

dressage: TEAMWORK, REFINED.

There was a time when the dressage test was overlooked for the more gallant aspects of the sport, but no international competitor worth his or her salt can make it to the top without a solid dressage performance. A good dressage test lays the foundation for the rest of the competition and sets a champion up for success.

The best dressage tests take place without a word, demonstrating a remarkable form of communication between top riders and their horses. Performed in a closed arena that must meet national and international standards, riders take their horses through a series of exact movements evaluated by a panel of three judges. Dressage blends grace, precision, and communication between



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horse and rider into what is often referred to as the “ballet” of eventing. That these strong horses are capable of such grace is a remarkable athletic achievement.

The movements of dressage are based on the natural movements of horses. Years of practice bring these natural movements to perfection, similar to the discipline required of ballet dancers, which is how dressage became considered the “ballet” of eventing. To complete a fine dressage performance requires years of training.

The dressage test consists of a series of compulsory movements at walk, trot, and canter gaits within a rectangular arena 60 meters long and 20 meters wide. Riders apply knowledge and a well-developed understanding of horses to elicit the firm control required by the exacting movements.

Judges look for balance, rhythm, grace, and suppleness. Yet the heart of dressage is the communication between horse and rider—obedience and harmony in these exacting sequences reveal the partnership of a great team.

Horses should move in rhythm and balance and seemingly floating over the ground. Some horses are more naturally talented than others, moving with elastic but controlled energy. They spring over the ground with a great deal of “bounce per ounce.” Others are a little stiff and have more difficulty performing the required movements.

Watching lower levels of dressage tests may seem repetitive, but when you see the progression of training from level to level, you come to appreciate the development of an athletic animal. You’ll notice that horses performing at higher levels are more maneuverable and responsive—able to react to subtle, often unrecognizable, cues from their riders. Dressage skills carry over into the jumping phases as the horse is confronted with more and more complicated questions of balance, speed, and strength integral to cross-country and show jumping.

At the higher level of tests, horses have to move not only forwards, but sideways as well, while crossing over the pairs of legs. These movements are known as lateral work and should show the same rhythm and regularity as when trotting straight. If a horse is not very well trained, it will try to slow down when going sideways, resulting in a bad fault.

Ideally, the test exemplifies a horse’s controlled energy. Most tests are about 6–8 minutes. On an uncooperative horse, those minutes can feel like a really long nightmare.

Winning tests look effortless, with the horse strutting its stuff for the audience. Whatever happens, the rider must get the job done. Dressage is only the first part of the competition, but it can make it or break it for any rider.

Grace and precision define dressage’s exacting movements.

