

# Dressage Clinic I

## Taking the Horse and Rider to the Next Level

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### 1. What is dressage, anyway?

- 1.1. A system or process for training the horse **and** educating the rider—these are equally important.

*“Dressage is about helping the horse learn to carry a rider comfortably and efficiently on straight lines and arcs. All the rest is just how we get there.”*

- Mike Schaffer, international dressage trainer and author of *Rightfrom the Start*, writing on the CompuServe Horses Forum  
(All “quotes” may be paraphrased but carry the proper meaning.)

*“As dressage instructors, our job is to help the rider learn to sit and ride so as to best allow the horse to do his job with the least interference.”*

- George Slusher, manager of the CompuServe Horses Forum

- 1.1. A competition discipline used around the world, including in the Olympics;
- 1.2. Comes from a French word that means “straightening.”

*“Ride your horse calm, forward, and straight.”*

- Général Alexis l’Hotte (1825-1924)

*“Ride your horse forward and keep him straight.”*

- Gustave Steinbrecht (1808-1885)

- 1.3. Dressage is based upon a partnership, mental as well as physical, between rider and horse. That doesn’t mean that we read the horse’s mind but that we are sensitive to the horse’s attitude as well as his movement.

*“Success will only come to the dressage rider who wins the friendship of his four-legged partner and turns him into an ally.”*

- Alois Podhajsky, Director of the Spanish Riding School

- 1.4. Joke definition: *“Dressage is a bunch of middle-aged women riding huge horses in endless, ever-smaller circles.”* That hardly fits 4-H riders, though!

## 2. Why should I bother learning dressage?

- 2.1. You can improve your horse for just about any use—trail riding, equitation, endurance, eventing, jumping, cutting, reining, etc. Proper dressage can help your horse become calmer, more rhythmic, stronger, straighter, more freely moving, more supple, better balanced, and more sensitive to you.
- 2.2. You can improve your own riding, particularly your seat and your understanding of the use of the aids, as opposed to gimmicks.

*“The competent rider recognizes and corrects problems after they happen. The good rider anticipates problems and stops them while they are happening. The expert rider prevents problems before they happen.”*

- Charles de Kunffy, internationally famous trainer/coach/judge

- 2.3. Dressage emphasizes developing the individual horse rather than trying to fit a horse into some pattern or frame.
- 2.4. It should simplify, not complicate, your thinking about riding and training because it relies upon a few basic principles, rather than a set of games, procedures or tricks. Dressage riders talk about “aids,” not “cues.” The use of the aids is based upon an understanding of how the horse moves and behaves. Mike Schaffer said that we could teach a horse to canter when we spit into his ear, but that wouldn’t help him learn anything else. If you understand the use and effect of the aids and can effectively apply clear aids, you don’t need to be taught “cues” for something like a shoulder-in or turn on the haunches: you can figure out how the horse has to move to do what you want and use the aids to help him move that way. It’s also fairly easy to get a responsive horse to do these right off the bat (not perfectly, of course), even though the horse has never done them before. As some have put it, we put the horse into the position for doing what we want. We make what we want the easiest thing for the horse to do: everything else is more difficult or not allowed. The horse learns to take the easy way out. We don’t have to use force or pain if we are patient, consistent, and clear.
- 2.5. It can open other avenues for competition and pleasure besides dressage shows, e.g., eventing, which includes a dressage test plus jumping and/or cross-country (riding over fences in the open).

*“Every horse should be schooled in dressage to the beginning of collection—Second Level in the US, over fences up to 1 meter, and in the open at a gallop, including jumping moderate fences. Then, and only then, can we tell what the horse might be good at.”*

- Charles de Kunffy (paraphrased from memory—1976)

- 2.6. It’s **FUN!**

### 3. What do I need to learn dressage?

- 3.1. A horse—almost any sound horse that walks, trots, and canters will do. Dressage can improve almost any horse—and any rider.
- 3.2. A saddle, preferably an English saddle. (That will be necessary if you want to ride a dressage test in a show or at the Fair.) A hunt seat or all-purpose saddle can do nicely. A dressage saddle could be very helpful further on.
- 3.3. A bridle with a snaffle bit with a smooth mouthpiece—no shanks, no ports, no twists, etc. The idea is to use the “least” bit that works (and fits well!).
- 3.4. Suitable clothes for riding (remember that your legs will be in close contact with the horse)
- 3.5. A whip that can reach behind your leg is very useful. Spurs are allowed, but shouldn't be necessary. In dressage, spurs are used to **refine** aids, not to make them stronger. The goal is for the horse to learn to respond to very small but clear aids given by a very quiet rider.
- 3.6. You shouldn't need training devices like martingales, tie-downs, draw reins, and the like. (Side reins are useful for longeing, but **only** if the person knows how to use them correctly. That's a subject for another clinic!)
- 3.7. A reference book—the 4-H Dressage Manual is a good start.
- 3.8. An instructor who is familiar with the principles of dressage and who has ridden dressage in competitions can be very helpful.
- 3.9. An interest in learning and a willing attitude!

### 4. What are dressage tests and shows and why do people ride them?

- 4.1. Dressage tests and shows serve several purposes. A lot depends upon the rider's goals and the horse's level of training.
  - Riding tests in a show can give the rider/trainer feedback on how the horse is progressing, just like your 4-H equitation patterns;
  - The tests help riders establish goals and see where they're headed, both long-term and short-term.
  - The tests provide a fair competition format: advanced horses do not compete with novice horses and everyone in a class rides exactly the same test in the same arena for the same judge, one at a time.

- 4.2. Dressage shows and tests are divided into levels that are progressively more difficult for horse and rider. The levels in shows are:

Introductory Level

Training Level

First Level (yes, it's not really "first"—it once was and the name stuck)

Second Level

Third Level

Fourth Level

Prix St. Georges

Intermediate (split into I & II)

Grand Prix (the level ridden at the Olympics)

The last three are also called "FEI" levels, referring to the Federation Equestre Internationale, the governing body for international competition in dressage, eventing, show jumping, driving, endurance riding, and reining.

There are several tests for each level through Fourth. In 4-H, you may ride any Introductory or Training Level test or First Level Test 1. The minimum qualification for the State Fair is a blue ribbon (58% or better) on Training Level Test 2 or higher. You will ride the same test at the State Fair.

- 4.3. The show levels roughly correspond to the progression of a horse's training, but each horse is unique and may take a somewhat different path. A horse will probably be doing movements while schooling at home that are not yet required in the tests it will be doing in a show.
- 4.4. The tests consist of a series of movements in a marked-out arena, with each movement getting a score from 0-10. The scores are added to the collective marks (see below) and converted to a percentage score. (See the other handouts for more information on the arena and tips on riding a test.)
- 4.5. In 4-H, all age groups can do any of the allowed tests. They are all judged by the same standard, unlike equitation.
- 4.6. In regular dressage shows, the classes may be divided into amateur (adults who are not professionals), young rider (under 21), and open (anyone) sections. You won't see "green horse" classes, as that is the purpose of the levels, but you may see novice rider classes or classes for 4-H and Pony Club (the United States Pony Clubs, not the Eugene Pony Club) members. There may even be classes for old fogies like me!
- 4.7. Arab, Morgan, AQHA, and other breed organizations are now including dressage classes in their breed shows.

## **5. What about the “movements”? Aren’t they just tricks or maneuvers you learn to do for tests, like we learn haunch turns for our patterns?**

- 5.1. Everything the horse does is a movement in dressage, including moving on a straight line. We are training the horse every second that we are riding the horse (or handling it on the ground), whether we think we are or not.
- 5.2. The movements in tests are designed to help the judge evaluate a horse’s level and correctness of training. Through Second Level, the movements are not physically demanding nor require a lot of talent. They are more tests of the horse’s training than athletic ability. Any reasonably sound and sane horse should be able to learn to do a competent—not necessarily high-scoring—Second Level test with correct training and competent riding. Many dressage riders and horses, however, never get beyond First Level. Very few riders or horses get beyond Second Level.
- 5.3. The movements in the Introductory and Training Level tests can also be used as good tests of the rider’s skill, balance, and seat. (Jumping is another good way to test the rider’s balance and seat.)
- 5.4. One difference between your 4-H equitation patterns and dressage movements is that the movements are expected to be done or start and end at particular spots in the arena, usually on the sides, ends, or along the centerline. Circles are expected to be a given size—too large or too small would both be penalized.
- 5.5. Everything has a purpose beyond learning to do some movement for a show. The movements are also exercises to help develop the horse physically, rather like exercises and drills that human athletes do; to help correct faults (e.g., crookedness), rather like physical therapy; and to help the horse learn to be alert, sensitive and responsive to the rider’s aids.

For example, while transitions between (and within) gaits are in dressage tests, they also help develop the horse’s suppleness (ability to change his shape) and self-carriage. Circles help the horse learn balance and rhythm and to accept contact. We can use exercises like position right/left, shoulder-fore, and shoulder-in to help straighten a horse. The shoulder-in also strengthens the horse’s hindquarters, brings his hind leg more under his body, and works toward collection. Many authors think that shoulder-in is the most valuable exercise in dressage. It’s not in tests until Second Level, but can be used in schooling even green horses by a rider who understands it very well.

## 6. Common myths about dressage

*“You need a huge warmblood.”* Nope. Lots of people ride Arabs, Quarter Horses, Paints, ponies, Appaloosas, Morgans, Saddlebreds, Thoroughbreds, and all sorts of crossbreds in dressage, including shows. About the only horses that can't do dressage tests are Tennessee Walking Horses, Missouri Foxtrotters, Pasos, and other horses that don't trot.

*“Well, at least the big warmbloods always win.”* Some of the horses in the top 10 at the Olympics were not warmbloods. The highest-scoring ride at our Fair was on a POA. It is true that, everything else being equal, a horse with a free, forward, thrusting movement will score higher than a horse with a restricted movement. However, as in the rest of life, things are seldom otherwise equal. A good rider on a so-so horse can often score higher than a less-skilled rider on a spectacular horse at lower levels.

*“Dressage judges don't like particular breeds or colored horses.”* In 4-H, the same person may judge dressage as well as equitation and showmanship, so any biases will work across the board. Since dressage is judged movement by movement, it's actually harder for a judge to insert bias than where an overall score is given. Judges are used to seeing a wide variety of breeds and colors of horses. Some of the judges own and ride (and show!) Arabs, Morgans, Appaloosas, Paints, Quarter Horses, Friesians, and almost everything else.

*“Judges don't like western/stock horses.”* This is closer to the truth, but it applies equally well to hunt seat, hunter pleasure, and the like. The movement expected in western classes is not the same as expected in dressage or hunter classes.

*“You need expensive special equipment.”* Not at all. You can show in dressage with the same tack and clothes you use for hunt seat equitation as long as you use a smooth-mouthed snaffle bit. You can't use martingales, tie-downs, or other similar devices.

*“It takes years to learn.”* Like any serious riders, dressage riders should learn continuously—we're never “finished.” However, it doesn't take long to be able to ride an Introductory or Training Level test successfully.

*“You have to be a tall, skinny, long-legged rider.”* Not! Some dressage riders are tall, skinny, and long-legged, but others come in all shapes and sizes. One well-known international rider/trainer is under 5 ft tall and weighs maybe 90 pounds.

*“It requires all sorts of fancy maneuvers.”* Actually, the movements in the dressage tests in 4-H are **less** difficult and more basic than many maneuvers in your equitation patterns. The movements include straight lines, corners and turns, circles, serpentines, and transitions. There are no haunch or forehand turns, sidepasses, two-tracking (leg-yielding), quick lead changes (flying, interrupted, or simple), or even reinbacks. Only the First Level test has a lengthened trot.

*“Dressage is only for advanced riders and horses.”* It’s really for any rider and any horse. (As always, it’s not a good idea for a novice rider to be paired with a green horse—remember the adage, “Green plus green equals black and blue.”) The levels are designed to accommodate horses at every stage of their training. Besides, how did those advanced riders and horse **become** advanced?

*“The scores are really low and discouraging.”* If you directly compare the scores in dressage tests to your usual equitation and showmanship scores, it would certainly seem to be that way. However, a 6 on a movement in a dressage test is called “Satisfactory.” That means that it meets the expectations for that movement at that level. A 5 is called “Sufficient.” In 4-H, the breakpoints for the ribbons are at 50% (average of 5 per movement) for red and 58% (average of just below 6 per movement) for blue. Of course, some judges may score lower or higher than others, just as they do in equitation or showmanship.

*“Your horse has to be on the bit in a dressage test.”* In truth, “on the aids” is expected only at First Level and above. A horse at Training Level **may** be “on the aids,” but it is expected to show consistent contact or “acceptance of the bridle.”

*“A lot of the score depends upon the horse’s gaits and athletic talent.”* It’s true that **some** of the score depends upon the horse. There are 4 “collective marks” on a dressage test in addition to the scores for each movement. Each has a coefficient or multiplier of 2, so they count more than most movements. (Some movements also have a coefficient of 2.) In Training Level, the Collective Marks are:

GAITS	freedom and regularity
IMPULSION	desire to move forward, elasticity of the steps, suppleness of the back, engagement of the hindquarters
SUBMISSION	attention and confidence, harmony, lightness and ease of movements, acceptance of the bridle, lightness of the forehand
RIDER	position and seat, correctness and effect of the aids

Note that none of those talk about a “big” or “fancy” gait. Freedom means that the horse’s movement isn’t restricted. Regularity means a consistent rhythm, and so on. All of these can be—and will be!—affected and potentially improved by your riding and the horse’s training. They are all qualities that we would want to have in any good riding horse.

Notice also that, in the rider’s score, the emphasis is on more than position, just as in your 4-H equitation patterns the emphasis is on doing the maneuver correctly, as well as having a correct position. That separates both dressage and 4-H equitation from the typical horse show classes.

## 7. Some differences in terminology between dressage and 4-H equitation.

4-H equitation terminology is more closely-related to western riding than hunter riding. Note that these don't necessarily mean exactly the same thing, but they are similar.

<b>4-H Equitation</b>	<b>Dressage</b>
pattern	test
extended trot	lengthen the stride in the trot (First Level)
two-tracks	leg-yield (not used in any 4-H dressage test)
*headset	not used in dressage
**collection	not used in 4-H dressage (all gaits are working or medium)
simple change	change of lead through the trot; in dressage, a "simple change" is through the walk
interrupted change	not used in dressage at all

\*In dressage, we don't directly work on anything like a "headset" and really don't even use the term, as it can be taken to mean that one deliberately tries to get a horse to put his head in a particular position. In dressage, we consider that the position of the horse's head is one of many natural results of the way the horse moves, its degree of relaxation, and its level of training and self-carriage, as well as the horse's conformation. (My Lipizzan carries himself quite differently from my Swedish Warmblood-Thoroughbred.) Dressage riders talk about a horse's "frame," which is the overall shape or picture that the horse presents. The horse's frame will change as the horse progresses in its training. The horse also will change its frame as it does different tasks. (There is a "collected" frame and an "extended" frame, for example, as well as "working" and "stretching" frames.)

\*\*Collection has a different meaning for a dressage rider than for a western rider. A horse in a collected trot in dressage does not have its head out and down, but elevated, with an arched neck and an essentially vertical face. More important, the horse's hindquarters should drop in a collected trot as the horse shifts his weight toward his hind legs. His hocks will be well-flexed and under his body. He must be well-balanced and ready to instantly change gaits, extend, halt, do small circles, etc. It's like the ready position for a boxer or martial arts student.

## 8. Resources

### 8.1. Organizations

Oregon Dressage Society (ODS)  
5880 NE 25th Ave, Suite 2 PMB 173  
Hillsboro, OR 97124  
503-681-2337/Fax 503-681-3873  
office@oregondressage.com  
<http://www.oregondressage.com/>

United States Dressage Federation (USDF)  
220 Lexington Green Circle, Suite 510  
Lexington, KY 40503  
859-971-2277/Fax 859-971-7722  
<http://www.usdf.org/>

United States Equestrian Federation (USEF)  
(formerly the American Horse Shows Association)  
4047 Iron Works Parkway  
Lexington, KY 40511  
859-258-2472/Fax 859-231-6662  
<http://www.usef.org/>

### 8.2. Books

To be added later