



Jeff Moore, faculty, with Alyssa Dragnich, L program coordinator

## Judging in the L Education Program: What It's All About

by Karen Bell  
Photos by Karen Bell and Tom Cavanaugh

Ever considered becoming a judge? Want to sit in your car for hours and watch ride after ride in 20 degree weather? Those that do, those stalwarts of dressage perfection, are the L Education Program participants. They are the “beginner” judges, on their way to judge your next schooling show. Many are not trainers or professionals, but rather, amateur riders who have worked their way

through the levels. Although to become a participant, you only have to have three 60% scores at 2<sup>nd</sup> level, many participants compete at higher levels. In addition, in order to qualify, they also have to scribe for three USEF R or S judges and be a participating member of USDF. Sounds easy enough, but like Jeff Moore, the A session faculty member and USEF S judges who did the program in Maryland in December, says, judging is “a special skill” that requires the ability to multitask and “run separate tapes” so that all the components of a test movement are noted, written down and scored. Judges have to learn how to cope with the information rapidly. They must note the basics and criteria of the movement, the score associated with the quality of the movement, and they must define comments for the scribe and remember issues related to the Collected Marks. According to Jeff, most people are capable of this sort of learning, but he warned the participants that they must watch and score dressage test videos of actual riders in order to be able to do well in the program.

The first day of Session A began with the history of the program, which Jeff and his business partner, Liz Searle, began 20 years ago to fill the need at schooling shows and to ensure that judges had a standard terminology (see USDF Glossary of Judging Terms). He emphasized having an empathetic attitude toward the riders, in the hopes that judges will learn to give comments that are not only useful but will “encourage harmony rather than cause abuse at home,” and to “be charitable when confronted with ineptitude.” He said it is mandatory that a “personal methodology” be developed when confronted with rules that were less than clear or in special circumstances. For instance, DR 122.1 states that “announcing the tests is limited to reading the movement as it is written once only. However, the repetition of reading of a movement is acceptable if there is reason to doubt that the rider heard the original call.” There were many examples of this sort: vague or contradictory statements that allow for some latitude in decision-making. Judges must decide on their own personal methodology in order to deal with vagaries of circumstances that can occur during a show for which no rule applies. As to scoring, it was notable that he thought commenting on a score of 6 was not always useful, especially if it meant confusing the rider when more than one issue was involved and when commenting on any one particular issue would do a disservice to the rider in her or his training. Jeff also encouraged would-be judges to use “decimal thinking,” as a personal methodology to help with accuracy and spread across scores. Because of the small spread (0-10) and because most movements receive scores of 5-7, many horses receive the same score even if they have very different performances. To the competitor, it is important to

keep in mind that as much as scoring may seem arbitrary, with a whole number system, two different horses can receive the same score even if one was a “6.8” and the other a “6.2.” Without a true decimal system, Jeff believes that dressage scores will continue to be a gross indicator of quality and not always helpful to the competitor.

On the second day, Jeff introduced the topic of biomechanics. He felt that the dressage community was decidedly late in applying biomechanics compared to other sports. His last three articles in USDF Connection (downloadable from <http://bellequine.net>) had already introduced readers to the definitions of engagement, impulsion, “stable” and “unstable” balance, and the biomechanics of the gaits and movements. In the L program literature, he quoted his trainer the late Baron von Blixen-Finecke, “by biomechanics we mean the way muscle moves bones to produce and sustain various forms of action: as regards the horse, mainly locomotion; as regards the rider, mainly position and giving of aids.” Such a concise definition belies the actual complicated nature of biomechanics, which became obvious when trying to separate the rider from horse biomechanics in the afternoon riding session.

Riders from training to 2<sup>nd</sup> level were evaluated by the participants and graciously allowed themselves and their horses to be faulted on various movement and gait issues. Horses were judged on the basic gait (“is it pure? Of good quality?”), specifics of the movement, and faults within the movement. The trot, for instance, would be marked down if lacking elasticity, reach, good articulation of the joints or if it was “flat” (without aerial phase) or the horse exhibited artificial head and neck movements as a result of poor riding (see below).



Participants showing canter work were judged similarly, in accordance to the specifics of that movement. For instance, he described how the fore and hind legs should have good separation with the outside hind leg reaching past the inside hind (pics below).



The canter should not be four beat, lateral or have a lack of reach with the outside limbs. In several instances, the horses' canters improved when riders with stiff and unyielding contact moved their arms in synchrony with movement (rather than going "against the mechanic of the canter").

Leg yielding and shoulder-in provided good examples of what might be seen in the show ring - horses out of alignment with head twisted and neck bent at the withers (leg yield, left) or without the proper 3 tracks visible, without any lowering of the croup and neck out of alignment (shoulder-in, right). Jeff commented on a story about an international judge who told Jeff that all 2<sup>nd</sup> level shoulder-in movements should get a score of 4, because there is almost never any lowering of the croup and therefore, no collection!

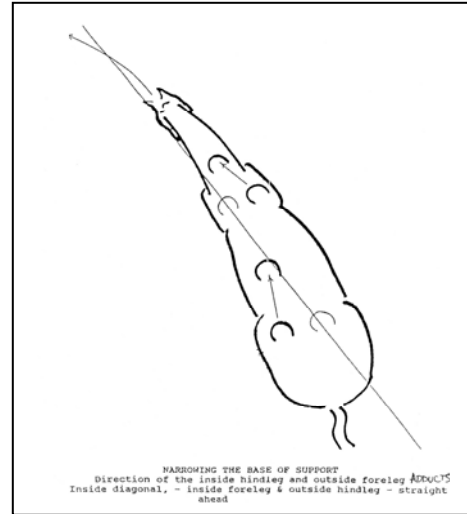


The participants also observed riders on circles and bending lines, looking for the stretch (convexity) of the outer side, concavity of the inner trunk, with the inner hind and outer foreleg adducting (toward the midline) (see figure right). Done properly, the horse's

inner hip will lower, and there will be a forward reach of the outer limbs. The entire trunk of the horse will form an arc with the head and neck bent in the direction of the turn.

Several participants interviewed afterward felt strongly that the criterion for the program was too low and that L Education Program participants should be riding and training above 2<sup>nd</sup> level. One participant preferred the program be closed to auditors but refused to explain the comment. Most, however, found the session educational and Jeff “charismatic.”

For his part, Jeff would not comment on the qualifications for the L Education Program but to say “the people who make up the requirements have to deal with a lot of variables in order to come up with a workable and (mostly) equitable system” and that the showing requirements are similar at the other levels of judging. The B (March 15-16) and C (April 12-13) sessions of the L Education Program are still open for auditing (DC area, locations TBA). To sign up, contact the L Education Program coordinator Alyssa Dragnich at [adragnich@verizon.net](mailto:adragnich@verizon.net).



A Session Participants (not in order):

Jaclyn Sicoli, Jaralyn Gibson Finn, Jessica McTaggart, Jessie Ginsburg, Lainey Johnson, Lauren Sprieser, Lori Barnard, Lori Parkins, Marija Treischman, Marne Martin-Tucker, Melissa Palmer, Roxane Kennedy Jennifer Moran, Kim Briele, Amy von Scholz, Donna Toole, Amy Chipman, Grace Harris