

Guidelines for Judging Dressage Seat Equitation Classes

The purpose of this text is to assist in the creation of a uniform standard of Dressage Seat Equitation judging. Many Dressage judges may not have experience judging group classes and/or those focused on the seat and aids of the rider. This is meant only to provide guidelines in order to enable judges to start developing their own system, and is not intended to be all-inclusive or to contain absolute laws.

I. Guidelines for rider position

Even when reading the texts of the “masters” there are variances on what is correct position of the rider. Below are suggestions of what each judge might want to watch for. Keep in mind that our goals in correct riding are security of the rider, the ability of the rider not to interfere with or aggravate the horse, the unity of the rider with the horse in motion, and the possibility for the rider to use her aids effectively and efficiently. To achieve this, the rider must have a correct design to his position, correct distribution of weight, balance, rhythm, spring (elasticity in joints), correct frictional grip, and relaxation. The judge should keep in mind DR117 from the 2005 USEF Rule Book:

► DR117. The Position and Aids of the Rider.

1. All the movements should be obtained without apparent effort of the rider. He should be well balance with his loins and hips supple, thighs and legs steady and well stretched downward. The upper part of the body easy, free, and erect with the hands low and close together without, however, touching either each other or the horse and with the thumb as the highest point; the elbows and arms close to the body enabling the rider to follow the movements of the horse smoothly and freely and to apply his aids imperceptibly. This is the only position making it possible for the rider to school his horse progressively and correctly.
2. Not only the aids of the hands and legs but also of the seat are of great importance in dressage. Only the rider who understands how to contact and relax his loin muscles the right moment is able to influence his horse correctly. (Compare DR102.2, DR108, and DR115.3).

II. Overall judging thoughts

- The rider should give the impression of being partnered with the horse, rather than being purely robotic.
- The judge must remember that he is judging equitation. For the most part, his eyes must watch the rider. The horse is only a vehicle that allows the rider to properly execute the requirements of the class.
- The judge should not be influenced by the body shape or attractiveness of the rider. An overall attractive appearance must also be workmanlike.
- The judge must not get too wrapped up in any one detail and especially be conscious of his own pet peeves and personal dislikes; always keep the overall picture in mind.
- Judges must keep in mind that although transitions are very important in a Dressage Test, it will be impossible to see every rider perform every transition when the class is working as a group. It may be difficult for many judges to be comfortable with the fact that they will not see every movement of each rider as they do in a regular Dressage class. Again, guard against putting too much emphasis on any one detail.

III. Scoring

- The first job is to compare one rider with another for an overall placing, deciding which rider comes closest to the ideal. The judge is to separate out the winners. He is not expected to remember every rider in a large class. In all but Dressage Seat Medal Semi-Finals and Finals, the judge is required to give final scores only to the number of riders getting ribbons plus two reserves.
- The judges must keep in mind that the score sheet does not require scores for each box. These are there for the judges to use any way they see fit. This can be difficult for the Dressage judge who is used to giving equal time to the best in the class as well as the worst and to evaluate every moment of each ride.

IV. Suggestions on conducting a class

- The judge must consider where to stand to have the best view. This might be in the middle, near one end looking toward the other where two-thirds to three-quarters of the ring is in view, outside the ring at one end near a corner (the advantage of this view is being aware of rider straightness), or on the outside on one long side.
- If the class is too large, the judge could have all the riders walk and trot one direction of the ring, then pull out the better riders. Work the rest of the class as required, pull in any riders that should be in the top group, and excuse the remaining riders. The judge can then work the top riders to evaluate them.
- A judge should not hesitate to “work” a class, requiring riders to truly show their ability. This can be done by requiring more changes of gait and changes within the gait as well as individual work.
- When asking for individual work-offs be very specific. Do not expect riders to be mind readers. The judge must make sure he asks for only those tests allowed in the USEF Dressage rules.
- Not all riders necessarily need to be asked for individual work-offs. It might be the top two or four, or perhaps to help the judge decide between fourth and fifth.
- A rider may reverse direction any way he chooses unless directed through the announcer or judge.
- When the judge asks for individual work-offs he may have the riders line up in the middle of the ring, or at one end where they are less liable to obstruct the judge’s view. As with regular test judging, remember that the judge must evaluate what she sees at that time. If the class were to run 10 minutes later the results might be different.
- When asking riders to drop their stirrups, the judge must give them time to cross them.

V. Thoughts for evaluating position

- **Basic picture:** Ear/shoulder/hip/heel in alignment with vertically hanging stirrup leather; heels feathered down; upright trunk with chest open and an aligned spine with rider looking up; straight line from elbow to horse's mouth; upper arm almost vertical.

LEGS:

Good:

- ✓ Centered under body
- ✓ Heels down slightly, iron on ball of foot with weight evenly distributed
- ✓ Angle to hip, knee, and ankle to allow the rider to sit in balance with horse and to absorb the motion of the horse's movement
- ✓ Knee low, thigh stretched down to adhere to horse
- ✓ Inside of calf lying close to and lightly on horse's side
- ✓ Quiet

Minor Faults:

- ✓ Slightly forward or back
- ✓ Stirrups too short so that the use of the leg is restricted
- ✓ Stirrups too long so toe is down or there is no flexibility to ankle
- ✓ Slight movement to legs
- ✓ Stirrups uneven
- ✓ Uneven weight in stirrups
- ✓ Stirrup leather twisted
- ✓ Stirrup on toe or "home"
- ✓ Bracing on stirrup
- ✓ Unnecessary lifting of heel to give aid
- ✓ Swinging legs
- ✓ Knee off saddle
- ✓ Toe pointed out excessively so back of calf and heel are on the horse
- ✓ Toe pointed in excessively with all of weight on outside of stirrup
- ✓ Rigid ankles

Major Faults:

- ✓ Any of above taken to extreme
- ✓ Thigh or knee coming up
- ✓ No contact with horse's side
- ✓ Lower leg gripping
- ✓ Spur held in side or constantly poking into the horse
- ✓ Loss of stirrup

SEAT & UPPER BODY:

Good:

- ✓ Sits centered on the horse
- ✓ Sitting in deepest part of the saddle, which should be more toward front of saddle than cantle
- ✓ Sitting deeply in saddle with upper body controlled but moving with the horse
- ✓ Hips and lower back supple, allowing them to follow the motion of the horse
- ✓ Shoulders balanced over the hips
- ✓ Head balanced over shoulders with chin level
- ✓ Rider looking over horse's ears

Minor Faults:

- ✓ Sits to one side
- ✓ Slightly ahead of the motion
- ✓ Slightly behind the motion
- ✓ One shoulder or hip higher or lower
- ✓ One shoulder or hip further forward
- ✓ Slight rigidity or stiffness
- ✓ Rounded back
- ✓ Excessively swayed back
- ✓ Collapsed chest
- ✓ Loss of rhythm with horse
- ✓ Chin down
- ✓ One ear lower than other
- ✓ Tension in buttocks, back, or shoulders

Major Faults:

- ✓ Any of the above taken to extreme
- ✓ Extreme crookedness
- ✓ Rider's head dropped down
- ✓ Unable to sit in saddle
- ✓ Excessive motion

HANDS & ARMS:Good:

- ✓ Soft fist
- ✓ Knuckles facing forward, thumb on top
- ✓ Hands angled slightly inside vertical, slightly apart
- ✓ Upper arm hanging relaxed on or slightly in front of the vertical
- ✓ Elbow near or slightly in front of waist
- ✓ Straight line from elbow through hand to horse's mouth
- ✓ Arms following motion of horse's head and neck, thus maintaining elastic contact

Minor Faults:

- ✓ Hands too high
- ✓ Hands too wide apart
- ✓ Hands too low
- ✓ Flat hands
- ✓ Elbows too far back
- ✓ Elbows straight
- ✓ Slight rigidity or tenseness
- ✓ Loss of contact with mouth
- ✓ Lack of following arm

Major Faults:

- ✓ Any of the above taken to extreme
- ✓ Hanging or pulling on mouth
- ✓ Hands constantly busy
- ✓ Major rigidity or tension in arms and hands

USE OF AIDS:Good:

- ✓ Aids invisible
- ✓ Horse performs well; relaxed, rhythmic gaits, energetic, supple, and balanced
- ✓ Correct timing of aids
- ✓ Correct use of half halts

Minor Faults:

- ✓ Lack of preparation/poor half halts
- ✓ Aids obvious
- ✓ Inappropriate use of whip
- ✓ Inappropriate use of spur
- ✓ Horse resisting
- ✓ Above or behind bit
- ✓ No bend
- ✓ Incorrect diagonal or lead quickly and quietly corrected
- ✓ Break in gait quickly and quietly corrected
- ✓ Horse lacking relaxation, impulsion, rhythm, suppleness, and balance

Major faults:

- ✓ Any of the above taken to extreme
- ✓ Lack of relaxation, impulsion, rhythm, suppleness, and balance caused by rider
- ✓ Wrong diagonal or lead uncorrected
- ✓ Break in gait poorly corrected
- ✓ Loss of control or unsafe riding (getting too close to other riders)

VI. Suggestions for developing methodology

One judge's method is to dictate plusses/minuses to the scribe--for each gait in each direction. Some judges use their own shorthand to be more specific. Some judges have the ability to write nothing while the class is in motion and can remember well enough to make their notes and give scores at the end.

VII. Suggestions for numerical scoring

90 - 100 Excellent	No major position flaw. Exceptional basics. The judge should describe this rider using only superlatives. The judge must not be afraid to use this score when it is appropriate.
85 – 89 Very Good	No major position flaw. Very good basics. This rider might have one of the minor flaws listed above to a minor degree. Ideally most of the winners will receive score in the 80's.
80 - 84	No major position flaws and very good basics. This rider might have one of the minor flaws listed above to a greater degree or have a couple to a lesser degree.
75 - 79 Good	The judge would be comfortable putting this rider on any trained horse and know that the horse will be comfortable with his rider. The rider may have a few minor flaws, but they are not detrimental to the horse.
70 - 74	This is the range for the average rider with no major design flaws or mistakes, who lacks suppleness or unity with the horse or the excellent rider who had one major mistake like a wrong lead uncorrected.
65 - 69 Satisfactory	This is the range for the mediocre rider, with several position flaws but no major ones.
60 - 64	This rider might have most of the good points, but one major flaw (i.e. very good position, except for the spurs poking in the horse's side all the time).
50 - 59 Sufficient	This rider has several minor position flaws that are not abusive to the horse, or this rider sits correctly but the inappropriate use of aids causes the horse to do poor transitions and be above the bit.
40 - 49 Insufficient	This rider has major position faults and/or rides the horse in a detrimental manner.
Below 40	This rider is abusive or unsafe.

VIII. Differences between judging a Dressage Test and an Equitation Class

Dressage Test

The horse's performance is scored.

The details and precision are important.

The judge is able to view every moment of the ride.

The judge will see every transition and the transitions are very important.

In the General Impressions, the Position and Seat score directly relates to the scores given throughout the test.

The quality of the horse's gaits influence the overall score.

Equitation Class

The rider's position and seat are scored.

The overall impression is important.

The judge will view each individual only occasionally.

The judge will see few transitions from each rider.

The performance of the horse is important only as it relates to the rider's seat and aids.

The quality of the horse should have no influence if the rider's seat and aids are not seen as having a detrimental effect on the horse's movement.

Compiled by Lendon Gray