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Between with JEREMY STEINBERG Rounds

Let's Make A Plan

Our columnist suggests a path toward improving the sport's scoring structure.

I've been following the debate about how to change, or from what I've heard "fix," the judging system to make it more transparent. Fix is a strong word, since it suggests the system is broken. Many small changes have been suggested, but none are significant enough to impact the basic premise that our sport is biased, and its results and placings can be unclear to novice and expert alike.

The system needs an overhaul in order to survive on a stage with other Olympic sports, but to call it broken is unfair. We need to more closely follow—or majorly overhaul—the rulebook as our first order of business, to clearly state the expected criteria.

Jumping is simple to judge and score, much like other Olympic events. Set up a fence, a clock and a group of athletes, and see who can go the fastest with the fewest faults. There is far more to the training and schooling of Olympic jumping horses than that, and politics plays a role in that community as well as ours, but the results are easy to follow. You can never say, "I thought so and so should have won even though he had more faults or was slower."

Most judged Olympic sports have

gone through similar processes in trying to revamp their judging systems to stay current and be easy to follow. None of them are truly simple for a layman to understand in terms of their technicalities, but the judges in these disciplines would never say, "It's too complicated for you to understand." Those days are over, or at least they need to be.

Judges should have the attitude of educate don't alienate. I've heard it said often by judges and trainers alike that they know because they are experts, and they should just be believed without any explanation. How many times have you watched a gymnastics, diving or ice skating program and heard the commentator say something about the way a gymnast tucked or pointed, a diver spun or an ice skater landed, and you were left scratching your head, wondering: How did they see that? They are trained to look for exactly those faults and flaws, as are our judges. As a layman, you might not always see the intricacies of the endeavor. The commentator is explaining each step along the way, as the technicalities might be hard to see, but they are easier to comprehend.

Each discipline has a bit of a

different system. Gymnastics has three different panels of judges all watching for different things. In ice skating you have basically two panels at work, and in various skiing events you have one to two panels. In dressage, you have one panel at small events and two panels, which include the supervisory panel, in the larger events. In most of these disciplines you have panels judging different aspects of the performance, and the scores get combined and averaged or have multipliers for degrees of difficulty. Most but not all disciplines drop a high/low score.

Each sport has had to maneuver its individual system in and around all the things we struggle with in the dressage world. All disciplines at some point go through major judging system changes, for various reasons. Sometimes the sport evolves in a direction that needs new standards to take into account the changes. When degree of difficulty is involved, in disciplines that have such multipliers, the evolving technology of equipment sometimes requires the multipliers to change. For instance ice skates and skis now allow athletes to perform things they were unable to do 20 years ago. The same goes for gymnastics: The vault used in women's vaulting competitions changed a few years ago, allowing more intricate and complicated hurdles as well as safer ones.

Change and evolution should be embraced, not feared. Implementation of a new judging system will require a huge amount of work on many ends of the spectrum, from performer to assessor, federation to competition management. You cannot make a small change to the system without a larger ripple being felt. I've stated this previously in regards to the Fédération Equestre Internationale's removal of collective marks last year. Those ripples are just starting to be felt, and we will see what shakes out on that end.

Timelines And Trials

It's been an interesting discussion, to say the least, when it comes to the FEI Judges Supervisory Panel, the high/low score drop, the seven-judge panel,

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LONGINES

Jeremy Steinberg envisions a system in which dressage judging separates marks for technical and artistic, thus better explaining why one horse prevailed over the others. KIMBERLY LOUSHIN PHOTO

the codex of deductions and degree of difficulty freestyle scoring that has taken place, been talked about or tried on occasion. There have been many variations on these interesting ideas, with supporters and critics in equal masses.

I do believe certain ideas and proposals will lead us in far better directions than others, and I am not alone in my convictions. I read an editorial by Carl Hester last year in *Horse & Hound* titled, "The Future of Dressage, A Clockwork Mouse Type of Test?" and as always, I appreciate someone in his position speaking out. He said the FEI was unrealistic in its timeline for implementing a new structure that includes the idea of a codex of deductions for scoring, which he wasn't closed to, but he believed more conversation was needed.

I agreed and disagreed with Carl at the same time. The timeline set by the FEI was ridiculous considering no one had even really come to the table

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on an agreement in terms of strategy of change. There was and is no codex, and there was and is no plan, so to put a timeline on the implementation of something that doesn't exist seems foolish. A timeline for creating a proposal or having various proposals in place to be voted on would be a far smarter solution.

Why doesn't the FEI just say we need to make a change? You have two years to come back to us with your

proposals. Put the ideas out there, and let the teams of experts in all different camps go to work. Everyone could then submit said proposals by the end of that two-year window, with their statistics and math, information and proof, and then a vote would take place to decide on the best system or systems. If that was the case, I'd rally everyone to stop talking and start thinking, get writing, and come up with something if you don't

like what's being tossed about. Instead of complaining that you don't like someone else's ideas, come up with your own. As the old saying goes, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

After this vote on a group of trial systems, another timeline is put into play that gives a certain amount of time for the new system to be implemented on a trial basis. This would avoid putting the implementation timeline out with no agreed upon system, which is what the FEI has done. For an organization that is supposed to be pro equine, why does the FEI so foolishly put the cart before the horse? Why are we arguing over ideas when no one has come up with an actual system to try, and why are we fighting about this as-yet undefined system, which hasn't been proven to work or to fail without all the numbers and stats on the table and in trial? It's like saying "no" before the question is asked.

I don't necessarily agree with Carl that the idea of a deduction-based system is the wrong way to go; in fact I support it. I believe it could be the best future of the sport. If it were up to me, I'd create a beta system of what it would look like and put it into play, running parallel to the current system to see over a year or two where our results stood, how it would be accepted, and then how it would be implemented. It would be like a two-year clinical trial. Even if a new system came into play, if it's not as great as we all hope, it is once again changeable. That is the beauty of a democracy and something in which the FEI could really use a lesson.

The Perfect 10: Technical Scores

If it was up to me, the system would look something like this, and it would separate the technical from the artistic. We'd have a definite codex or deduction system of faults that follow the FEI Rulebook as well as the judges' handbook/guidelines for judging. I've written about this before, but if the judges followed the rulebook more closely based on the definitions of movements and principles, we wouldn't need such a drastic change in the system.

With the codex of deductions, you'd start with a 10, with the assumption that all horses are capable of attaining a 10 in regard to the definition of the movement. If you read the rulebook definition of any and all the movements there is no mention of the super mover being superior over the average mover and no mention of bonus points for the super mover being able to lift his legs higher in a piaffe, for example. There is only a note as to how high the legs should be picked up and how to measure what is correct, i.e. the hind pasterns for hind legs in a piaffe. There is no minimum or maximum allowance or window, deduction or bonus, only a statement about how high, so in theory any horse that exactly performs what the rulebook states in regard to how high a piaffe should be would then be doing that one particular aspect of the movement perfectly. But just remember, that is only one very small aspect of a complex movement and only one example. We'd also have to take our 10 and make it a "perfect" instead of an "excellent."

Why not agree that it is possible to do a movement perfectly? Set an absolute ideal of perfection and aim for it. That is at least what the current rulebook's definition of movements is principally founded on, perfection. So we define every movement's possible faults and flaws and create our codex. We also include basic and overall deductive scores for every movement having to do with geometry and all things definable and tangible, like accuracy, misbehavior, major mouth or tongue issues, and so on, where it is easy and clear, even for the layman to see and interpret. We'd have to get very specific in each movement in this codex, but it is doable.

When that is done, we also go back and put the collective marks *back* into the tests, as these will be much needed to get out of our, as Carl called it, Clockwork Mouse Type of Test and keep on course with one of artistry on top of accuracy, precision and possible perfection. At this point our collective marks will take on a new meaning.

So if we look at all movements as possible for each and every horse, without fail, to perform for a 10, by looking at execution of movement technically, not at the abstract or indefinable, immeasurable qualities of impulsion, harmony, beauty, quality of gait and so on, we are creating a completely level playing field. Of course, many of these movements inherently require the intangible qualities listed above in order to be performed for that particular 10. This would be described in the codex deductions, as it is already described individually by movement in the rulebook, thus bringing the two documents into agreement.

Incorporating The Intangibles: Artistic Scores

With that perfect 10 being out there and no note yet on artistry or quality of gait, we come back to the collective marks, which would now have far more reaching impact on the score "artistically." We'd have the usual suspects of Paces, Impulsion, Submission and Rider's Position, but we'd include a few more and parse out the ones we already



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have. We'd now give the collective marks a multiplier, or what we've always called a coefficient, based on what we would all have to agree would be the importance of each. This could be variable in regards to amateur classes, big championships, etc.

As an example, the gait score could become a huge factor or a minor player based on the multiplier we use. Since we agreed all horses could achieve a 10 on a trot half-pass in regard to performing it based on the rulebook's description, we now have a chance to make the gait impact the outcome. Each of the three gaits should have their own score and multiplier, so we could really make note of their correct or incorrect nature and separate gait specific variants or abnormalities, much as the young horse divisions do, and make sure development of the gait through the training remains emphasized.

The rulebook does not call for

higher scores for bonus leg movement; it only says what is required. Take a trot half-pass for example; it says "crossing" of the horse's legs. It doesn't give a specific measurement as to how much, so the score of the movement would not give bonus points to the bigger moving of two horses who can cross his legs a greater distance. But the gait score, as well as the addition of the expanded coefficients, would give us the chance to make note and give the better moving, more supple creature the advantage between two who can be technically comparable.

A horse with no impulsion in a half-pass would not be capable of receiving a 10, as that is one of the primary requirements of the movement, so the deduction of not enough impulsion would have been taken into account in the scoring of the movement.

With these expanded coefficients, we'd include suppleness and others, and a term I'd love to see included is

the word calm, which would for me be included in a collective like Overall Harmony or Overall Impression. We'd move the term harmony into this category, along with calm and relaxed, and we'd take it out of submission. Submission has less to do with harmony as it does obedience and acceptance, and harmony has far more to do with the overall impression and should be marked separately—and hopefully with a fairly high multiplier since the foundation of the art and sport is a harmonious relationship within a powerful, yet relaxed and calm performance.

These collectives allow bias to correctly come into play, yet in a more fair and structured environment. By separating the technical from the artistic, we are still allowing discussion and opinion on quality of horse flesh and rider. We'd have a test sheet where the audience, educated about the sport or not, could see how a certain horse did, in fact, get the scores comparable to that of another, better moving horse, or more relaxed horse, or more supple horse or so on, but when it came to the artistic impression, the one horse-rider combination was far better.

What makes a computer-generated violin concerto better or worse than that of its virtuoso's counterpart performance? Nothing when it comes to the technical, but everything when it comes to the artistic. The two could perform the exact same piece, technically identical, playing the same notes within the exact same rhythm and tempo, yet your ear will be drawn to that of the player's version because of the emotional connection the violinist would have with the music.

We aren't pitting one computer against another; we are judging the technical accuracy of performance and training as one piece and the artistry, horseflesh and ethereal quality of the rest with a combined score that emphasizes each according to what we as a community decide. It is possible to separate yet also easy to combine.

Our sport would be no different; we'd just make note of the two different aspects, thus giving the outside observer the ability to see

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what was correct and what wasn't. It also gives the expert's experience and eye a weighted component.

I'm not saying my system would be the best or even easy to implement. It would take a lot of retraining and re-schooling of all involved, but other sports and organizations have done the same—and done it more than once in their own evolutions.

I'm all for the codex of deductions and working within a system that takes the rulebook for what it is, a rulebook that gets followed and cherished as the bible of the sport and keeps us on track with the art.

“One could say ‘technically’ on my average horse, I was a contender.”

Setting a codex and bringing in the possibility of perfection in the score of a 10 to every animal, yet also having a separate artistic counterpart, levels the playing field on training, and still allows the better moving, more elastic horse with impulsion to win. It would be a situation where one could say “technically” on my average horse, I was a contender. I have trained and worked in a way that has my technical ability up to par with my peers even though my horse is a more average animal than its fancier counterpart.

It would be a system where one could clearly see the winner based on the technical and artistic scores, understanding their favorite lost out due to technique or didn't win based

on artistic measures. We'd still have breeders breeding extravagant movers and trainers training average horses. We'd still have our super heroes on super athletes and our underdogs always scrapping, but best of all we'd have an audience, both in the expert and the untrained, who could see and understand the difference. 🎧

JEREMY STEINBERG

Grand Prix trainer and competitor Jeremy Steinberg was the U.S. Equestrian Federation national dressage youth coach from 2010 to 2014. The 1996 FEI North American Young Riders Championships individual dressage gold medalist, he is a former U.S. Dressage Federation Junior/Young Rider Clinic Series clinician. He credits much of his dressage education to the late Dietrich von Hopffgarten, his longtime friend and mentor. Today Steinberg runs a boutique-type training business in Del Mar, California, and travels the country giving clinics. Learn more at steinbergdressage.com.



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