

Why know Dressage?

Understanding the elements of dressage can help you with your training. The shortening and lengthening of the three gaits: walk, trot and canter, is a key principle in dressage and beneficial in training jumpers. To prepare for jumping, practice ground poles or 'cavaletti', which are ground poles that are slightly raised from the ground to encourage the horse to lengthen or shorten his stride as needed. This can help with horses who are sluggish, not straight or too quick between fences.

What is Dressage?

Dressage is training the horse to be sensitive to the aids, more flexible and stronger in the back and joints. The horse is able to carry themselves along a curve or on a straight line and maintain an even tempo or cadence in the gaits.

The Dressage test is a series of movements that showcase the horses obedience, quality of the gaits and agility. The test comprises movements called transitions that are choreographed in a pattern that corresponds with the letters placed around the arena. A judge sits at the top of the arena and scores each movement from a numbered scale.

The numbers are totaled for a final score, and the judge usually gives comments on each movement so the rider can improve.

Which Test?

Dressage tests range from beginning walk-trot test to advanced Olympic level Grand Prix. The beginning series of tests are In Training Level, then continue to First through Fourth Level. After that, the tests advance to Intermediere, Prix St. George, and finally Grand Prix. To view the tests visit the United States Dressage Federation's website at www.usdf.org. Each lower level group has four tests. Riders of any age can ride in the Training Level tests, which are designed for novice horses and competitors.

The Arena

The Dressage arena is 20x60 meters. Letters are placed around the circumference of the arena as guides. For lower level tests, riders use the letters A,K,E,H,C,M,B,F. The letter X represents the center point of the arena, and is not marked. Higher levels use more letters that are also within the arena but not marked. The arena is enclosed by a 1-1 1/2 foot rail. The judge sits in an enclosed box at the top of the arena. The horse enters and exits from the same point

1/2 foot rail. The judge sits in an enclosed box at the top of the arena. The horse enters and exits from the same point, marked A.

The Tack

The dressage rider is usually outfitted in typical English gear and the horses are shown in minimal tack. There are different guidelines for tack depending on which governing body's rules you're competing under. An English style saddle is required and most use specifically a [dressage saddle](#). The dressage saddle has a deep seat, bigger knee blocks, and long straight flaps to mirror the rider's leg position.

How to Learn your test

The rider should memorize the test. Memorized tests give the rider more confidence, and ensure a quiet ride so that the rider and horse are the focal point. However, in lower levels a 'Reader' can be used without incurring penalties. The reader reads the test aloud for the rider while they ride the test. The Dressage tests are almost always split in two parts, which are mirror images. For example, you may begin with 20 meter circling left at B for the first half, and then you would do a 20 meter circle left at E, (it's opposite letter in the arena) for the second half. It's easy to remember the letters A,K,E,H,C,M,B,F as All King Edwards Horses Cleared Mighty Big Fences. It also helps to draw out the Dressage test on paper to memorize it.

Setting up a practice

You should practice riding the tests from beginning to end and also in pieces. Have a friend or your trainer help you to make sure your circles are round and your transitions are exact. Video helps to pick up where you can improve. Give yourself enough time before the class to warm up and work on pieces of the test in the warm-up arena.

Straight lines

Straight lines are as important as round circles. The first impression you give the judge is your entrance, when you then halt and salute. Make sure your lines are straight in crossing the diagonal, which is done twice in lower level tests.

Halt and Salute

Halt and Salute is a required movement in all tests. A square halt scores high marks, and make sure your salute is a fluid 4 beat movement. 1) Place right rein in left hand, 2) lower right hand straight down to your thigh as you bow your head. 3) Bring head and hand up at same time, and 4) take right rein back into right hand.

Transitions

Transitions are the changes between one gait and another, or change in direction. Transitions are judged on both accuracy and fluidity. The rider prepares a few seconds before the transition so they happen exactly on the letter. The horse should keep the rhythm of the gait and maintain balance between transitions.

Round Circles

Circles are an important part of the test. If your circle is oval, too small or too large you will lose points. Keep your inside leg on if the horse falls inward, and your outside leg on if the circle tends to be too big. Think of the two halves of the circle from letter E to letter B for instance. If you think of it in halves, it's easier to get the circle a perfect 20 meters.

Precision

Precision means performing the movement on the letter. Judges critique this as much as the quality of the gait, if not more. Prepare ahead with your half halt or change of bend to make sure you get the movement on the mark.

However, horses get bored with doing the test over and over, and begin to anticipate the movements too much. Do the test in pieces to get a feeling for preparing for the next movement.

Steady rhythm

Keeping a forward and steady rhythm is critical. If a horse spooks or shies at the judges' box or flower boxes, he's lost the rhythm. Or, if your trot is too slow, and the canter too fast, it is not scored well. Training level tests are a great way to begin, as they have simpler movements and give lots of time and give more opportunities to keep an even rhythm. Master these first before moving up the levels.

Scoring

The Dressage tests are written by the United States Dressage Federation, or USDF. The judge's scores will range from 0 to 10, with a 10 being the maximum (best) score that can be awarded for any one

movement. To more heavily emphasize a movement, some are "weighted" with a coefficient of two (2).

An error occurs when a rider goes off course (rides the wrong pattern) or in some way does not perform the movement as

listed. An error is marked in addition to the regular score.

Interpreting judge's comments

Collective marks at the end of each test and a few more general comments may be dictated to the scribe or written by the judge. These comments are provided to help you improve and understand the numeric score you were given.

These tests are helpful to keep and use in your training at home or before your next class.

Dressage is a great way to keep good communication with your horse. All horse sports can benefit from Dressage.

The Dressage rider will tell you too, how rewarding it is to learn with your horse and master the movements, and advance to the next level. Dressage is an elegant and beautiful sport to watch, and remains one of the most tradition based and popular horse sports