

## Tips for Riding a Successful Dressage Test

The aim of a dressage test is to show the judge that your horse/pony has true, regular paces, is calm and obedient to the riders aids, moves forward in a naturally rounded outline and accepts the bit willingly which for some might seem a tall order!

### ***But what can we do as riders to try and achieve this?***

Probably the most important thing to remember above all else when riding your test is **ACCURACY**. Many other things may go wrong in your test but from a judges point of view there is no excuse for not riding a test accurately and many extra points can be picked up by being accurate if nothing else! If you adopt the habit of riding accurately from day one you will always pick up marks in a dressage test.

At Preliminary level you will find you often have some leeway in tests as to the exact point that you make a transition e.g. '*Between H and C Working Canter*' or '*Transition to Medium Walk just after X*'. However as you progress onto the higher Prelim tests or on to tests at Novice level or above you will increasingly be asked to perform transitions at an exact marker.

If the instruction is *between*, then don't leave it until the last moment to ask for your transition otherwise you will have gone past the marker and will have lost a point!

If the instruction is *At A, F, B* etc, your transition should be as your shoulder is in line with the letter – not before or after otherwise another mark is lost!

Make sure you use every available inch of the arena by riding into your corners. Cut them off and not only will you lose marks for inaccuracy but you will have given yourself less time and space to prepare your horse/pony for the next movement.

Make sure your circles *are* 20mtrs - not 17mtrs or almost 20mtrs! Also make sure they are *round* in shape, not a strange egg or diamond shape. Again failing to get the size and shape of a circle or ½ circle correct loses valuable marks. Practice, practice, practice at home so that you can visualize the size and shape as you ride your test.

The same applies to serpentines. Make sure you ride loops of equal size and shape and that your serpentine is a series of ½ circles joined together with 2-4 strides on a straight line

Ride what the test asks you to ride and not your own interpretation of a shape! If you are not sure how a movement should be ridden *ask* someone to explain or show you or *look* in a book or find a diagram that shows you what the shape should look like.

Learn your test before the day of the competition so you know where you are going. It's fine to have a reader when you first start to compete but try to work towards remembering the test for yourself as come the day you qualify for a championship or represent your Pony Club or Riding Club and the rules do not allow readers it will panic you – start as you mean to go on and rely on yourself for getting your test right, not Mum, Dad, Sister, best friend or some poor stranger who's been asked to read for you at the last moment!

Everybody has different ways of learning a test, some learn by the letters and others by remembering the pattern of the test, find a way that suits you best and then practice both by riding the test and also by drawing it out on a piece of paper, riding it in your head and walking it out on foot.

So having got the accuracy bit right, the rider next needs to think about **RHYTHM and PACE**. One of the most common problems judges see is riders getting pre-occupied with their horse/pony's outline and by doing so sacrificing forward movement (impulsion) and a good regular rhythm. A judge would much rather see a horse/pony working in a good rhythm, going confidently forward into a soft contact but not quite round enough, than forced into a 'fixed' outline that produces short choppy strides and resistance to the riders aids which will lose you far more marks than a slightly longer outline would.

**Always remember the 'F' word - FORWARD!** Ride your horse/pony forward in all paces and through all transitions, it's just as important to ride forward in the downward transition as in the upward. Forward does not mean faster, it means creating more energy, power and impulsion. This needs to come from behind the saddle as this is where the horse's engine is and it will mean the difference between obtaining good marks or adverse comments such as '*not in front of the riders leg*', '*resistant*' or '*lacking impulsion*'

Spend time at home working on your horse/pony's walk – especially your '*free walk on a long rein*' as in many tests marks for this movement are doubled – think what a difference a good free walk could make to your final score!.

A free walk on a long rein worthy of a good mark from a judge will show your horse/pony stretching down and out and seeking the contact of the bit and make sure you *allow* your horse/pony to do this by slipping your reins so that they are long but not loose or baggy – so many riders don't even give their horse/pony a chance to stretch by hanging on to the reins.

Encourage your horse/pony to 'march', as if walking toward a bucket of oats. If you allow your horse to dawdle in the walk he or she may not even track up let alone show a good overtrack - this means that the hind feet should be falling ahead of the tracks made by the front feet – which is what you must show in free walk. Get a friend to watch you from the ground and tell you when you are obtaining a good 'overtrack' so that you know what it feels like from on top.

Next ask yourself if your horse/pony is pointing in the right **DIRECTION**. Your horse/pony should be straight on straight lines and bend accordingly on turns and circles.

Make sure when riding down the center line your horse/pony is straight, looking forward and on the center line – what better way to start and finish your test - and the same applies when riding up the long sides of the arena.

When riding through the corners of the arena or performing turns or circles, ride your horse from inside leg to the contact on the outside rein to create the correct bend. Trying to hold your horse into a corner or on a circle from the outside rein only will result in a comment like '*incorrect bend shown on circle*' or '*incorrect bend through corner/turn*' and more marks lost. Your horse/pony should take a uniform bend through their body around the riders inside leg so that the horse/pony's body curves along the line they are on.

And finally **LOOK AS THOUGH YOU ARE ENJOYING YOURSELF!**

Smile - You've paid good money to enter the class (or Mum and Dad or a long suffering partner have!), you've practiced like mad, you've spent time on your own and your mount's turnout so as to look your best in order to create a good overall impression to the judge and now all you need to do is think positively and ride positively!

You owe this to your horse/pony because however nervous you feel, however hard your heart is beating or however powerless your legs have become, your horse needs you – he can't do the test without you and no judge likes to watch a rider that looks as though they'd rather be walking on hot coals than riding a dressage test!!!!

If you are nervous it's quite easy to make an 'error of course' and go wrong and if your horse/pony is nervous or rather excited about the whole thing he might mess up the odd transition but don't worry it's only one or two movements in a whole test so it needn't affect the rest of your test too seriously – and there's always another day and another competition!

At the end of the competition, collect your sheet, learn from the comments and guidance the judge has given you and then go home and practice some more – it will get better and better with experience I promise!

