



Judging Musical Freestyles: Understanding Artistic Impression*

	POSSIBLE POINTS	JUDGE'S MARKS	CO-EFFICIENT	FINAL SCORE	REMARKS
1. Harmony between Horse and Rider	10		3		
2. Choreography use of arena, design cohesiveness, balance, and creativity	10		4		
3. Degree of Difficulty	10		2		
4. Music suitability, seamless,ness, cohesiveness	10		3		
5. Interpretation music expresses gaits, use of phrasing and dynamics	10		3		

*In USDF tests, Artistic Impression scores may be given in .1 (tenth) increments

Harmony between Horse and Rider – coefficient 3

Harmony goes beyond the technical aspects of the rider and speaks more to the *relationship* of the horse and rider. In a harmonious ride, the horse displays confidence in both the rider and in the demands of the test. He is calm and attentive, and the execution shows ease and fluidity.

In freestyles, riders aim to keep their horses on the beat of the music as well as with the music's phrasing. This requires far more adjustments than a standard test. Still, the ride must be kept harmonious so the freestyle can be enjoyed rather than disturbed by a struggling horse. Because of the extra demands of the freestyle, a harmonious test is a tribute to the artistry of the rider and should be greatly appreciated and rewarded.

Choreography - coefficient 4 - Equates to Construction of the Patterns

“Use of arena” centers around the concepts of *entirety* and *distribution*. First, the entire arena space should be used. Secondly, the arena should be treated as a scale that can tip forward and

backward as well as side-to-side, with the goal being to keep this “arena scale” in balance. In other words, the various elements should be distributed throughout the space, so there are as many elements at E as there are at B, and at A as there are at C. For instance, in a First Level freestyle, if both the trot and canter circles were performed at the "A" end, the arena would feel as if it were "tipping" in that direction. Likewise, if all the circles were performed at "E", the arena would be "tipped" to the right from the perspective of the judges on the short side. Symmetry can be used to achieve equal distribution of weight from right to left, but it is neither required nor necessary. However, by the end of the freestyle the space should have been totally explored and used in a way that keeps the "scale" relatively even right to left and front to back.

“Balance” pertains to the relative equality of right and left rein work. It would not be balanced for a rider to do three shoulder-ins to the right and only one to the left. It should be noted that lengthenings, mediums and extensions are only required on one rein.

“Design cohesiveness” could easily be replaced with the words *clarity* and *logic*. The rider's intentions must be clear to the judge. Was the line held long enough for the judge to identify the movement? The FEI requires a minimum of 12 meters, however USDF recommends 18 meters for lower level riders in movements such as a shoulder-in. Were the patterns understandable or hard to decipher? Did the elements flow or were transitions out of character or odd for dressage? While creativity is encouraged, the emerging patterns must still make sense and be easily discernible. It should be noted that halts can be anywhere on the centerline, as long as they face C, and that transitions do not need to be at the letter.

“Creativity” denotes not being test-like. If a rider performed a pattern directly from a test and changed it in no way, that would be test-like. However starting that same pattern from a different position, changing the distance over which it develops, or altering it in any other way now removes the pattern from being “like the test.” If you consider that shoulder-in, half-pass and extension are trot requirements beginning at Third Level, continuing through Intermediate, and also a part of FEI Pony, Junior and Young Rider levels, you can imagine that it would be very rare to come across totally unique trot sequences. A movement or sequence should not be penalized for lack of creativity simply because you have seen it before.

Exceptional creativity can be achieved by using unusual transitions (walk pirouette to canter extension), combining elements in a way as not seen in a test, and even employing less common lines such as M - D or short diagonal extensions. Combining elements can also add difficulty to a freestyle. Such combinations may be recognized under both categories. For instance, we see an increasing number of canter extension to pirouette combinations. This is both interesting as well as difficult. Trot zigzags are usually shown to highlight the strength of a horse and should not be considered test-like per se. However if they are done more steeply plus are shown differently than the standard test for the level, they too may receive recognition for both creativity and difficulty.

Degree of Difficulty – coefficient 2 – Calculated Risk

This category pertains to the transitions and configurations used in the freestyle and how they relate to the standard tests of the same level. Placement of elements—such as transitions, tempis, pirouettes, and shoulder-in performed on the centerline—may be considered increased difficulty as well, because they are exposed to very close scrutiny.

If difficulty matches the basis for the level - let's say First Level, Test 1- it would be evaluated at a 6.0; if it matched the highest standard for the level - First Level, Test 3 - it would be evaluated at a 7.0. For each element that exceeds the difficulty of the level - such as First Level canter to halt - there could be a subsequent rise in the score depending on the execution.

The choice of transitions and configurations (steeper half passes, number of tempis, shoulder-in on quarter line, challenging combinations, et cetera) should be within the capabilities of the horse to perform correctly and harmoniously. High difficulty should not be rewarded when the demand goes beyond the horse's scope, and indeed may have a negative influence. However, successfully performed high Degree of Difficulty will raise the overall impression of the freestyle and should be rewarded.

Music - coefficient 3 - Equates to Music Selection and Preparation

“Suitability” is the most important of the Music scores. Music should not be evaluated by the likes or dislikes of the judge, but whether or not it is suitable for the horse. Suitable music does not interfere with the image of the horse and can even enhance him by making him seem buoyant and lively. One can assume that if the music seems "right" for the horse, it is. Lack of suitability is more noticeable. The wrong music choice can make a horse look burdened, sluggish, or heavy. Music that is overly energetic or too fast for the gait can make the horse appear hurried, nervous, or tense. Level-appropriateness or the character of the horse are other forms of suitability. For instance, does a First Level rider perform to dark music that is better carried by a dramatic higher-level horse? Does a stallion perform to "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies?"

“Seamlessness” refers to the editing of the music both within a particular song and between songs. At the freestyle's conclusion, the judge should recall if there were any abrupt cuts in the music that were jarring. Was there one; were there several; or did the entire composition move along with nothing to disturb the ear? The same can be said for long pauses or very long sustained chords because they do not support movement.

“Cohesiveness” is akin to having a symphony of several movements. Each of the movements may have a different feel or tempo (trot, walk, canter, passage) but there is no doubt the entire composition is part of the same whole. Freestyle music should come from the same genre, have the same instrumentation, or a single musical thread (like all guitar music) that holds it together. Preceding a composition of rock music with the Twentieth Century Fox fanfare or a light classical piece would not be cohesive.

Interpretation - coefficient 3 - Equates to the Relationship of Music to Movement.

"Music expresses gaits" refers to the tempo and rhythm of the music and how it fits the horse's gaits. (To clarify, rhythm is a repeatable pattern, whereas tempo refers to the rate of repetition or speed.) At the very minimum, the *rhythm* of the music should exemplify the gait. Does the canter music have a canter "feel"? Likewise for the trot? Is the walk music more relaxed? While it is not a requirement, the majority of riders will take great pains to find music with a *tempo* to match their horse's gaits. This can be rewarding as the judges and audience can clearly see the relationship between the music and the movement of the horse. The risk is that differences in footing, excitement, or other show-related causes can alter the horse's tempos. The skill of the rider to keep the horse "on the beat" should be appreciated. The judge may note that the match of the music's beat to the horse's footfalls may not be in sync all the time. This is especially true in a change of pace, because a lower level horse may not yet have the strength and therefore airtime to "stay on the beat" during a lengthening. The judges should take that into account.

"Use of phrasing and dynamics" is related to the *musicality* of the rider. During the planning stages of the freestyle, riders should create highlights in two ways. One is by changing the horse's movement at the beginning of the music's *phrase* (a musical "sentence" or "paragraph"). For instance, the music changes as the rider begins a shoulder-in, leg-yield, circle, half pass, et cetera. The other is to use the music's *dynamics* (loud versus soft) to show the difference between movements. As example, lengthenings or tempi changes are done on the loud music while pirouettes are done on the soft music. Lateral movements are well expressed during midrange dynamics. At the very least, riders should show musical expression at extensions, gait changes, and the final halt salute. A secondary area would be after the initial salute. Once the horse has started forward, he would begin a new element on the first change of musical phrase. The more occurrences a rider shows of starting and/or ending elements with musical phrases, the greater the challenge. His or her skill in making it to a certain place in the arena at a particular time in the music should be rewarded.

Interrelationship

There is a misunderstanding that the artistic score cannot exceed the technical by more than a certain percentage. There is no *direct* correlation of the total technical score to the artistic scores, though there is an *indirect* one. If the freestyle is filled with technical errors, scores for both Harmony and Degree of Difficulty will suffer. If there are disturbances great enough to interrupt the flow of the patterns, the judge may not be able to discern the intent of the rider, which lowers the score for Choreography. Moreover, a large disturbance will most likely cause the rider to go off the music, lowering the score for Interpretation. The only score relatively unaffected by technical errors is that for Music, unless the disturbances are so frequent that the judge cannot determine if the music is suitable.

On the other hand, well-chosen Difficulty in well-balanced and creative Choreography should create enough ease for the team to perform in Harmony. With the right Music and a fair amount of Interpretation, these ingredients should create a successful freestyle.

*Compiled by the USDF Freestyle Committee with input and approval from USDF Judges Committee.
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