

English Disciplines – Dressage

When thinking of dressage the first thing that often comes to mind are the incredible efforts of the riders in the Olympic dressage ring each Summer Olympics. What many people don't know is that there is a lot more to dressage than just competing at the higher levels.

“Dressage” is actually derived from the French word for “training”. So basically, any training you do with your horse is a form of dressage. From teaching your horse basic aids and transitions to more advanced moves, proper training is the key to dressage.

Any horse can learn dressage. At the lower levels even the most homely pleasure horse can compete successfully. This is because the basics of dressage have nothing to do with how fancy a horse is or how well it moves, but instead are based on good transitions, correct carriage and quality riding. Whether you are looking to compete, or just want better enjoyment from your horse, basic dressage will give you a leg-up in your riding.

At the lowest levels the movements in dressage are very simple. There are even classes set up for horses and riders who are not yet ready to move up from doing walk-trot. Basic tests focus on the walk, trot and canter, simple forms such as 20 meter circles and riding across the diagonal and simple transitions. The tests are judged on how willing the horse is, whether the movements are performed correctly, if the rider is effective in his or her aids and the smoothness of the ride overall.

As you gain experience and show in higher levels things become more difficult. The horse is expected to carry itself in a correct frame, working on the bit and moving forward from its hindquarters. While the basic three gaits are still important, the tests begin to add things like lengthening and shortening stride which gradually progresses to true collection and extension. As the horse progresses, it will be expected to learn lateral movements such as leg yields, half passes, shoulder in and many others. Further training moves into high-collection movements such as piaffe, pirouettes and multiple lead changes.

In the higher levels a horse is expected to be of a higher quality. While in lower levels any horse should be able to perform adequately, the higher levels look for an animal who is a class above the rest. Riders look for horses with superb movement, often with lots of action in the front end. They need to be able to track up from behind so that they can carry themselves in such a way as to free up the front end for higher level movements. Ideally riders seek a horse who naturally is built uphill and who can carry itself in a good frame without being restricted by conformational problems. Most riders prefer a bigger horse of a warmblood-type build, neither overly light, nor heavy.

A good dressage test is a true joy to watch. Horse and rider work together in quiet unity seemingly dancing through the test as though in a private ballet. Indeed, a well ridden Grand Prix test is truly awe inspiring.

About the Author

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