



COURTESY FRASER PHOTO



Between with JEREMY STEINBERG Rounds

Making Sense Of Dressage Scores

When the FEI guidelines say one thing, but the test sheets say another, our columnist believes the system is failing riders, judges and the public.

I've been thinking about judging and the idea of a system that would use 10 as the starting point and work with deductions based on faults or a codex. I know this is a sore subject, with most judges against the idea, but we need a system that is easier to understand and less arbitrary.

Often you feel like your test was better than your score, or your score was better than your test. (Although none of us complain about the latter.) We're often told we don't understand enough about judging—that the points raising or lowering the score contrary to what you thought it should be are finer points or that this particular judge saw better than the untrained eye of the rider, spectator or trainer.

Years ago I had an argument with a U.S. Equestrian Federation "S" judge at a large West Coast competition about a ride we'd just witnessed. I had finished my

own ride in the CDI Prix St. Georges and was in disbelief that my score was as high as it was. Seeing as it was a mistake-free ride, I understood well enough and was over the moon.

As the class went on, one of the West Coast Olympic riders came in on a brand new horse that had been touted as the next big Olympic hopeful. He rode his test with beautiful trot work, but he had a mistake in nearly every canter movement as the horse was still struggling with the changes. The horse jiggled in the collected and extended walks and was riddled with tension. The test was skillfully managed, but it was far from polished or fault free. I know the rider was slightly embarrassed by the test in front of a large crowd, which had gathered to see what this new horse could produce, but I also know this rider has nerves of steel and understands the process of developing horses for show, so he'd chalk up the ride

to a learning experience and part of the process. He commented to me that he was embarrassed the score was so high for such a test. The ride scored well above what I scored for a ride 45 minutes earlier with no errors.

When I was talking to the S judge later that day, I asked, "How is it possible for this rider to score so incredibly well with all the mistakes?" She instantly insisted that I was upset by not doing better and was a poor sportsman. This couldn't have been further from the truth, as I scored way higher than I expected, and I told her this. I went on to say I didn't understand how, with the coefficients in the collective marks for suppleness, paces and rider's score, along with all the coefficients in the test, that it was mathematically possible to score that high with that many mistakes. She said all the 9s the horse got in the trot work made up for the mistakes, which in her eyes were minor and few.

As a side note, this was in the 1990s, and 9s were not thrown around readily back then, so I had a hard time believing he did in fact receive that many. She said I didn't understand enough about how judging works to be arguing. She went on to say, "Plus, this rider sits so well that any time he canters into the arena he automatically gets a 9 or 10 on his position, so he always makes points up there as well." She had been sitting at C shadow judging with the Fédération Equestre Internationale "O" judge, who was the head of the panel for the show and with whom she is good friends, so she also reminded me she saw the scores, and the test was not as bad as I had thought.

I was shocked that this judge admitted to basically pre-scoring this rider for his position even before the test began, and I told her that was not right. You can't make that assumption, and the rider score is not just about position; it also includes "effectiveness of the aids," which judges—this one included—have reminded me many times. It is not possible to give high scores to a rider when there are so many mistakes in the test, as the effect of the aids is not there

when the horse is not on the aids.

I was told I shouldn't argue, that I didn't really understand enough to be having this discussion with her. That if I really wanted to understand I should go through the training and sit in the box so I could comprehend how it all worked. I was angry and said that unlike her, I was too busy riding and putting my own butt in the saddle and on the line for people like her to judge, and we both walked away angry.

Years later, I still feel like I was right. You can't give a score of 9 to a rider because of their name, regardless of the test they produce, with no thought to the effect of their aids.

How is it possible that professionals in the industry can still be dumbfounded by the way we are judged? If competitors, trainers, owners or coaches are not understanding—and are told it's not possible to fully understand without years of this particular training—how can we ever expect the general public to follow it?

I understand that the more training you have as a judge, the easier it is to sift through the finer points of scoring, but I don't understand how there can be so much difference of opinion, whether in interpretation of movements or the score. Where does the breakdown occur? Is it in the judges' training, or is it simply in the fact that they are human—and in the end are asked just for their opinions of the ride, which is based on years of experience, but is still subjective? And if so, should it be that subjective?

Referring To The Manual

Because I teach so regularly, I stay current on the rules, the changes and who said what. I read the Rule Book yearly, the marked-up version in fact, as I like to see the outlined changes. I visit the



Our columnist questions some of the dressage guidelines on the FEI website, including one meant to clarify the scoring for pirouettes. "I've seen countless pirouettes that have a perfectly clear four-beat, thunderous canter. Would that be considered a clear beat?" he asks. ARND BRONKHORST PHOTO

“We need a system that is easier to understand and less arbitrary.”

USEF and FEI websites rules and regulation sections regularly, as I'm always curious what they are changing or adding based on what is happening in the sport.

I am pretty hard on the FEI in that I don't feel like they are always a fair governing body with a transparent attitude or as smart as they'd like us to believe. If they are going to publish their rule book and documents in English, they need a better editor and proofreader, and if they want more people to read it and take it seriously, they should lead by example and take it seriously themselves. That kind of document should not have spelling and grammatical errors that people like me can find.

Any time I mention my opinion about scoring to my judging friends, they remind me that there are guidelines published and a manual stating how it works. But I'm frustrated by the errors or contradictions in these documents.

How can we trust the laws when they contradict each other or are hard to understand?

Case in point: A few years ago I read through the pirouette guidelines on the FEI website. If you want the "FEI Dressage Handbook - Guidelines for Judging," you have to buy that one, but there are also some select guidelines published on their website explaining how and why certain scores are given and how movements should be performed.

The website's guidelines were written or approved by the FEI Dressage Judge General. The one about the pirouettes is by Ghislain Fouarge, the last FEI Dressage Judge General, and it's full of mistakes. One of the sentences makes no sense to me at all:

The rhythm can be slowed very slightly but it has to be the same rhythm as

the regular collected canter of the horse, the strides should not become labored.

So which is it: The rhythm can or can't be slowed? If it's slowed, it's not the same as it was a few strides earlier in the regular collected canter. On that note, what is the "regular" collected canter? Isn't there just one collected canter, or is there an irregular collected canter as well?

As I understand it, his point is the TEMPO can be slowed, which I strongly disagree with as a whole separate conversation, but the RHYTHM must stay the same as the regular collected canter. (The rhythm being the footfall sequence, three beats, and the tempo being the rate of speed that the rhythmic phrase repeats itself.) I really think he should say the speed can slow, i.e. the miles per hour, but the tempo is supposed to remain the same. That would be my interpretation, but why should I have to infer and interpret a "guideline"? It makes no sense that the FEI guidelines require interpreters to

understand and are, in effect, wrong. If we are all left to interpret, who is right in the end? How can there be a standard when the definitions are not clear as to what the movements are? The same document goes on to say:

In the pirouette the rhythm appears to be a three beat although with small pirouettes this is almost impossible. There is much theoretical discussion based on slow motion recordings but this should not cloud the judge's assessment. There may be a slight hesitation but the canter gives the impression of a clear beat.

We know it is impossible, not that it is "almost" impossible, and on top of that, what does the last sentence actually mean? A slight hesitation of what? A clear beat of what? I've seen countless pirouettes that have a perfectly clear four-beat, thunderous canter. Would that be considered a clear beat? I understand his meaning to be that the diagonal pair in the canter, the inside hind leg and outside front leg, give the

impression of a clear three-beat canter, understanding that the canter becomes slightly four-beat where the diagonal sequence is disturbed, but that it should give the impression of a three-beat canter.

Another one I am left scratching my head at is:

The horse should be clearly collected and prepared before the pirouette but not for too long – only 2-3 strides (max 4 strides) – and always in a clear quality three beat canter.

Again, which is it? I don't understand how you can use the word "only," but then go on to say "max four strides." If it is solely and exclusively two to three strides, how can you also allow a max of four? How can I be this confused when reading a document that is supposed to be the authority?

Following that comment, comes this one:

If, in the Prix St Georges, the horse changes before the corner marker the fault should be considered in the mark for the counter canter and not the one for the pirouette. This is more fair to the rider as the pirouette has a co-efficient and may have been shown well.

I just checked the newest and most updated 2018 Prix St. Georges test sheet on the FEI's website, and the test still states that the pirouette is executed between H & X or M & X. The movement is in a standalone box of its own, not finishing until the counter canter starts at H or M. The counter canter is H-C or M-C with the flying change at C, and both are movements of their own, in boxes of their own.

How, if a horse mistakenly does a flying change before it gets to H or M after its pirouette, can you say that the mistake belongs to the counter canter? I understand the pirouette has the coefficient, but the test wording is very clear which movements belong to which box. I get that Mr. Fouarge wants to be fair, but let's be realistic: This sport is not fair. If you want to be fair, let's leave the flying change mistake as part of the pirouette but require all riders to train their own horses from

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scratch instead of buying made ones and then become Olympians, but on that I digress.

Just above that paragraph, he clearly states that if on the entrance to the pirouette the horse loses the canter for a stride there is a deduction, and if the horse has resistance before the pirouette there is a deduction, so why not give the rider the benefit of the doubt there as well and include that mistake in the previous movement? Using his logic that would only make sense. Realistically neither makes sense. If a horse does a flying change before it is supposed to, either on entrance or exit of a movement, that counts as a mistake *in* the movement as it is written exactly that way on the sheet.

How can there ever be clarity when people are changing the rules, yet not changing the test sheet? These things cannot be made by decree, or maybe I guess they can. If he wants to give the riders that benefit, which is very nice of him, we need to change the sheet, and everyone needs to agree. It would need to read that the counter canter starts a specific number of strides out of the pirouette, so if, say, in the box after the pirouette description it said, "Upon completion of the pirouette, return to the track at M, M-C Counter canter and C Flying change of leg," then this would be solved. The rider would have the benefit of the doubt, and all their coefficient points of the pirouette would remain intact.

Unfortunately, however, it seems no one at the FEI has read Mr. Fouarge's comment about being kind to the rider or taken it to heart enough to change the test, so which one is actually getting judged, the guideline or the test sheet?

Also of note in the guideline under mouth issues is:

Grinding the teeth is not considered a fault if the horse appears happy and willing and has saliva.

Yet the FEI's own rule book clearly states:

Putting out the tongue, keeping it above the bit or drawing it up altogether, as well as grinding the teeth or



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agitation of the tail, are mostly signs of nervousness, tension or resistance on the part of the Horse and must be taken into account by the Judges in their marks for every movement concerned, as well as in the collective mark.

So again I ask: Which is it? Is the grinding considered a fault or not? Mr. Fouarge says no, but the rule book says yes. Both documents are currently up to date on the FEI website. Which one do we follow, the guideline or the rule book? Who's steering this ship?

I don't mean to be hard on Mr. Fouarge. I've never had a conversation with him other than hello when he was in the judge's box, and there I always found him fair and correct. I appreciate the guideline—or at least the idea of it—but I just don't understand its usefulness with these mistakes and contradictions.

In looking at a few of these definitions and inconsistencies I also noticed that the U.S. Dressage Federation has irregularities in their definitions as they copy and paste these FEI mistakes directly into our own "USEF Rule Book," which they follow in their training system for our officials. I noted one of these about the reinback, with the USEF and the FEI wording being identical:

USEF:

DR106 The Rein Back

4. The steps are counted as each foreleg moves back. After completing the required number of steps backward, *the horse should show a square halt* or move forward in the required gait immediately. In tests where a rein back of one horse's length is required, it should be executed with three or four steps.

FEI:

ARTICLE 406 REINBACK

4. The steps are counted as each foreleg moves back. After completing the required number of steps backward, *the*

Horse should show a square halt or move forward in the required pace immediately. In tests where a Reinback of one (1) Horse's length is required, it should be executed with three (3) or four (4) steps.

How is it possible to halt squarely from a reinback without the last step of the reinback being half the size as the other steps, or upon completion of the reinback the horse taking either a half step forward or back to become square? And how do we count the "half step" that the horse needs to make? Unless the horse steps backward, evening up its stance with each step it takes, much

“How can there be a standard when the definitions are not clear as to what the movements are?”

like a young child navigating stairs where they can only manage one step at a time with one leg, squaring up their feet on each tier before venturing out onto the next one, it is impossible to halt square at the end of a reinback. This is why we always move promptly into another gait and/or do a *schaukel*, combining the initial reinback with additional forward steps and then again backward steps and then moving promptly into another gait.

That crab-like baby stepping wouldn't fit into the narrative that the reinback is a diagonal movement with even steps. There are no tests that I know of that have a reinback to halt transition, but regardless, they need to get their "stuff" together. How can we hold judges responsible for being accurate and fair when the rule books have irregularities in them, describing things that are impossible for horses to accom-

plish? We leave judges with no choice but to be defensive of their task.

We can't continue to have a system where we are perpetually told we do not understand because we are not educated and then have the educators lack cohesion, or rule by fear in order to create it, not to mention keep the public out of the discussion. The system is designed to fail if it continues; it only needs an uprising to shift the paradigm.

Often we have an article come out from some top rider, judge or official defending what they do, arguing a case against what they want or don't, but so often I am left at the end of the page thinking they made no point or used no facts. It was only opinion: I don't like it or I do.

I understand these people are very educated in their field, but in the end it is still only their subjective opinion based on their experience, and a lot of that experience is not even firsthand, but through information they have been told or inferred. Some of these columns I've seen complain about a proposal the FEI or riders group has put together with

nothing but a long winded "I don't like it," but no ideas to improve upon it.

An older, wiser friend of mine who runs horse shows used to say, "Don't come to me with problems; come to me with solutions." It would make far more sense, instead of the officials complaining that they are always being bombarded, to create a think tank amongst themselves to remedy the situation or at least find some cohesion between their educational and informational tools. If you don't like the fact that people outside of your community are telling you what to do, i.e. the trainers, riders, competitors, FEI, International Olympic Committee and so on, create your own committee and start cleaning things up. You could start with the rule book and guidelines.

When Wayne Channon writes about judging problems, the judges jump up and complain that he doesn't know,

isn't educated, doesn't sit in the box, has terrible ideas, is a lunatic and more, instead of being self-reflective. Bash him all you want, but at least he's coming up with facts, stats and ideas for discussion.

A few years ago I read a column by a famous U.S. rider talking about why dressage should continue to be an Olympic sport. It really just argued that because the horses have been involved for so long, it's art, and it's pretty, it should get to stay. There were no facts to back anything up; there was no standpoint other than beauty and historical inclusion, and it did nothing to address the complaint from the IOC that it is outdated, hard to follow and elitist, which is against what the IOC stands for—and on top of it all the judging is controversial.

But why would the International OLYMPIC Committee care about art? They care about fair and just international SPORT. They are not the IAC, the International Art Committee. It is a competition, which means however close it may be, clear winners and losers must be crowned.

Many things that are beautiful and historic come and go, making way for the new and inspired. As a horse community, we need to get on that bandwagon or get left behind. We will never achieve harmony on the outside if we don't find it within. When we have documents like the rule book that we don't follow, or guidelines with holes in logic, judges or officials being bullies or playing favorites, and the people speaking out being chastised, there is no way we can achieve the unity and cohesion that would allow the outside world to follow the sport. 🌐

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