

Judges on Freestyle

Tips for riders and judges alike on improving freestyle standards

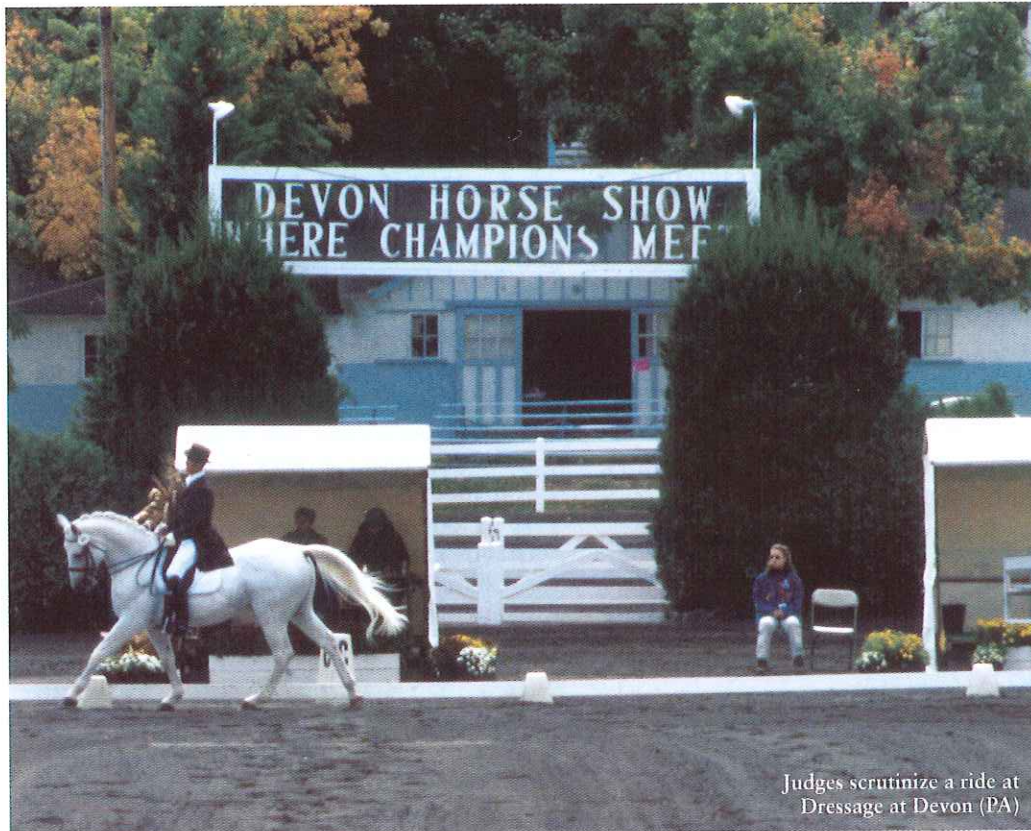
BY TIGGER MONTAGUE

IN FREESTYLE, AS WITH any dressage competition, it's the judge who ultimately determines how successful your ride is—at least from a scoring standpoint. You may have labored to choreograph a seamless ride to music, but will it impress the judges? What are judges looking for in freestyle, anyway?

In this article, you'll get the view from "C" according to three top judges with extensive national and international experience in evaluating freestyles.

We Got the Beat

Many freestylers obsess over choosing music that exactly matches the footfalls of their



Judges scrutinize a ride at Dressage at Devon (PA)

ED CAMELLI



Francis Verbeek

ARND BRONKHORST

horses' front feet. In fact, says Dutch FEI "O" judge Francis Verbeek, "Never look at the front legs, but instead at the hind legs." It's the hind legs, she says, that judges watch to determine whether the horse is moving in rhythm and in synch with the music.

"For me, the music must give the impression and highlight the horse's gaits; but it does not have to be always on the beat," says FEI "I" judge Janet Brown of Colorado Springs, CO.

Music can enhance a horse's movements in ways other than just being "on the beat," our judges point out.



Janet Brown

SHERI SCOTT PHOTOGRAPHY

Says Brown: "You see drums used for piaffe or for the pirouette; or a *glissando*, where the piano or harp goes up and down the octaves. Of course, a beat exactly on the time of the tempi changes is super. Klaus Balkenhol's kür to Spanish music still brings chills up my spine. It is a kür everyone should watch before they do one themselves."

Choreography: Keep It Simple and Honest

If you've read about freestyle or attended clinics on the subject, you're



COURTESY OF LIBBY ANDERSON

Libby Anderson

bound to have been admonished against making your choreography “test-like.” “The test has to surprise the judges,” Verbeek explains.

However, cautions Brown, “It is better to do a more simple kür and do it well than to add too much difficulty and fail. Don’t do a ‘fly in a paper bag’ freestyle; be sure to establish and develop each movement. Make it obvious to the judge what you are doing. Stay off the rails; don’t do all of your lateral work away from the judge at C.”

“Do not try to fool the judges” with choreography that makes the movements difficult to evaluate, warns FEI “I” judge and USA Equestrian “S” judge Libby Anderson of Catharpin, VA, who is a native of Australia. “They are looking for cheating moves, like the walk away from the judges in a straight line, piaffe shown only from the side and not from the front, and extended movements shown only from behind and in straight lines. And do not become repetitious, with too many circles, loops, and squiggles, which tend to become boring and detract from your overall theme.”

At the same time, Anderson acknowledges, “The judges appreciate clever and fair highlighting of your

horse’s best moves and the underplaying of his lesser movements.”

And the Highest Marks Go to...

As a spectator, it’s easy to tell the difference between a so-so freestyle and a thrilling performance. But the most crowd-pleasing rides may not win the blue ribbons. We asked our panel of judges to explain what distinguishes a freestyle from the crowd.

Verbeek says she takes into consideration “the quality of riding, the rhythm of the music in harmony with horse and rider, originality of the kür, and the degree of difficulty.”

Foremost in Brown’s mind when she judges freestyles is “the technical performance of the horse. Without the technical proficiency, the kür cannot be beautiful and artistic.”

Next, says Brown, she wants to see the rider “highlight the horse’s strong points without overdoing it. No one wants to see ten pirouettes or eight leg-yields.” Last, she evaluates “how the ride is put to the music, the interpretation of the music, and the choreography. The choreography must be balanced—not one-sided or overdone with one movement.”

“Correct basic technical work cannot be overemphasized, and it still remains an essential ingredient in the development of a musical freestyle,” Anderson concurs. “The ultimate success of the freestyle is through the proper selection of music and beats per minute for your horse’s gaits. But even if you have these two basic ingredients, you may still need a little more. The freestyle should be an expression of your interpretation of a story. As Belgian ‘O’ judge Mariette Withages tells us, the story must have a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion, just like a good book. The story should have highlights, bright moments, quiet moments, in-between moments, and—most important—must

weave a continuing theme throughout the freestyle. The judges and spectators should feel drawn into your musical theme and observe the development as the story unfolds.”

The truly outstanding freestyle, Anderson says, is one in which “magic becomes reality, and horse and rider merge as one dancing partnership. The rider is doing a good job when, as the story unfolds, you are momentarily caught in a time warp, right up to the moment of the finale.”

Judges on Judging

Judging freestyle is a bit of a juggling act, says Verbeek. “You need to do several things at the same time: look at the total performance of the kür—you have to remember it at the end!—the choreography, the music, the rhythm, the technical parts of the riding, and the difficulty of the test.”

Brown uses a simple system to keep track of the many elements. “I use plus and minus signs for the right side of the score sheet as the ride is ongoing. That way, I do not have to try and remember everything quickly at the end. For example, if the edits are bad, that is a ‘minus’ in music. If there is a good moment of interpretation, that is a plus. If a pattern is difficult, that is a plus; if it is on the rail and just like the test, that is a minus. If there are ten leg-yields, that is a minus in choreography. If at First Level the horse does the change of lead through the trot from counter-canter to counter-canter, that is a plus for choreography and also for degree of difficulty. That way, at the end, I have a good idea if it was a high mark or not.”

Anderson advises judges to keep up with freestyle in as many ways as possible. “Attend in person if possible, or view on videotape, top international freestyle competitions. This is such a

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the past. There's only so much you can do, especially at Third Level. There aren't that many things you can do that someone else hasn't done.

What is one major mistake you've seen riders make in their freestyles?

Sometimes you see [the rides] being chopped up too much. I know judges like to see the variation, but sometimes it doesn't flow. To me, it needs to look like a ballet. There are so many that run here and run there, trying to make it look difficult. You lose the dance.

What is one terrific freestyle that you've seen?

I'd have to say that [Danish rider] Lars Petersen's at Stuttgart was phenomenal. It was really special, and I enjoyed watching it. The music was done so well—music you'd think wouldn't work for horses. The music changed just perfectly with the pirouettes. The tempo music was absolutely phenomenal. He did twos into a 20-meter circle of ones and back out into twos. It was incredible. It was a dance.

Any final words of advice?

Good luck! Be prepared for hard work. It is fun, but there is a lot more work than people realize in the making of a freestyle, especially if you want it to be special. ▲

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developing sport that rules are still changing regularly, and the judges must keep up with the international freestyle rules and competitions.”

“Keep an open mind,” Anderson continues. “Do not be patronizing when judging lower-level freestyles. Try to evaluate the technical portion, awarding suitable marks for the performance rendered while keeping the theme and the musical story in the back of your mind.

“Reward artistic merit when you see it. Do not begrudge marks if you feel they are well deserved. Evaluate the quality of the tape, the editing, the musical phasing, and its suitability for this particular freestyle. Be fair, and do not hesitate to comment and give the correct and fair mark to any of the artistic areas that are weak or even insufficient.” However, she cautions, “Never be negative. This does not help the rider or the sport. The judge's job is to evaluate and award marks according to merit. Perform this job with a friendly but fair assessment. Comment on the weakness of the freestyle, the music, or the technical aspects. Suggest, if possible, how to improve.”

Anderson also advises judges to “let the show management know if you enjoy and are comfortable judging the freestyle section of their show. If you do not or are not, then let the show management know that, if possible, you would rather not judge that section.”

However, judges who are inclined not to bother with freestyle should take heed of Anderson's prediction: “The musical freestyle is here to stay. Long live the freestyle!”

Tigger Montague is an FEI-level rider and trainer. She is president of the Virginia Dressage Association and a member of the USDF Freestyle Committee.

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WARNING: For use in animals only. Not for use in horses intended for food. Not for human use. Keep out of the reach of children.

PRECAUTIONS: Prior to treatment, EPM should be distinguished from other diseases that may cause ataxia in horses. Injuries or lameness may also complicate the evaluation of an animal with EPM. In most instances, ataxia due to EPM is asymmetrical and affects the hind limbs.

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ADVERSE REACTIONS: In the field study, eight animals were noted to have unusual daily observations. Two horses exhibited blisters on the nose and mouth at some point in the field study, three animals showed a skin rash or hives for up to 18 days, one animal had loose stools throughout the treatment period, one had a mild colic on one day and one animal had a seizure while on medication. The association of these reactions to treatment was not established.

ANIMAL SAFETY SUMMARY: Marquis (ponazuril) was administered to 24 adult horses (12 males and 12 females) in a target animal safety study. Three groups of 8 horses each received 0, 10, or 30 mg/kg (water as control, 2X and 6X for a 5 mg/kg [2.27 mg/lb] dose). Horses were dosed after feeding. One half of each group was treated for 28 days and the other half for 56 days followed by necropsy upon termination of treatment. There were several instances of loose feces in all animals in the study irrespective of treatment, sporadic inappetence and one horse at 10 mg/kg (2X) lost weight while on test. Loose feces were treatment related. Histopathological findings included moderate edema in the uterine epithelium of three of the four females in the 6X group (two treated for 28 days and one for 56 days).

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