

A Method to the Madness

Judging methodology explained

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AS A COMPETITOR, YOU KNOW that behind every dressage test is a lot of thought and preparation. Likewise, behind every mark on your test sheet is a great deal of consideration and education on the judge's part.

In order to arrive at scores in a consistent manner, dressage judges, as taught by the USDF "L" Education Program, use an established system of evaluation called the judging methodology. Judges take this process very seriously because they are aware that their scores and comments influence the training methods that trainers and riders use to achieve their competitive goals. If judging methodology is not based on correct, humane training principles, horses' welfare—and the sport of dressage—will suffer.

In this article, we will explain the process that judges use to arrive at the score for each movement on a dressage test.

The Equation

Judging methodology can be expressed as a mathematical equation of sorts:

Basics + Criteria ± Modifiers = Score

Let's look at each element of the equation in detail.

Basics. As the word suggests, the basics are the fundamentals and are the most important factor in determining the score for any movement. The criteria for the basics are:

1. Is the gait regular and free?

2. Is there sufficient impulsion for the level?

3. Is there sufficient submission for the level?

The first consideration is the gaits. The judge has to decide: Is the gait of the movement in question free and regular? The purity of the gait is important in dressage because irregularity can be an indication of a lack of soundness, of poor training or riding, or both. Above all, the horse must show a clear four-beat walk, a two-beat trot with a moment of suspension, and a three-beat canter with a moment of suspension. In all gaits, the horse should move freely and without constriction. The quality of the gaits should improve with correct training because, as the horse is able to carry himself more on the hindquarters, using his back and freeing his shoulders, he will develop elasticity and expression. (For definitions of terms used in this article, see the USDF Glossary of Judging Terms, which is published in the *USDF Directory* and also is available in booklet form from USDF.)

The second consideration is whether the impulsion is sufficient for the level at which the horse is being shown. Impulsion comprises a desire to move forward, a suppleness in the back, an elasticity of the stride, and an engagement of the hindquarters. "Desire to move forward" is the horse's willingness to carry himself

forward, not simply going fast. When a horse shows suppleness and elasticity, his movements have a springy quality. His back is free of tension, thereby allowing the energy produced by his hind legs to be transmitted efficiently forward through his body. This is the quality that makes the horse athletic yet a comfortable and enjoyable ride.

The degree to which the horse can show impulsion depends on his level of training because engagement of the hindquarters requires increased flexion of the joints of the hind legs during the weight-bearing phases of the stride. This flexion causes the haunches to lower and the forehand to elevate. Even a Training Level horse is expected to show a degree of engagement, but obviously not to the extent of the Grand Prix horse or even the Third Level horse.

Submission, as defined in dressage, does not mean blind obedience. Instead, it has more to do with the quality of being in harmony with the rider. The judge wants to see a horse that is confident and attentive. He should appear to move with ease and lightness. Submission also refers to an acceptance of the aids. The criterion of submission as sufficient for the level means that the horse accepts the bridle and is not heavy on his forehand. His balance should be such that the carriage of his head and neck is appropriate for the degree of engagement of his hind legs and of the lifting of his withers.

Criteria. Having established the state of the basics, the judge must then determine whether the competitor has met the criteria of the movement—in other words, is the purpose of including the movement in the test being fulfilled? If the movement is a ten-meter circle, then the criteria for that movement are that

THE MARKS AND WHAT THEY MEAN

In order to understand judging methodology, you need to know the meanings of the scores.

Here, from the USEF Rule Book, are the definitions of the numbers, from 10 to zero:

10	Excellent
9	Very good
8	Good
7	Fairly good
6	Satisfactory
5	Sufficient
4	Insufficient
3	Fairly bad
2	Bad
1	Very bad
0	Not executed.

the circle is indeed ten meters in diameter, that it is round, and that it is executed at the letter specified in the test. If the movement is shoulder-in but the horse instead performs a leg-yield, crossing all four legs with too much angle and no bend, then the criteria for that shoulder-in have not been fulfilled.

In order to determine whether the rider has met the criteria for a movement, the judge must understand what's known as the essence of the movement. The essence is the most important part of the movement. In the above examples, the essences are the circle and the shoulder-in. Here is where developing correct basics and schooling correct figures will go a long way in enhancing your scores. Most accomplished trainers and riders use the logical progression of the training scale (see illustration [WHERE](#)) as an outline for their schooling sessions. Likewise, judges use its principles in their methodology when evaluating the elements of a dressage test. Practicing correct figures helps the rider to develop the horse in the most efficient manner and also helps to teach the horse obedience, suppleness, and

balance. The team that practices correct figures at home is better able to produce them at a show, even with all of the added distractions. Then the rider can concentrate more on the basics.

Modifiers. The final consideration in determining the final score for a movement is what are called modifiers. A modifier is a less-important feature of the movement that may enhance or detract from the score. For example, many dressage tests require the competitor to halt, to rein back a certain number of steps, and then to move off. The essence of the movement is the rein back itself. If the halt preceding the rein back is not square, then that is a negative modifier. Performing the exact number of rein-back steps required is a positive modifier. The transitions into and out of the halt and the rein back are additional modifiers.

Modifiers color the quality of the movement and may (but do not always) cause the judge to raise or lower the score accordingly. A superbly ridden corner before a "7+" shoulder-in may convince the judge to award that movement an 8. But if the judge thinks the shoulder-in was a weak 7, a poor job handling the corner may result in the 7's being reduced to a 6.

The Collective Marks

With the basics having been considered in each movement, the collective marks (for gaits, impulsion, submission, and the rider) become a reflection of the body of the test and a summary of what was observed in all of the movements. In the collective marks, the judge is able to emphasize how the basics stacked up as a whole. The mark for the rider is an evaluation of the rider and his or her effectiveness and influence on the test.

The scores for the collective marks are intertwined. The gait score is more independent of the other three scores, but there is often an overlapping, especially of the scores for submission and impulsion, and sometimes the rider score as well. It is up to the judge to attempt to tell the rider in which area the training needs attention.

Not Just Numbers

The judge sitting at "C" is on your side and wants you to have a good ride. The judges I know enjoy nothing more than to give a high score. But in fairness to the sport, to the other competitors, and especially to the horse, those marks must be earned—a reflection of correct basics and movements. ▲

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