

How to Ride a Dressage Test

By Angel Andrews

First, I would like to state that no one, and I mean, no one, starts their dressage career/habit as an upper-level rider, even if they have been riding for years. We all start as training-level riders and guess what? So do the judges! So as you are trotting around the outside of the arena, just remember, the judge was once in your shoes, or should I say stirrups?

Before we get to the competition ring for our test, I want to talk about the warm-up. The warm-up can make or break a dressage test. After you mount, take a deep breath and pet your horse or give him a treat. Mine always get 2 sugar cubes, one from each hand. Not only does this make them stand politely, it also gives them a chance to stretch their necks from side-to-side. It will also help him (and you) to relax. You don't want to turn into an alien rider he doesn't recognize due to show nerves. Don't forget, he may be a little scared/nervous himself. He's away from home, probably missing several of his buddies and wondering what he's done to become a show horse. So take a few minutes to reassure him. Walking him for 5 minutes in the warm-up, but not on the rail, or even around the show grounds will give him a chance to check out his surroundings and relax. When he's taken a deep breath and checked out everything, it's time to go to work.

As you take up the reins and begin your trot work, allow him to stretch over his back into the contact. Do lots, and lots of circles, figure 8's and changes of direction. Don't just go around and around the perimeter of the arena. Each time a horse changes direction, he must shift his weight from side-to-side, thus, helping to get the blood pumping in his body and warm up his muscles for suppling. I canter fairly early in my warm-up as most horses' trot work improves after they have cantered. I start every horse (even my Grand Prix horse) in a training level frame and then gradually increase the level of collection and shortness of the frame. I then go back to trot work and work on suppling exercises. I don't just do movements from the test. Any athlete (and a dressage horse is an athlete) must warm-up and stretch before he can perform to the best of his ability. I try to keep my ride as similar to my daily rides as possible. The warm-up arena is not the time to drill a movement or teach something new!

The ring steward has just informed you that you are next. Smile and thank them and immediately head to the competition arena. As soon as the rider in front of you has saluted, you may go around the outside of the arena. Use this time for some more suppling exercises or stretching, such as

shoulder-in, haunches-in, and play with the poll flexion but, again, don't just go around and around. I never let my horses look to the outside as I go around the outside of the arena. I want them focused on me and what's happening inside the arena. It doesn't matter to me that a horse trailer just pulled in or there's a loose dog running around. I'm aware of what's going on, but I don't let my horse become so interested in other events that he's not focused on me.

The judge has just blown the whistle. You have 45 seconds to enter the arena. As soon as I hear the whistle, I usually stop, take a deep breath and pet my horse. Believe me, that one deep breath can make a huge difference in what type of ride you are going to have. I can't stress enough how much it will calm you and your horse. For one thing, it will keep you from running him off of his feet into the arena from the adrenaline that's pumping through you and through you, to him.

You've now turned down centerline. Look where you are going and prepare for your halt before you get to "X". Not when you arrive at "X". Looking where you're going will help to guarantee a straight line to "X", a halt at "X" and a straight line to "C".

Accuracy is something that must be learned early in a dressage show career. I have my students ride figures, circles, straight lines and diagonals until they want to strangle me but they never get negative comments from a judge regarding their geometry. It's silly and unnecessary to lose points due to poor geometry or wiggly, crooked halts.

As I enter the arena, my horse is flexed in the direction we will be tracking after the halt. This gives him a little extra signal of where we're going. As we approach "C" and again before the corner, I half-halt. This will help balance him and keep him from falling through the corner. I half-halt again in the corner and then once again coming out of the corner. This helps him maintain his balance and prepares him for the next movement, whether it is on the diagonal or on the long side of the arena.

The quality of the transition is going to determine the quality of the movement and the quality of the transition is determined by how much preparation went into it. If you have a bad transition, chances are you are going to have a bad movement. It's pretty difficult to fix something in the middle of a movement. That's why preparation for the movements/transitions is key to having a good test.

OK, so what happens if you make a mistake in the middle of your test? And notice I said YOU make a mistake. I never blame my horses. If an error is

made, it was probably due to miscommunication on my part. Horses are very willing and really try to please their riders so it is up to us to make sure our aids are crystal clear to them. So what to do? First of all don't panic! It's one score. Put it out of your head and move on to the next movement. Remember, you've got to prepare for the next movement or it too will be bad. I've seen dressage tests spiral out-of-control because the rider was still focused on something that happened several movements earlier.

Use your corners to rebalance your horse. That's what half-halts are for. The short side of the arena is perfect for softening a horse (remember counter-flexion?). Look up and know your geometry. If you are looking where you are going, chances are really good that the movement is going to be performed where it's called for in the test. Prepare for a diagonal on the short side, BEFORE you get to the corner. Don't wait until the letter for the movement to ask for the movement. You should have given your horse a little checkered flag to let him know that you will be asking him to do something different. This can be something as simple as a half-halt, putting him a little deeper on the outside rein, shifting your outside leg back to keep his haunches from swinging out or any number of VERY subtle aids.

Remember, YOU must ride the test. Don't sit on your horse like a Christmas tree ornament doing nothing. He's needs reassurance and direction from you, the rider.

You've now turned up centerline. Yea! We're almost done. Again, look where you're going. You should use your peripheral vision to spot "B" and "E" and execute your halt between them. Don't take your legs off of him. This enables him to swing his haunches from side to side. Plus, the halt is a forward movement and I want my horse thinking forward (even in a final salute). Don't ever let your horse step back in a halt. An easy way to prevent this is to keep your legs on and soften your hands just a bit. Salute, smile and pet your horse.

Did you remember to have fun and breathe?

BIO: Angel Andrews is a Grand Prix competitor and trainer based in Oklahoma City, OK and Wellington, FL. She has earned her USDF Gold, Silver and Bronze medals and currently rides and trains several horses and students.