

Spectators Guide to Dressage

What is Dressage? The word dressage sounds like massage - and comes from the French word dresser, to train. To the untrained eye it looks easy, but like many equestrian sports, it serves the needs of a diverse range of horse lovers. It's an Olympic equestrian sport; yet a basic training discipline for the backyard horse. Dressage teaches a horse to be obedient, willing, supple and responsive. The horse freely submits to the rider's lightest "aids" or body signals, while remaining balanced and energetic. The object of dressage is the harmonious development of the horse in both mind and body, and every horse, regardless of its type or use, can benefit from this training. 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 aids should be virtually 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 is required. 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. The highlight of a dressage competition is the Musical Freestyle in which the rider creates and choreographs to music an original ride of compulsory figures and movements.

The Arena A standard arena measures 20 meters by 60 meters (about 65.8 feet x 197.5 feet). Some of the lower level tests may use a small 20 meters by 40 meters arena as does the musical Quadrille (4 riders in a choreographed ride).

Judging the Tests The tests for each level are written so that there is a way to consistently measure performance. The judges are looking for accuracy of the transitions (changes of gait), obedience, suppleness of the horse, quality of the gaits, and the rider's use of aids. All movements and certain transitions from one gait to another are numbered on the judge's sheet. They are marked from 0 to 10, 0 being the lowest mark (virtually nothing of the movement performed) and 10 (excellent) the highest. A flawless performance of each movement is seldom achieved. Judges are always excited as they (rarely) give a 10! Following the test, the rider's individual movement scores are added up and a final score is calculated as a percentage of the possible score that the rider could achieve for that particular test. The highest percentage wins the class.

Musical Rides The Musical Kür or Freestyle is a ride that is choreographed for the horse and contains required movements while being artistically pleasing and technically correct. Pas de Deux is an artistic program created by two riders to present their horses to their best advantage in an artistic, musical context. Mirror image, point-counter-point and in-line movements can be used. The Quadrille tests are designed for teams of four horses and riders with or without music, depending on the test.

The Movements Horses and riders are judged on how well they perform certain movements in tests that match each horse's level of training. These are: * Extensions: The horse will lengthen his stride for the rider on demand. This movement is most exciting at the trot. When done correctly, the horse seems to float across the arena. *Lateral movements: The horse will show its suppleness by going forward first and either moving sideways or moving parts of its body sideways for its rider. *Pirouettes: In this dramatic upper level movement, the horse will turn in place at a canter. * Flying Changes: The most highly trained horses will appear to "skip" across the arena

at a canter switching the leading front and hind hooves. * Piaffe: This is a highly cadenced trot-in-place. The horse will spring lightly from one diagonal pair of legs to the other with an even rhythm and a definable moment of suspension. It is the highest degree of competitive collection demanded of the horse. * Passage: The horse appears to float, springing from one diagonal to the other while maintaining its body in a perfectly straight line. In effect this movement is a collected trot in slow motion.

Watching Dressage The key to enjoying dressage is to watch the rides and try to see how they differ and why one person's score is better than another's. It takes many years of training and great concentration of both the horse and rider to perform well in a test. You should expect to see calm, obedient, smooth rides where the horse's ears are forward or turned towards the rider, and clearly "listening" to the rider's instructions, although no actual words will be spoken during a test. The horse should look happy.

Spectator Pointers Riding a dressage test requires a great deal of concentration on the part of the horse and rider. The following guidelines will help to ensure that all riders have the opportunity to achieve their very best performance. * Avoid running, shouting or sudden movements while a horse is in the ring. * Applaud only after the rider has completed the final salute. * You may speak in a normal tone, but do not shout or wave. * Spectators must stay back from the white fence surrounding the competition arena. * It is best to leave your dog at home, but if you have your dog with you, keep it on a leash at all times * Before visiting the stabling area, check with the show office.

A Word About Horses While horses are magnificent creatures of beauty and grace, they are also powerful animals that can be dangerous when frightened. Horses' range of vision is limited close

up, and sudden movements or loud noises may scare them. Since their first defense is flight, a horse may bolt away. Their second defense is kicking, so you'll want to stay well away from the back end of any horse. Like most animals, they also like to eat, and fingers look almost as good as carrots. You should never pet, feed, or get on someone else's horse without permission. We ask that you respect our horses and riders by not creating a dangerous situation for them or you. No running near the rings, waving of blankets or papers, loud clapping or other noises during a ride. It is our wish that you enjoy the competition and our hope that this gives you some understanding of the dedication needed and the intensive work of horse and rider in providing these performances.