



Dressage

Dressage, the highest expression of horse training, is considered the art of equestrian sport and is used as the groundwork for all the other disciplines. Horse and rider are required to perform a series of compulsory movements executed within a rectangular arena. It is one of the three disciplines in competition at the Olympic Games, the other two being Jumping and Eventing.

Some history

The long and colourful traditions of Dressage go as far back as ancient Greece: the first known work on horsemanship dealing with Dressage was written by the general Xenophon (430 – 354 BC) who is considered the founder of the discipline. With the disintegration of ancient Greece, the art of riding slowly fell into oblivion and was not revived until the Italian Renaissance in the 16th century. A riding academy was created in Naples in 1532, the teachings of which gradually reached Baroque France. *Le Manège Royal*, written in 1632, concentrated on understanding the character of the horse and winning its cooperation. In the 18th century classical Dressage reached its peak with the creation of the world-famous Spanish Riding School in 1729 in Vienna, which laid the basis of the modern discipline.

Despite the fact that over the centuries the discipline had enjoyed numerous followers and theorists, the first competition was not held until 1873 in Vienna, Austria. The first international competition took place in Turin, Italy, in 1902. Dressage events were part of the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm, when equestrian made its Olympic debut. The first FEI Dressage championship outside the Olympic Games was held in 1930 at Lucerne, Switzerland. The first FEI World Championship was held in Bern, Switzerland.

Modern competitions

In modern competitions, horse and rider are expected to perform from memory a series of predetermined movements, known as figures (volte, serpentine, figure of eight). The completely flat arena, measuring 60 x 20 m., is skirted by a low rail along which 12 lettered markers are placed symmetrically indicating where movements are to start, where changes of pace or lead are to occur and where the movements are to end. Upon entering the arena, each rider proceeds down a marked centre line and halts to salute. The horse must stand four-square and immobile.

Paces

In all competitions, the horse has to show three paces: **walk**, **trot** and **canter** as well as smooth transitions within and between these paces.

Walk

The footfalls describe a regular four-time beat in each variation:

collected walk – each step covers less ground but remains active;

medium walk – an unconstrained walk of moderate stride, even length

extended walk – the horse stretches its head and neck, covering as much ground as possible with each stride, but without haste.

Trot has a two-time beat separated by a moment of suspension. The quality of a trot is judged by its regularity and elasticity. The variations are:

collected trot – the horse's outline shortens and it moves forward with an arched neck;

medium trot – the horse moves forward with moderately lengthened strides and more obvious impulsion from behind;

extended trot – the horse covers as much ground as possible, lengthening its strides as a result of great impulsion from its rear end.

Canter has a three-time beat with the diagonal feet landing simultaneously. There is a moment of suspension when all feet are in the air before the next stride begins. If a horse is cantering on a circle, it will lead with its inside foreleg. In counter-canter, the horse leads with its outside leg.

High quality is revealed by freedom and regularity of the paces, lightness and ease of the movements. The horse gives the impression of doing the movements on his own accord and shows immediate and even intuitive response to the rider's commands.

Tests

There are tests of different degree of difficulty. In lower level tests, there are movements such as *halt*, *rein-back volte*, *walk-pirouettes* and lateral

movements. In medium levels there are flying changes in canter, when the horse is required to switch its leading foreleg without breaking the stride. In high level tests, there are movements like *passage*, a collected, highly elevated trot that has a long moment of suspension as each diagonal pair of feet is raised and lowered, and *piaffe*, performed with maximum collection and no forward movement in which the horse gives the impression of trotting on the spot.

At international competitions regulated by the FEI, riders and horses are expected to perform the following tests:

Prix St-Georges (of medium standard);

Intermediate 1 (of relatively advanced standard);

Intermediate 2 (of advanced standard);

Grand Prix is a highly demanding five-and-a-half-minute test requiring all of the basic schooling movements plus the fundamental airs of the Classical High School, including *pirouettes* (pivots on the spot at a prescribed gait), *piaffe*, *passage* and flying lead changes.

Grand Prix Special is a seven minute test requiring the same movements as the Grand Prix but in a different order and with increased focus on the more advanced movements.

Grand Prix Freestyle (Kür) is performed to the accompaniment of a musical score. Most of the marks, based on purity of action, rhythm and regularity, impulsion and collection, are for technical performance. This weighting is to preserve the classical principles of Dressage, according to which all movements are generated from the natural gaits of the horse. The harmony between the action of the horse and the rhythm of the music, the symmetry and logic of the choreography and the special transitions in music are also looked at. The music of a Freestyle test is not just a background: performing in synchronisation with the rhythm is the ultimate aim. Freestyle is the pinnacle of Dressage execution and when it works, the result is magic.

The standard formula for FEI world and continental championships and the Olympic Games consists of a Grand Prix, Grand Prix Special and Grand Prix Freestyle (Kür) tests. The Grand Prix test decides the team medals and serves as a first individual qualifying round. The top 18 to 25 riders (the number varies depending on the type of competition) progress to the more demanding Grand Prix Special. The best riders, based on total points from the two previous tests, qualify for the medal round where they perform a Grand Prix Freestyle (Kür) test.

The Top Dressage Horse

Most top horses are at least 10 years old (compared with some seven-year olds in Jumping) because it takes that long to train them to the most advanced level. Attributes such as carriage, paces, character, willingness to work and an outstanding

learning ability are part of the equation. "When you lose a horse in Dressage, you lose a friend a partner. It's a catastrophe," says renowned Dutch rider Anky van Grunsven.

Scoring

A panel of five judges assess each of the figures awarding a mark from 1 to 10. Once totalled, these scores produce a percentage and the rider or team with the highest total score is declared the winner.

Equipment

Formal dress, consisting of top hat, tails, white shirt and tie, gloves, white or cream breeches and black boots, is compulsory. Members of the armed and police forces wear uniforms.

Main competitions

The premier Dressage competitions, in which compete both individuals and teams, are

The **Olympic Games** taking place every four years in a bissextile year.

The **FEI World Equestrian Games (WEG)** held every four years in the even years between the Olympic Games.

The biannual **Continental Championships**

Continental and **Regional Games** organised under the patronage of the International Olympic Committee and Regional Games Associations.

FEI World Cup Dressage

Initiated in 1986, the FEI World Cup Dressage is the only annual worldwide linked series in this discipline. It consists of a series of qualifying leagues encompassing Western and Central Europe, North America, Canada and Australia. Each FEI World Cup qualifier comprises a Grand Prix test, which in turn is a qualification for the Freestyle to Music competition, where league points are accumulated towards places in the FEI World Cup Dressage Final.

Dressage is a magnificent combination of sport and art dedicated to showing the horse to the world in all its glory. With such a vibrant past and rich potential, how could the discipline but have a bright future?