



NEW ZEALAND PONY CLUBS ASSOCIATION INC.

A GUIDE TO BECOMING A DRESSAGE JUDGE

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Becoming a Dressage Judge requires some knowledge of the training of the Dressage Horse, the ability to recognise correct paces and the way a horse moves. Also necessary is – an observant eye, and the ability to analyse and comment (in dressage terms) on exactly what is seen.

With practice you will begin to see more and come to clearer decisions. It is more important to have an overall general impression of each horse, than dwell on repetitions of the same fault.

Judging takes tremendous concentration, confidence, and honesty if the best result is to be achieved.

Judging ethics – while it is impossible not to judge a competition in which there are riders you know, it is entirely unethical to judge a close relation or a pony/horse that you own. Some do put themselves in this situation, and while they may think it's only Pony Club and doesn't matter, it is unethical and not in the interest of fair play.

STEPS TO TAKE TOWARDS BECOMING A DRESSAGE JUDGE

1. Watch and listen to EXPERIENCED TRAINERS WORKING, and learn what basic principles they are promoting with their riders.
2. Know the sequence of a horse's footfalls in each pace, and be able to assess the correctness.
3. Develop an eye for movement, in all horses/ponies. Look for straightness of action, and the rhythm of the pace.
4. Understand the need for rhythm in all paces, with a regularity of all steps and strides, and realise that 'tempo' is the speed of that rhythm.
5. Read and understand the FEI definitions of paces and movements in the DRESSAGE NZ RULE BOOK.
6. Study the Rules and Regulations in the NZPCA Dressage Teams Championship Rule Book & attend Dressage judge's clinics.
7. Read and listen in order to acquire a vocabulary for saying what you mean, briefly, in dressage terms.
8. Learn the Scale of Marks by words, then use them correctly, bearing in mind that "8 is Good and 10 is only Excellent – NOT PERFECT". Your comments should never contradict your marks
9. From your knowledge of correct action and training, practise analysing which faults you see as major, or minor (see below for Horse & Rider Faults).
10. Organise, through the Secretary of a Dressage Competition, to sit in the back of a Judge's Car to observe. Do remain quiet, and don't speak unless the judge speaks to you, his/her concentration will be focused on the competitor and should not be distracted.
11. Offer to write for judges. This gives an opportunity to watch from the 'C' end of the arena, and match the judge's comments with the horse/pony performance. You may, however miss seeing parts of the test, if the judge gives you many comments to write down.

PREPARING TO JUDGE

PRIOR TO A DAY'S JUDGING

- Make diagrams, on a large sheet of paper or card of each movement in the test. (A matchbox makes a good outline of an arena). In each box, fill in the letters and track of the movement to be judged. Number the movements and indicate the different paces, using various colours, dots, short or longer dashes. Use an arrow to show direction of the movement. This will enable a far quicker reference.
- Learn the test thoroughly, not only from start to finish, but to enable you to pick up at various points, so in emergencies you will not need to look down, to check, but keep focused on the horse/pony you are judging.
- Study the directives, beside each movement; be clear about the requirements, or essence.
- Organise your starting 'sound device' – bell, whistle, horn etc. have extra pens on hand.

ON THE DAY

- Be Punctual – start at the allotted time and if individual times have been given endeavour to keep to them.
- Check car placing – remember it is easier for your writer to be in the passenger seat.
- Check Arena – holes, hazards, and that letters are correctly placed.
- Is your writer experienced or not? If new to the game, he/she may be nervous too! Explain where to put comments and marks, and in which sequence you will give them. It is usual to give your comment as the movement is performed and the mark at the end of the movement. However, you may prefer to give the mark first, and add comments afterwards. Advise your writer of your order. You may like to state Movement 1, Movement 2 etc. Check your writer knows the simple abbreviations, e.g. trans. for transition, O for circle etc. Politely discover if your writer is hard of hearing – it is quite stressful to find out halfway through a test that the writer hasn't heard, your comments or marks, and was too scared to say so!!
- Remind yourself that every day starts with a clean sheet. Forget any previous performances you may have seen of any horse or rider, or any knowledge of their record. They may have a new saddle, blacksmith, or trainer, since you last saw them.
- Know when each movement starts and ends. It is more practical to give your comment while the movement is being performed, before giving the mark, quickly.
- Keep your eye on the horse all through their test.
- If you miss a mark you can come back to it after the test and fill it in from your comments and recall. If you really can't remember, the rider must be given the advantage, i.e. 6 or more if the overall standard of the test was higher.
- Watch for moments of transitions. Avoid looking down at your sheet when these transitions are coming up. Each transition will affect the following movement and you must be able to comment, if it is very smooth, abrupt, late or badly ridden etc.

Try and find GOOD THINGS TO REWARD. It is too easy and DESTRUCTIVE to look only for FAULTS. Relate your comments to the essence of the movement, AVOID PICKY DETAIL. In Pony Club judging, it is most important to be ENCOURAGING TO THE YOUNG RIDERS, so that they will try to improve and come back again another day. FIND something to PRAISE, even if only "rode tactfully under difficulties" or "pony shows promise". MAKE YOUR COMMENTS AS POSITIVE AS POSSIBLE, avoid "DON'T" and instead use "TRY TO".

Judges are not there to give a lesson. Your comments are important to the rider so they must be factual. They are there to report to the rider what was seen. You can say "horse/pony appears stiff on right rein" – it may be the rider who is ineffective on that side.

- The test ends at the last salute, so start giving your final marks directly, and take time to consider the rider's mark before they leave the arena. As you sign each sheet, check that there are no marks missing. See that your signature is legible, to enable reference for help from you later.
- The marks you give the rider must reflect the marks achieved in the test movements, since the rider is responsible for the effect of their aids on the horse, (unless the horse has obviously been very difficult or disobedient), then some additional marks may be collected for patience and tact.
- Remember that all riding, even in competitions, is meant to be fun and that you hope to see ponies/horses and riders working in harmony. "Cross children make cross ponies", so ask yourself – why this is, if you see an unhappy pony/horse. Overall, if one aspect of the pony/horse causes you concern, it could imply there is something wrong. The whole outline and attitude of the horse must match at all times.

AT THE COMPLETION OF YOUR JUDGING THE COMPETITION

Check the placing of the class and compare it with your own ideas, to see if the horses you thought had scored highest did actually come out on top. If not, did you place too much emphasis on boring accuracy, perhaps, instead of rewarding enthusiastic forward paces?

Your marks may differ from those of another judge, but hopefully the totals of each horse will place it in approximately the same position, though often there can be a genuine difference of opinion on some qualities shown.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Trainers and judges know the most important quality to be shown in dressage is the horse's willingness to move forward freely. This is not to be confused with moving with tense, hurried or rushed paces. (Activity and forward energy at the lower levels develop into impulsion later). The horse must be relaxed in order to work in a steady rhythm. If the paces are not rhythmical there is no true regularity. True relaxation leads on to suppleness which itself is necessary in order to produce straightness.

SUPPLENESS shows when the horse is quietly mouthing the bit, with a relaxed closed mouth, a gently swinging tail, and the back swinging slightly laterally, from poll to tail.

STRAIGHTNESS is seen when the foreleg is directly in front of the hind leg, whether it is on a circle or straight line. Horses/ponies that plait or paddle in front should not be penalised, but their strides may not be as long as those that move completely straight in front. Hoof-prints should still be on one track with the hind legs. There should be no evasions of weight-bearing in a hind-leg, either by moving towards the opposite hind leg, or away from the direct line of the track.

Until a horse/pony is straight it cannot produce true impulsion but it can still show energy and willingness to be active. Therefore: when a horse/pony is going forward energetically, working with rhythm and relaxation, is supple and submissive, accepting a contact he will develop straightness and impulsion.

PONY CLUB TESTS do not require collection or extension – so avoid using these words. However, some degree of balance is required from the early stages. Many horses/ponies will be seen still on the forehand, which should not be a criticism at the lowest levels. This cannot change until the whole balance is improved, through more active and weight-bearing hindquarters. If a horse/pony does not accept the bit it cannot be ready to perform a dressage test. (NOTE: this does not apply to our 'Beginner Tests A to F' inclusive in the NZPCA Riding Tests 2001 book). You are looking for a "cheerful submission" not a forced outline dominated by the rider's hands.

THE RIDER'S POSITION will have a definite influence on the performance. You need to assess if they are sitting in a correct vertical balance, and giving tactful, correct aids. There should be a contact on the outside rein at all times, and an inside leg close to the horse, to ask for some bend. In trot, young riders may not yet have achieved the degree of relaxation in their pelvis or seat, to absorb the horse's movement, and allow for independent steady hands, or relaxed soft elbows. You can comment on this, and leave criticism of their unsteady hands, unless, this is very marked and deliberate. In walk and canter arms and hands should follow and allow the horse's natural nod, not a fixed position of the hands. This would produce an unsteady rein contact, which makes it difficult for a horse to accept the bit, or stay cheerfully on the contact.

FAULTS IN THE HORSE

MAJOR FAULTS -

- Lacking - Activity (dull) Rhythm (erratic paces) Bend (head turned out or quarters in or out on a bend or circle, i.e. hind legs not following track of forelegs)
- Not showing Working Paces when required (hurried, erratic, too fast, too slow, or may be unlevel)
- Unbalanced, for the level of the test (falls into halts, or dives into canter)
- Going above the bit (Except in Junior Riding Tests)
- Consistently over-bent
- Not accepting the bit, or not on the bit (depending on level)
- Consistently tense, or rushed (not relaxed)
- Resisting downward or upward transitions (may be caused by rider's poor preparation).
- Appearing to lean on rider's hands
- Repeatedly disobedient to rider's aids
- Consistent head tilting
- Not straight in walk or trot (lowest levels may show quarters to inside, in canter, then not a major fault, they are unlikely to be straight)

MINOR FAULTS -

- Lacking accuracy in transitions at markers (especially at lower levels)
- Going over bent for a few strides only
- Halts not maintained
- Wrong strike off (corrected)
- Small stumble, or break in rhythm
- Shying, not sustained
- Circles not absolutely round
- Irregular steps in lengthening
- High spirits (controlled)

MAJOR FAULTS IN RIDER -

- Sitting crooked
- Tilting forward
- Seat bouncing, stiff or unsteady
- Fixed knee grip, causing lower legs to come away from horse's side
- Swinging legs – uncontrolled
- Aids too obvious

- Hands too restrictive, elbows fixed
- Allowing wrong strike-off, uncorrected (Except in Junior Riding Test C)
- Inaccurate riding of track (not at lowest levels)

N.B. FOR BEGINNER RIDING TESTS - read the notes to Judges:-

Tests A – F The rider is being judged on their use of correct aids. Pony should show regularity of pace, correct bend calmness and co-operation. Working paces are not expected.

FOR JUNIOR RIDING TESTS - read the notes to Judges:-

Tests J – O The rider's position, effect & correctness of aids are considered, and Pony impulsion, suppleness & obedience are mentioned for the first time.

FOR INTERMEDIATE RIDING TESTS - read the notes to Judges:-

Tests P – S All the above considerations plus: - paces, impulsion and submission.

These Junior Riding Tests may be the hardest to judge. Keep your comments simple. Your final comment to the rider should be constructive, but not in lesson form.

Your comments could give ideas as follows:

At "C" level - 'Try to learn to recognise when your pony is cantering on the wrong leg'

At any level - 'Try to look in the direction you are going'

'Try to keep your pony looking where it is going'

'Try to keep your leg aids a bit quieter'

'Take a bit more time to prepare for halting' or 'for the transition'.

Give encouragement at all levels – 'nice entry' or 'maintained a steady position' or 'better' (an improvement after a poor movement).

It is not possible to suggest what marks should be awarded or deducted, for specific mistakes, as so much will depend on the level of the class, the age of the riders, the importance of the competition, etc.

If all judges have a positive attitude to what they are seeing, and try to mark the good points, they will be able to be encouraging even to a very rough performance.

Consider the main point of each movement, say, an ENTRY from A at a trot, through walk at X to Halt and Salute at G. Was it straight? Was Pony accepting the bit? Fairly balanced in downward transition to walk? Was the halt reasonably square, and maintained for the salute? Did he move off calmly?

Use your scale of marks. Was it Satisfactory (6), was it Fairly Good (7), or, may be, Good (8) or did it go crooked at the halt, or unbalanced in transition and lose a mark?

For the Beginner Riding Test, if test was restricted, lacked any rhythm, or cantered at times when it should be in trot, then it probably can't earn more than 5 for paces. But if it was calm and co-operative it might go up to 6. So much depends on the situation on the day.

A pony that continually star-gazes and is totally above the bit cannot earn more than 4's on most days, but if it happens to drop down to a better outline on circles, perhaps, or after canter, then you must recognise the improvement in that movement. If in any doubt as to what is meant by any of these expressions, consult your Pony Club Manual 1 and Manual 2.

If you do use the full range of marks, at least from 3 to 8 or even 9, you will have more chance of separating the range of talent you may meet in a single class, without totally depressing the real novices who will never score high enough to place in the top of the class, anyway.

It really does get easier as you get more involved, so good luck!

Final thought: Keep your Rule Books with you, and make sure you know the rule of the day regarding whips. Always be prepared to give the competitor the benefit if in doubt.

Further copies available from:

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