

Tackling Choreography

A guide for freestyle do-it-yourselfers

By Terry Ciotti Gallo

Do you feel intimidated by the thought of creating your own freestyle? Relax. Becoming familiar with a few principles is all it takes to get started. Here are some pointers that will help get you on your way to creating an enjoyable freestyle.

The Basics

First, determine the **level** that you will be showing. US Equestrian Federation rules (online at usef.org) state the prerequisite: The horse/rider combination must have received a minimum

score of 60 percent at the highest test of the level to be shown, or from a higher level, at a USEF-licensed show. In other words, if you wish to do a First Level freestyle, you and your horse must first earn a score of 60 percent or better at First Level Test 4 or in a higher-level test. Send a copy of the test sheet with your freestyle entry form.

Next, learn the **required elements** for the level you wish to show; they are not always the same as in the standard dressage tests. For instance, did you know that turn on the haunches and walk pirouette are not required at any level, except for the FEI Juniors? This is important because you may opt not to include that element, especially if it is not a strong one for your horse. To find out what

is required, check the freestyle score sheets (available from the USDF and published in many regional and GMO omnibuses).

There are other differences, too, between regular dressage tests and freestyles. In a freestyle, the halt and salute can be anywhere on the center line. Changes from element to element do not need to be performed at the letters, though they still should occur in a logical place, such as on the rail, midway between letters; or in conjunction with a change in the music.

Understand what is meant by **above the level**. As explained in the USDF booklet “Musical Freestyle: Rules, Guidelines, and Definitions,” **movements** include leg-yield, rein-back, travers, renvers, shoulder-in, half-pass, flying changes, turns on the haunches, pirouettes, piaffe, and passage. You may not perform movements that are above the level being shown. For example, performing a half-pass in a Second Level freestyle is prohibited.

Do not confuse movements with **figures** (circle, figures of eight, and so on) or **transitions** (such as walk to canter) in determining which elements are considered above the level for your freestyle. A First Level freestyle ride could incorporate a canter to a halt, even though it’s not part of the First Level tests, because it is a transition and not a movement. Likewise, a Third Level freestyle may include a steep half-pass zigzag (again, more advanced than in that level’s tests) because the zigzag is a pattern, not a movement.

All possible permitted and forbidden movements and transitions are listed on the USDF freestyle score sheets for each level.

Difficulty

The first step in baking a cake is gathering the ingredients for the mix. Similarly, in dressage, you must know all the ingredients you will need to incorporate into your freestyle. Your



STRONG SUIT: *Isabell Werth showcased the great Gigolo's elasticity with an extended-canter-to-pirouette move in their freestyle (pictured at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics)*

list will include not only the requirements for the level and the knowledge of what is permitted and forbidden, but also any difficulty you wish to add. Your planned degree of difficulty will greatly affect your choice of patterns and overall choreography.

One way to grasp the concept of difficulty is to review what is expected at the top test of the level. Can you exceed that expectation without doing movements above the level? Using the previous example of a First Level ride with a transition from canter to halt, that transition is allowed and would certainly exceed what is expected. At Fourth Level and at the FEI levels, you could increase the degree of difficulty by doing more than the minimum required number of tempi changes. Performing them in a curvilinear pattern would further elevate the difficulty. A shoulder-in performed off the rail is another example of increased difficulty.

There is a caveat to all this, however. Any movement, figure, or transition must be done well in order for it to receive credit for difficulty. If your horse cannot perform the element with precision and clarity, you risk not only losing points for execution but also being penalized under the difficulty category for taking an unacceptable risk. Although higher risk usually adds greater interest to the choreography, it is well worth noting that the mark for degree of difficulty has a coefficient of only 1 (USDF). If you can pull it off, definitely do the greater difficulty. When in doubt, stick with something safe.

Choreography

There are many facets that make up the choreography score. They are listed on the score sheet as use of the arena, inventiveness, design cohesiveness, balance, ingenuity, and creativity. Let's start with the creative aspects.

How do you avoid making your freestyle "test-like" and achieve more **inventiveness**, **ingenuity**, and **creativity**? First, read all the

tests, right up through the Grand Prix Special. Doing so will aid you in understanding how a skill develops through the levels, which viewing angles work best for the judges, how various patterns flow through the arena, and what combinations of elements appear at levels that you may not have reached yet.

Apply what you learn from this exercise to expand your arena awareness and to get ideas as to how to show your horse to his greatest advantage by seeing the choreography from the judge's point of view. For example, you can begin a pirouette on a diagonal line, on the side, or directly on the center line, as expected at Grand Prix. How well does your horse pirouette? If this movement is one of his strengths, then you might want to consider placing it on the center line.

The second advantage to this process is that, in learning about the patterns in tests you may not have ridden yet, you will be less likely to repeat those patterns exactly. ⇨



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Another way to increase your choreographic sense is to watch videos of freestyles. Even if the movements are above your level, pay attention to what the rider is asking of the horse and what strengths the choreography is highlighting. For example, Germany's Isabell Werth and Gigolo's signature combination was an extended canter directly into a pirouette. This extremely difficult pairing emphasized Gigolo's great elasticity. Now apply that concept to your own freestyle: If your horse also has good elasticity, why not ride an extension on the short diagonal directly to a shoulder-in?

This kind of pattern is a great example of two concepts that relate to creative design. One is the use of **combinations**; the other is using a less common **line**. If you are a First Level rider, imagine how many ways you can combine the three trot requirements of leg-yield, circle, and lengthening. Now bear in mind that the pattern could be initiated from the center line, the rail, or the quarter line, and you can see that the resulting number of possibilities is quite large.

After you consider difficulty and explore the creative aspects of choreography, your next step is to coordinate your ideas with the music. Before finalizing your plan, however, draw a series of rectangles representing the arena on a piece of paper. Sketch in your patterns, and ask yourself:

- Have I employed good **use of space** by making sure all areas of the arena have been covered and that the various elements have been distributed throughout the space? You do not want to feel as if the arena is "tipping" in any one direction.
- Have I used right- and left-rein work in good **balance**, or does one side dominate?
- Are my patterns logical, clear, and easy to follow, or do they lack **design cohesiveness**?

Many riders establish balance and design cohesiveness through the use of symmetrical patterns, but symmetry

is not necessary to create the feeling of stability in your ride, provided that your design is logical and fluid. As FEI "O" judge Anne Gribbons puts it, "You do not want to look like a fly in a paper bag."

Correct and Clever

Now you are ready to go on to the actual choreographic-design process. In "The Wow Factor" (December 2007), we briefly discussed how different elements could be interpreted musically, as well as whether music or choreography should come first. Regardless of the method you choose, the choreographic principles remain the same. Create interest by using combinations, uncommon lines, or both. At the same time, make sure that the elements and patterns are clearly identifiable to the judge, that there is fairly even use of the reins, and that the arena has been used well.

Consider these principles before beginning your choreography, and review them again at the conclusion of the process to ensure that you have completed the "check list." With a little love and patience, you can craft an artistic and successful freestyle that you will be proud to call your own. ▲

USDF Freestyle Committee chair Terry Ciotti Gallo has more than 30 years of experience in sports, dance, and music. Her freestyles have been performed at Olympic Games, World Equestrian Games, World Cup Dressage Finals, and Pan American Games. She lives in Florida.

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