not sloppy!

Start practicing precision in your everyday rides for more success in whichever level you choose to show this summer. We will see you at the show!