

USDF Spectator's Guide

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What is Dressage?

The word dressage sounds like massage—and comes from the French word dresser, to train. It's an Olympic equestrian sport, yet a basic training discipline for any horse.

Dressage principles are a logical, step-by-step progression from simple to increasingly complex movements. More and more is asked of the horse as it becomes mentally and physically ready to respond to these demands.

The graceful movements performed in competition may look effortless but are the result of years of training. The rider's aids (weight, leg, and hand cues) should be imperceptible. A squeeze of the calf, a closing of the fingers, a shifting of the rider's weight in the saddle should be all that is necessary to tell the horse what to do.

Dressage requires the horse and rider to combine the strength and agility of gymnastics with the elegance and beauty of ballet. The result is truly the best blend of sport and art.

Like any sport, watching dressage is more interesting the more you know about it.

Dressage Tests

Dressage tests used at shows are divided into graduated levels for horse and rider, from the most basic walk/trot to the Grand Prix test that is the same test used in the Olympics.

The test levels are Introductory, Training, First level through Fourth level, Prix St. Georges, Intermediate I and II, and Grand Prix.

Each test is divided into separate movements. The riders guide their horses from one letter in the arena to another, through a series of movements at the walk, trot, and canter.

Horses and riders are judged on how well they perform certain movements that match each

horse's level of training. The judge gives a score for each movement on a scale of one to ten, ten being the highest. The scores are added together and then divided by the total number of possible points to get the percentage

score for the ride. It will help you understand what is going on if you can get a copy of the test you are watching.

Dressage Movements

Some of the movements in dressage are:

- Extensions - the horse will lengthen its stride.
- Half Pass - the horse moves forward and sideways in the trot or canter, bending his body toward the direction of the travel.
- Leg-Yield - the horse moves forward and sideways in the trot, bending his body slightly away from the direction of travel.
- Passage - a trot that looks like each step is held for a second in the air.
- Piaffe - trotting in place. The horse steps from one diagonal pair of legs to the other with an even rhythm.
- Pirouette - a 180- or 360-degree turn in place at the walk or canter.
- Shoulder In - a slanted sideways movement with the shoulder leading.
- Tempi Change - flying changes at the canter performed every one, two, three or four strides. The horse will appear to skip across the arena at a canter.

Additional Thoughts

1. Less is More

In dressage, the less you see the rider do, the better, because that means he is communicating with his horse and his horse is attentive – they are working as a team.

2. Good Figures

Circles are round and lines are straight, a precept true in geometry and dressage. A 20-meter circle should go from one side of the arena to the other, a 10-meter circle only half way across. A horse should not weave on a straight-line movement.

3. Tempo and Rhythm

Rhythm is the repetition of footfalls. A sound dressage horse has only three correct rhythms – four-beat walk, two-beat trot, three-beat canter. Tempo is the speed of repetition of strides. Every horse should have a consistent tempo throughout the test that is controlled by the rider, a tempo so obvious you could sing a song to it.

4. Naughtiness

Horses, like people, have good days and bad days and days when they are just feeling a little too good. Naughtiness in horses can be exhibited in bucking, rearing, tossing of the

head, or even jumping out of the dressage ring.

5. Tension

During a test, the horse needs to remain calm, attentive and supple. If the horse gets tense, he gets rigid through his neck and back, which can exhibit itself in stiff movement, ears that are pinned back and a tail that swishes constantly and doesn't hang arched and quietly swinging.

6. Rider Seat and Position

The rider should sit upright quietly and not depend on his whip, spurs or voice to have a nice test. Riders who use their voice have points deducted off their test score for that movement.

7. Whipped Cream Lips

When a horse is relaxed in his jaw and poll (the area just behind his ears), he releases saliva, and you might see white foam around his lips and mouth. That is a good sign as it means he is attentively chewing on his bit and comfortable in his work. The amount of white foam varies from horse to horse.

8. Freestyles

Most of the classes use set tests, but there are also musical freestyles levels where riders perform freestyle movements with choreography and music of their own choosing. This can be especially fun to watch for people who aren't yet familiar with dressage shows.

9. Scary Stuff

Dressage shows tend to be very quiet, so the horses will notice things and react suddenly more so than they will in a busier atmosphere. Allow plenty of room for horses and never approach a horse without first alerting the rider (the horse could run or kick out suddenly). Use caution with noisy garbage or shaking out big floppy items like an umbrella, blanket or rain poncho.

10. SSSSHHH!

Focus is important during any test, from Training Level to Grand Prix, so remember to be courteous and follow the rules by staying about 15 meters (45 feet) back from the competition ring and remaining as quiet as possible during rides. If you have any questions about where you may stand or sit, check with the ring steward.