

# **10 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE DRESSAGE RIDERS**

Over the years working a never-ending multitude of horses, great Dressage riders develop habits, ways of achieving consistently high performance and excellence in the daily work. These are not training how-tos but rather personal habits adopted by riders to set themselves up for success every day.

**1: *An effective Dressage rider looks upon each failure as a ladder rung: step on it and lift yourself up.***

Great riders know that failure is a constant on the road to success and they train themselves to use it in their favor. Failure provides us with critical information which we then use to improve our work. Embrace it. Welcome it. Study it and learn its lesson. Each time you fail, be thankful for the information, put it behind you, raise yourself up to the next ladder rung and try again. Failure is not the end, it is the beginning.

What is energetically in us, goes into the horse. If you carry your emotional refuse into the ride, ie; bad day at work, family problems, etc., it will inevitably effect performance. Be very careful what you put in as horses are like computers, if you write bad code, you will have to rewrite it at some point. Learn to neutralize your emotions BEFORE you get on the horse. This will give both of you an opportunity to begin the ride clean.

**2: *An effective Dressage rider leaves their personal issues on the ground, approaching each ride emotionally neutral.***

**2/3: *Effective Dressage riders make themselves the calm baseline that their equine partner can rely upon at all times.***

The psychology of the horse requires a partner willing to assume a leadership position. This assumption of the leadership position by the rider in the partnership translates to the horse via the language of the body in all circumstances, all scenarios. A rider who remains mentally AND physically steady when the horse experiences confusion, fear and perhaps resulting chaos, will very quickly gain trust, confidence and devotion to the work from their equine partner. A skilled rider quickly proves his or her leadership ability to a

new horse, who then, greatly relieved in such capable hands, will confidently trust his rider and attempt to work *with* and not *against*. Trust is earned not given; work to deserve it from the horse.

***4: An effective Dressage rider owns their personal space both on and off the horse.***

Closely related yet different from habit #3, maintaining ones space communicates leadership. A dominant stallion does not mosey into a herd head down, tail low, back soft. Oh no, he is up on his toes, tail flagged, every muscle pumped full announcing his arrival...his presence is known. His body language virtually screams 'follow me!' This type of presence must also subtly be in a riders body language when working both on the horse and off. Our equine partners rely on us to lead them and we communicate our worthiness of this responsibility with our body language, with the feeling of resolve within our bodies. Effective riders maintain exemplary posture both on and off a horse, we carry ourselves, we own our space with a steely intention, communicating our empathetic power and ability to lead to those who rely on us: our equine partner.

***5: An effective Dressage rider has trained their 'inner voice' to be either positive or constructively negative, never defeating.***

An effective Dressage rider approaches the ride with a sense of wonder: what will the ride bring? What is the legacy of yesterday's work? Will it be fair to push the horse just a bit more today? Problems, resistances that arise are addressed constructively, not reacted to emotionally. It is the supportive 'inner voice' of the rider that keeps the ride 'on the rails' and productive, ending always on a positive in preparation for continued success in the next ride. It is the burden of the rider to maintain an emotional 'thru-line' that directs the ride steadily toward completion.

***6: An effective Dressage rider knows success happens one ride at a time, day in and day out, remaining consistent and realistic in their daily goals and expectations.***

The work is a continuum, each ride building upon the last. There are no short cuts. You cannot buy it, you have to make it with consistent, correct work,

realizing nobody can do it for you. The amount of success you have as a rider is directly related to the amount of effort you put into it. Rome was not built in a day and neither is a Grand Prix rider/trainer, nor a Grand Prix horse. Get up, dress up, show up and put in another day's work. Then do it again, and again and...again. The river of trying never stops flowing.

***7: An effective Dressage rider has the courage to be creative in their problem solving, the courage to go beyond the text-book and think independently.***

An effective Dressage rider innately understands that every horse is different. Every rider is different. Every moment is a new moment, a new opportunity to create quality.

***8: An effective Dressage rider knows they must be an athlete in their own right before they can expect their equine partner to be one.***

The foundation of the Training Scale is the rider's seat. Every rider strives to be in control and command of their physical being, able to independently apply the aids effectively in both calmness and chaos. A Dressage rider uses every single muscle known to man, and then some! It is imperative that we cross-train, building our own strength, endurance and dexterity *away* from the horse. Cross-training keeps the muscles 'fresh' ie; not locked into the sole muscle memory of the ride itself but rather neutral, able to break old 'muscle memory' response patterns easily if required. Poorly trained horses effect the muscle memory of the rider just as poor riding effects the muscle memory of the horse. Cross-training assists the rider in both developing athleticism and neutralizing undesirable muscle memory.

***9: An effective Dressage rider knows there is only one direction to go: forward!***

Horses are built to move, they are born to move and most love to move. Effective riders know how to use this base instinct in the horse as a key ingredient in the work each and every day, much like flour to a baker. As it is in life, so it is in Dressage: if all else fails, GO FORWARD! In this way, an effective rider creates a

fresh moment, a fresh opportunity to try again toward understanding and success.

***10: An effective Dressage rider works for their horse, not vice versa.***

Great riders do what they do for the sake of the horse... and nothing else. 'Dressage' encompasses all that we do from the moment we rise in the morning and enter the stable aisle to the final night check at the end of the day. Highly effective riders know they must stay close to their horses each and every day in order to build the intimacy required for the Grand Prix. They know their partner's moods, their idiosyncracies, their likes and dislikes. The transition from the aisle to the school is best seamless: true partners from the stall to the aisle to the schooling arena to the show ring and home again.

Remember, Dressage is an art form in motion, therefore it only survives as such when practiced correctly on a daily basis by both Master and student, through the grace of correctly trained horses. Strive to develop good habits, for the sake of the sport, for the sake of the horse and for your own future as an accomplished rider.

*Written with gratitude to 'the trainer's trainer': Michael Poulin. follow the author on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/Thetenhabits](https://www.facebook.com/Thetenhabits)*