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## *In this series:*

Part 1 (March issue):  
A proposal to reform  
dressage judging.

Part 2 (April issue): How  
judging relates to horse  
training.

Part 3 (May issue):  
Incorrect responses -  
Marks: 0 to 3.

Part 4 (June issue):  
Obedience -  
Marks: 4 to 5.

Part 5 (July issue):  
Rhythm -  
Mark: 6

Part 6 (August issue):  
Straightness, Part 1 -  
Mark: 7

Part 7 (September issue)  
Straightness, Part 2 -  
Mark: 7

Part 8: (October issue)  
Contact and frame -  
Mark: 8

Part 9: (November issue)  
Engagement -  
Mark: 9

Part 10: (December issue)  
Riding the test



# Boost Your Dressage Scores

with learning theory

By Manuela McLean  
Director, Equitation Science International

*Dressage judges play an important role in the education of both riders and their horses. The marks and comments they provide can inform rider and coach of the level of training achieved, and any areas that need more work. But, can you turn them into clear training strategies and boost your dressage scores?*

*In this series, Dr Andrew and Manuela McLean, founders of the Australian Equine Behaviour Centre (AEBC) and Directors of Equitation Science International, explain dressage judging against the backdrop of learning theory and the equitation science training scale.*

*We began the series with Dr Andrew McLean's revolutionary proposal to align the judging system to how the horse learns. Last month, Manuela McLean talked about engagement and achieving the highest marks in the judging scale.*

*This month, she explains the riding the test with accuracy and precision, breaking down the judging criteria into clear training strategies, and providing simple exercises to help improve your training and your next competition performance.*

## Part 10 - Riding the test

.....  
Want to boost your scores? Read on...

During this series, I have covered the dressage judging scale from a mark of 0 to 9 explaining how the marks are awarded, and how to train and achieve the qualities the judges are looking for.

Last month, I explained the quality known as Engagement - which is not just about a rhythmical and straight horse that is 'on the aids' and in the correct frame, but about one that is 'engaging' his core musculature and developing his capacity to carry the rider in effortless balance.

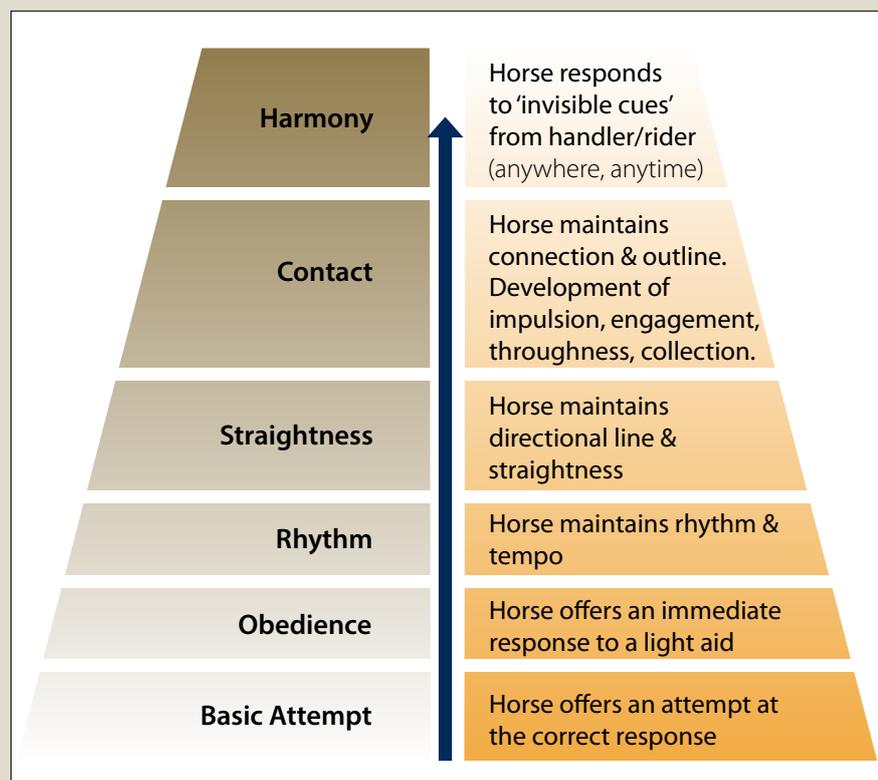
Now is the time to put all of your training into practice to ride a dressage test as well as you can. Your aim at home should be to work at a higher level than that at which you are competing, so the test is easy for you and your horse. You need to use all of the aids and postures described in the previous articles to create the effortless flow of movements and gait changes expected in a winning dressage test.

If you have competed previously, study the marks and comments received to see where you can improve; the previous articles will help you identify your training issues.

Get to know your horse's weak links; for example, if he has a tendency to fall in on one rein, improve the obedience and lightness of the indirect turns on that rein. If he has a tendency to go on the forehand during transitions, then practice the preparation.



## Be consistent in all your training



Every time you interact with your horse, he is learning something. It is important the only variable that changes in the competition is the environment.

When you ride in a new location, like an event, your horse may lose confidence and pay more attention to the environment than to your aids.

Your job is to stay consistent, apply the same aids and use the shaping scale to determine what you should be working on at the time.

Do not expect your horse to be better at a competition than at home, especially if he is prone to tension. You may have to go back one or two steps in the scale; sometimes all the way to basic attempt!

This is normal, but if you are consistent, you apply your pressures, releases and rewards correctly, and use the shaping scale well, your horse's training will benefit and consolidate through his first outings.

# Riding the test

## It starts at home

It all starts before you begin dolling up your horse and preparing to go to the competition. Make sure you know your test off by heart and have practiced it in the week or so prior to the competition. Horses are prone to anticipate movements, but it is the rider's job to teach them to wait for the aid and to prepare adequately for the movement to follow. You should practice this at home.

## First outings

Taking a young horse to a competition can be a bit traumatic and it is a good idea to take him out without competing several times, so he can habituate to the environment of the competition scene.

Your groundwork tools will help you prepare and when you arrive at the competition. Make sure he 'parks' well (stands still until asked to move) at home, for example while being plaited and saddled, and arrive with plenty of time if your horse is prone to being tense, in which case, 10-15 minutes of ground work around your float will make him calmer. If he is not 'parking', you are more likely to have issues with tension in the warm-up area.

In these situations, it is best to lead him around the area, not too close to anything scary, so that gradual habituation to the environment can occur. Once he has seen things from afar, then you can take him closer to investigate. Practice parking everywhere.

## Dealing with spooks and startles

When a horse startles or stops suddenly when he sees something new, he is probably genuinely scared, his heart rate will be quite high in association with the adrenalin rush that occurs at this time. A recent study showed there is a significant lowering of the heart rate around 13 seconds after the startle. It pays to wait that amount of time, keeping your horse facing the object and not allowing him to back or turn away, before asking him to approach. There is no point asking the horse anything while he is still startled because the adrenalin may be associated with a higher pain threshold and he will not feel the aids as well during this time.

When he begins to look away or become interested, gradually approach, stopping before he wants to stop, waiting and approaching again. This will help him to relax and investigate the scary object. Once he has been near it once then it shouldn't be necessary to stop and look at it again, ride him past it, concentrating on your speed and line. Keep his neck as straight as possible focusing first on the shoulders using the reins and then the hind legs using your leg aids.

Taking a young horse to a competition can be a bit traumatic and it is a good idea to take him out without competing several times, so he can habituate to the environment of the competition scene.

## Warming up

Allow plenty of time to warm up, especially if you suspect that your horse may be tense. I generally allow 45-50 minutes. This gives time for familiarisation and also time to present to the gear check, as well as preparing for your test. If you feel your horse has done enough before your scheduled time, 'park' or walk on a long rein. Remember, he needs to obediently go forward after the rest and you will need to pick up the rein contact to bring him to attention before asking him to go forward.

If at all possible, it is best to walk on as long a rein as possible in both directions around the warm-up area, concentrating again on speed and line.

If he is tense, practicing halt transitions is not always the best thing to do. A good way to get his focus is to keep him moving and practice turns one way then another. Riding your test in a small area in the walk helps you to remain focused, stops you fiddling and keeps your horse occupied during the warm-up time.

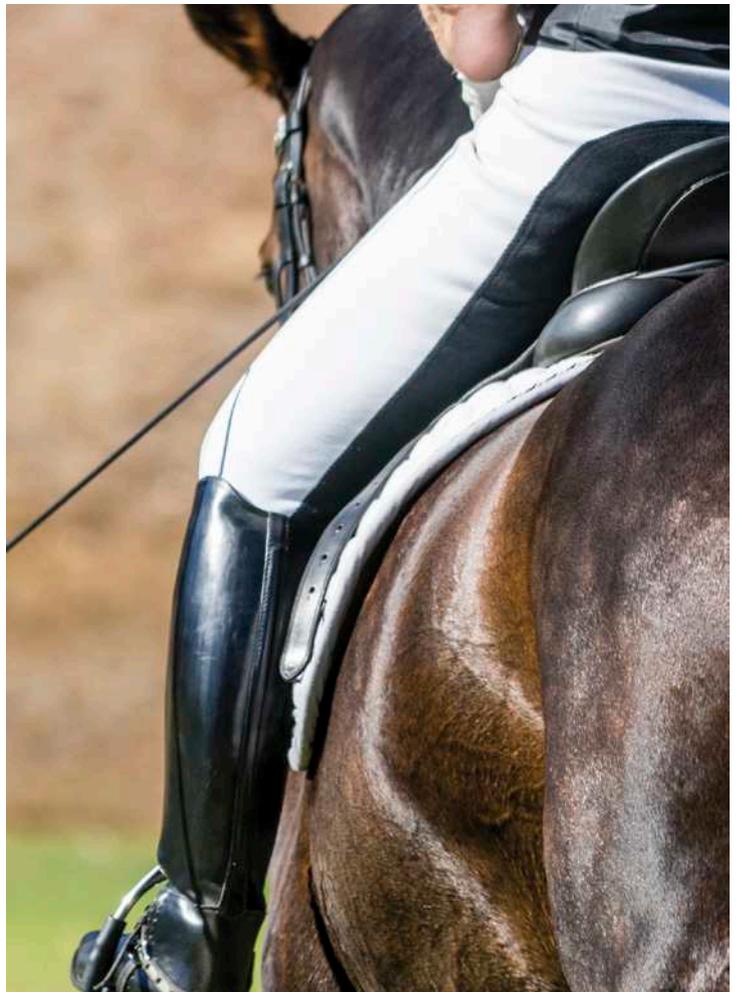
## Rhythm first

Always work on rhythm first, establishing it with a straight neck, so that you can see both cheek pieces.

- Is the rhythm regular and even?
- Can you feel the forelegs and the hind legs, and does he feel relaxed in the back?

Counting the beat of the outside foreleg helps you to breathe and keep the beat.

You may need some transitions between the gaits to establish consistency, especially if your horse is strong. Making frequent transitions from walk to trot and back to walk is a good way to establish a rhythm; making sure there is no change in frame during the gait changes. This will produce a little trot, which can then be made more forward with a lengthening aid. You may have to come back to the little trot if he starts to get strong. Repeating this exercise will establish your working trot.



All photos by Kerri Afford Photography.

## Check self-carriage

Check the self-carriage of rhythm by giving forward with the reins to test if he is running, and relax your legs to see if he is stalling. (Remember, he should not change in rhythm when you retake the contact of either the reins or legs.)

Once rhythm is established, you can start to work on making him more supple with turns (direct and indirect) and bending exercises, such as spiraling circles using direct turns and long indirect turns.

Flexion should occur as a result of the turns in the beginning and, once established as part of the turn, it is possible to flex without turning. The difference in the aid between a flexion without turning is the rider's body position does not turn, the horse is flexed with a closing elbow and fingers on the rein, and should maintain rhythm and line.

Check the self-carriage of straightness and flexion by giving on one rein for 2-4 steps.

Practicing the test in the trot will keep the rider occupied during the warm-up. Riders tend to want to fix problems during the warm-up time, but riding the test keeps a flow of movements. Some horses prefer the canter than the trot and are more relaxed in it, if this is the case, then use the canter instead of the trot. Remember, inter-gait and intra-gait transitions are a good way to prepare for your test.

## Keep things consistent

Try to use the same exercises you use at home to warm-up; there will be some that suit your horse more than others. It is important the only variable that changes in the competition is the environment. Do not expect your horse to be better than at home, especially if he is prone to tension. With horses that tend to be inactive, however, the environment can improve their activity; they often become more animated in a strange environment.

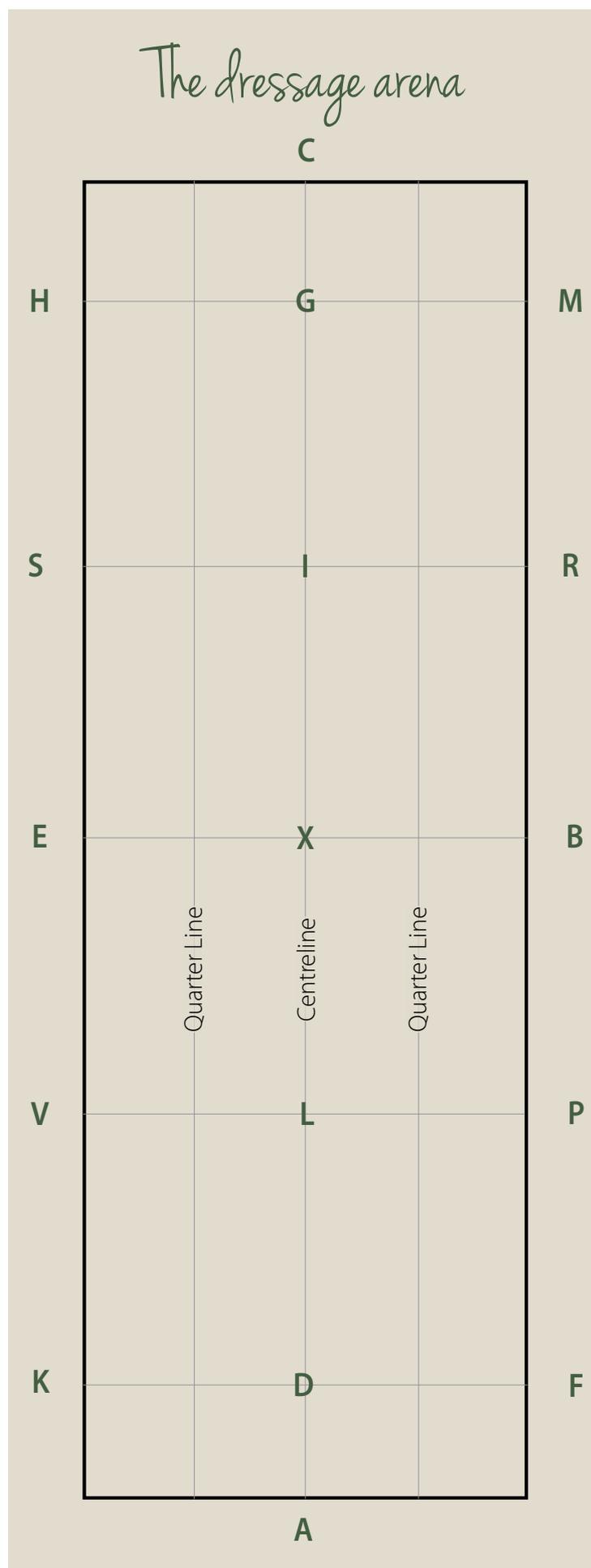
## Presenting to the judge

As soon as the rider before you has performed the last halt and salute, you need to be prepared to go around the arena, beginning as he leaves at A.

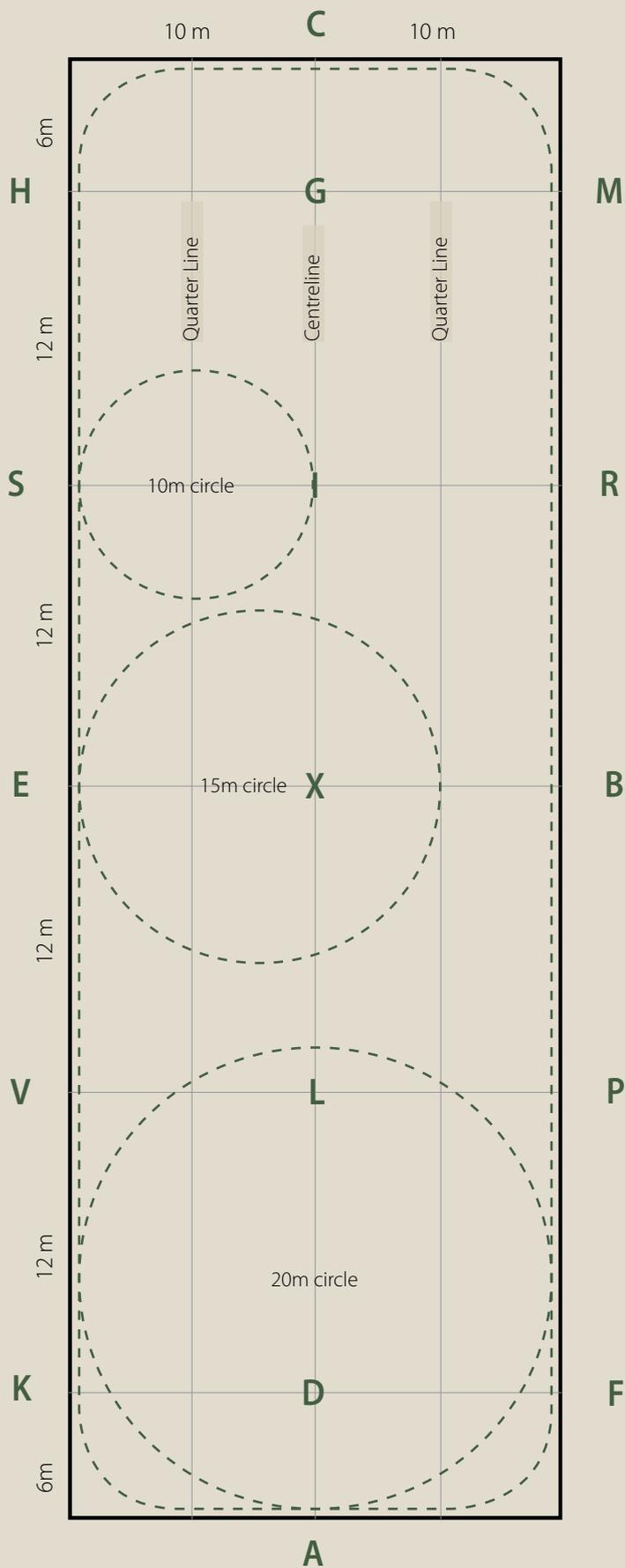
There is always one direction that feels better than the other, so begin in that direction. Horses tend to be more suspicious when seeing things out of their right eye and more inquisitive when seeing things from their left eye (studies have found that when they are free to choose, they tend to approach more on the left rein). So, if you have a horse that is more prone to shying, begin on the left rein, so that he sees the arena from his left eye. Just remember there are always exceptions to the rule!

You will have time to ride around the arena both ways while the judge gives the previous rider the collective marks. It is important that your horse sees the arena edge with both eyes, so change direction before entering.

It is best to begin in trot, riding confidently and establishing a rhythm, and then either continuing at the same speed, riding transitions within the gait or up and down a gait, or ride wiggly lines.



# The dressage arena



Ride a halt transition to check your horse's obedience to the stop and go aids, do these when approaching the judge.

If you have never competed before, you should aim to go as close to the arena fence as possible. Begin at A and ride one lap, then turn around and go back up to the judge. When you present to the judge and give your and your horse's name, it is best to be halted near the judge's car or box. It is not always necessary to do this in all competitions, but do acknowledge the judge and smile!

Continue in the same direction down the long side back to A and you are now ready to enter the arena.

## Riding the test

The entry up the centerline is the judges' first impression, although they may have secretly been checking you out while riding around the arena! Horses do a better centerline if you enter on your 'stiffer' rein, as they are straighter in the body. So, circle a 20m circle around A and wait for the judges' bell, horn or arm signal to enter; you still have a minute to get organised.

The letter A should be positioned away from the entrance, so there is plenty of room to ride straight 5-10 metres before the entrance to the arena. If you are on the left rein, enter leaving the letter A on your right to make a nice smooth entry.

## The entry

Look at the letter C and position your horse's ears on it. Make sure you can see both cheek pieces of the bridle, that your rein contact is even, knees are pointing forward like headlights, your lower leg is in contact with his belly and you are evenly plugged in on both seat bones.

Ride positively forward up the centerline, as there is less chance of wobbling if the horse is forward. Prepare for your transition by engaging your core 5-10 metres before the marker, keep the rhythm and contact during that time, and then stop your seat movement and close your fingers on the rein to halt. Trot to halt transitions should occur in four steps and, in the lower grades, 2-3 walk steps are permitted.

## The halt

There is always a moment of immobility of 1-2 seconds at the halt and after the salute, so practice this at home.

When saluting look at the judge, hold the reins in one hand and drop the other, give a definite nod and smile as you look up and retake the contact. Love that judge! Proceed forward, (leg aid on for two steps then release, and lengthening the stride with a nudge at step three or four if need be).

Ride straight towards C, preparing for your turn with a bit of flexion 10 metres or so before C and begin the turn at the letter G (for the lower levels and later if you are riding at a higher level).

At preliminary level, you are expected to ride all corners/turns as a quarter of a 10m circle; at novice and elementary it as a quarter of an 8m circle, and this decreases to a quarter of a 6m circle in the higher levels.

From novice level upwards, you are expected to ride a straight line on the short side between the two corners. Riding into your corners is the best way to prepare for the next movement or long side, it prevents your horse from swinging his quarters in.

## Turns and corners

To ride an accurate turn or corner, an indirect turn towards the wall as you approach the turn helps to achieve the beginning of bend and flexion.

In the middle of the corner, aim to keep the inside hind leg out towards the wall by giving a nudge with your inside leg to make the stride longer (most horses tend to shorten their stride).

The last part of the turn involves a direct turn aid to bring the shoulders around the turn. Maintain a connection with your inside leg, so that when you turn the shoulders, he does not turn his hindquarters as well.

By riding your corners this way, you will achieve bend, and will then be able to proceed down the long side in a straight line because the horse's shoulders will be slightly in and the hindquarters will be closer to the wall. Remember to always look towards the next line you will be riding.

The entry up the centerline is the judges' first impression. Horses generally do a better centerline if you enter on your 'stiffer' rein, as they are straighter in the body.

## Circles

Riders need to ride accurate circles to achieve good marks, so get to know the 'touch points', where you should cross the centerline if doing 15 or 20m circles, or where you cross the quarter line and, if doing a 10m circle, make sure you do not go over or under the centerline. Ride your circles looking ahead at least 10 meters.

Using the touch points, focusing your eyes on them to ride your circle will help you be accurate.

Aim for flexion to the inside to achieve the beginning of bend, begin the circle with a slight indirect turn, your inside thigh will then be in contact with the horse's side, he bends his ribs around your thigh. When he feels like he is falling in with the shoulders, reapply the indirect turn and thigh.



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As a general rule horses stall as they leave the wall and as they approach the wall, so plan to ride your horse forward to prevent the egg-shaped circle from occurring. Providing his neck is straight and he is flexing, you may need to ride him more forward or longer in the stride with your outside leg if falling out or your inside leg if falling in.

Losses of rhythm will be felt through your seat. If you feel like pushing with your seat or you feel that your horse causes your seat to lose the size of the movement, you have lost the length of stride. If your horse is running and you feel out of balance, then you will need to slow the tempo or shorten the stride.

## Riding across the diagonal

Before riding across the diagonal, make sure you ride into the corner or the change of rein across the diagonal will come up too quickly and you will overshoot the diagonal line.

Begin the turn across the diagonal as a direct turn of the inside foreleg followed by an indirect turn of the outside foreleg; this is basically both reins towards the direction aiming for a meter before the marker at the other end of the diagonal. Ride absolutely straight with the horse's ears on the line before attempting to lengthen, if it is required.

A crooked horse before a lengthening will become uneven or irregular during the lengthening. At the lower levels, shorten the stride before you reach the marker, so you can regain the correct balance to ride the corner.

Riding towards a point on the track that is a metre before the end marker will give you plenty of room for the corner and will allow time to apply an indirect turn towards the wall to establish the new bend for the corner. Remember to ride into it!

## Loops and serpentine

The judge is looking for flowing changes of flexion and bend in these movements, whilst the rhythm is maintained.

If riding a loop off the wall, turn as if going across the diagonal then change the flexion before the change of direction; you may need an indirect turn. Ride straight for about 5 metres before turning back towards the wall, maintaining the same flexion and using a direct turn. Aim towards a point a meter before the marker to be able to ride into the next corner. Change the flexion back again as you approach the marker.

Riding a three-loop serpentine is nearly always a movement that has a coefficient of two. You can earn a lot more marks if you ride it well.

Ride the first half circle as you would normally and, just before the centerline, change the flexion, but maintain the same line. Upon crossing the centerline, begin the change of direction and change your diagonal (if in rising trot). Remember to ride forward towards the wall and complete the next half circle before changing the flexion again. Learn your touch points to ride serpentine accurately.

## Downward transitions

Horses are prone to anticipating downward transitions; they then become abrupt and lose the flow (what judges refer to as not being forward in the transition). They may fall on the forehand, dropping the back and lengthening the neck, or become hollow in the back and raise the neck.

It is important to practice the transitions at home in a way where you engage your core, maintain the same rhythm with your seat action and leg, and maintain the line, frame and flexion with the reins. Once the body of the horse stays the same, then apply the aid for the transition, which for a downward transition involves ceasing the movement of the gait with your seat and applying the rein aid.

When riding the test, repeat the same sequence remembering to count down 3,2,1 so the transition occurs as his nose touches the letter and the new gait occurs at the letter.

If your horse has a tendency to stall or shorten in the next gait, apply the longer aid after the first two steps of the new gait. If he quickens or lengthens the frame in the new gait, then make sure you maintain the same frame in the first two steps of the new gait before relaxing the aid and returning to a light contact.

## Upwards transitions

Horses can also anticipate upward transitions; for example, they often jog before trotting or hop before cantering. The same principle applies: engaging the core means nothing except that something is going to happen, they just don't know what that is until you change your posture, seat or leg.

Engage your core before the transition, while maintaining the same seat action and speed, as well as line, lengthening or slowing, as necessary. Apply the aid to go up the next gait 1-2 metres before the marker, lighten your seat by closing the back of the thighs and closing the leg (calves) to produce the new gait (an inward and upward lift).

Horses are prone to anticipate movements, but it is the rider's job to teach them to wait for the aid and to prepare adequately for the movement to follow. You should practice this at home.

The gait change should then be achieved at the marker. It is all about the timing and preparation for the transitions. You can apply the longer aid after the first stride of the new gait to create a more forward transition.

## The long rein walk

This is one of the most costly movements of the test as it always involves a coefficient of two. The judge is looking for a lengthening and lowering of the frame of horses neck, as well as a lengthening of the stride. The movement is not complete until the rider has retaken the contact and the horse has not changed the quality or rhythm of the walk.

To ride this movement well, you need to turn onto the diagonal line and achieve straightness before letting the reins go longer.

Aim for the horse's poll and ears to be on the line of the diagonal and then gradually let the reins slip through your fingers, allowing the horse to stretch his neck.

Once the neck is stretched and the poll is becoming level with the wither, apply the lengthening aid to get him to reach forward and downward with his nose, while maintaining a light contact.

The nose should be slightly in front of the vertical and the base of the nose level with the base of the chest. The walk needs to be active, a tempo of 55 beats per minute and long in the stride with an over track of 10-15cm. With these qualities in place, it is possible to achieve a mark of 9 or 10.

Some horses do not lengthen and lower the frame sufficiently. In this case, widening the reins towards the thighs and releasing the contact when he lowers his poll can train this. In the beginning, it may take up to three seconds to achieve this lowering but, with repetitions, the lowering will be achieved more quickly. Gradually, a rider will not need to widen the hands to achieve the lengthening of the frame, but can do so by letting the reins slip through the fingers a little at a time.

When retaking the contact, do so gradually, retaking the new inside rein for flexion first, and then the outside rein, repeating this sequence until the rein length is correct.

It is important to maintain the length of stride at this stage before shortening for the next upward transition.

Horses that jog when retaking the contact have generally shortened their stride in the process; they have changed the action and length of the rider's seat. Take care to shorten the reins gradually, feeling for the first element of stride shortening and applying the lengthening aid at this time before shortening the reins further.

Horses that run or quicken need to be slowed in the tempo, closing the knees and thighs, as well as using the reins, will help to achieve the slowing of the tempo when retaking the contact.

## Letting the horse take the rein forward and down to stretch

This movement is generally performed in trot on a 20m circle. The same principle applies as the long rein walk, except starting from a working trot of about 75 beats per minute.

Gradually lengthen the rein, allowing the outside rein to lengthen before the inside rein, aiming to maintain the same rhythm, tempo and stride length.

Train your horse to bend on this long rein by spiralling in on the circle using a widening inside rein until he bends and stretches the outside part of his neck, shoulders and back. He will lower the frame as he does so and feel as though he bends his body his inside hind leg should step into the hoof print of the inside foreleg.

Stretching the horse's frame is a gradual process, it can take three seconds to achieve the beginning or correct stretch. It is the same as us stretching, we do it slowly.

## Testing for self-carriage or giving and retaking the contact

Judges are looking for a horse to remain in the same outline, rhythm and line during the moment of giving with the reins, as well as the moment of retaking the contact.

You have, by now, been practicing this often in your preparation and in your training. Remember to clearly open your elbows to position your hands closer to your horse's mouth, making a clear loop in the reins. When retaking the contact, simply bend your elbows back to their original position; this also brings your hands back into position. Your fingers should remain closed around the rein during this time and your upright, plugged in position should also not change. When practicing, take care that during this process, there is no change in tempo or stride length; apply the appropriate aids if there is.

If the reins do not lengthen, the horse should not lengthen the frame in the 2-3 strides of giving with the reins; similarly if the rider's hands go back to the original position, the frame of the horse should not change or the rhythm. A change in frame is your horse telling you and the judge there is a problem in self-carriage - he is not comfortable in the frame - and that your reins are either too long or too short, or that he may be on the forehand or hollow and above the bit.

Salute and finish your test with a smile but, most importantly, reward him with a scratch or by stroking his neck. It may not be the best test that you wished for, but he is not a robot and can only do as best as we ride or have trained him.

## Riding a lengthening of stride

Lengthening of the stride is asked for in the trot and canter on the long sides, across diagonals and on circles. Marks are often given not only for the lengthening itself, but also for the transitions into the lengthening and back to the shorter strides.

Make sure you have positioned your horse correctly on each line before the lengthening. Maintain a light contact and the same frame when beginning the lengthening for 1-2 strides; once he has begun to lengthen, allow the reins to follow the slight lengthening of the neck.

Before shortening the stride, retake a light contact, but maintain the length of stride and then shorten the stride. Riding your transitions in this way will keep your horse uphill, through and engaged through the transitions, but will also produce a better lengthening and shortening. Remember to change your seat length when using your core and aids to lengthen and shorten the stride.

## Leg yielding

Leg yielding can be asked from the centerline to the outside track or from the outside track to the centerline. When a horse leg yields, his body should be parallel to the wall with a slight flexion away from the direction of travel; all four legs should appear to cross evenly.

Preparation is important, train your horse to flex and not yield, then position your leg back and not yield, but maintain rhythm and line. Once he has accepted this position, ask him to yield using a leg aid and your posture to yield; aiming to arrive one metre before the marker. If going straight, undo the flexion and leg position but, if going onto a circle, simply put the leg that is back forward and continue the circle.

## Last impressions count

The dressage test is not finished until the final halt and salute. Ride that last centerline accurately; preparing the corner, turn or half circle before the centerline and lining up the letter C, so that you do not overshoot it or cut the corner.



Photo courtesy of Anjanette Harten

Again, ride purposefully up the centerline, preparing for the perfect square halt to finish. Square halts are a function of lightness and evenness of the rein aids, and an even seat and leg contact.

Salute and finish your test with a smile but, most importantly, reward him with a scratch or by stroking his neck. It may not be the best test that you wished for, but he is not a robot and can only do as best as we ride or have trained him. Walk forward 5-10 metres from your last halt before turning to leave the arena.

## Coming up

Don't miss the next and final article of this series, which will appear in the February 2016 issue, when Manuela will talk about the lateral movements of shoulder in, travers, renvers, half-pass and pirouettes.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** *Manuela McLean, NCAS Level 2 (Dressage Specialist), BSc (Biology), Dip Ed, co-developed the AEBC training system and co-authored 'Academic Horse Training' with her husband, Dr Andrew Mclean. One of her most recent achievements is coaching and training Joann Formosa and her stallion, Worldwide PB, to gold medal success at the London 2012 Paralympics. In just six months, Manuela trained Worldwide PB to be a competitive Paralympic mount, to be responsive to verbal and postural cues, and to the lightest of aids. A national coach of dressage, Manuela's focus is on teaching riders how to train and maintain the*

*basics in their horses; creating a true foundation for higher level dressage. Manuela has ridden and competed at FEI level in Dressage and advanced Three Day Eventing. In great demand as a clinician, she travels to teach riders of all ages throughout Australia and to New Zealand, Canada, Denmark, Finland and the United Kingdom.*



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