

# Understanding Freestyle Scoring

*A judge explains the technical and artistic-impression scoring criteria*

By Janet "Dolly" Hannon

For many dressage riders, riding a freestyle is one of their primary goals. We all know how memorable an exciting performance can be, and watching a great freestyle inspires many riders to create their own.

If you followed along with last year's "Clinic: So You Think You Can Dance?" series, in which *USDF Connection* shadowed a rider and a free-



MASTER OF ART AND CRAFT: Olympian Steffen Peters' freestyles are known for their artistry. He and Ravel perform their latest creation at the 2011 Adequan/USDF National Symposium Supported by Trilogy.

style designer as they created a freestyle, you know that the process is extensive and requires considerable attention to detail. One of the most important details is understanding the freestyle tests themselves and how they're scored.

The USDF Freestyle Committee, in conjunction with the USDF Judges Committee and the US Equestrian Federation Test Writing Committee, approved the current (2011) freestyle tests, Introductory through Fourth Level. These tests saw the institution of collective marks on the technical side of the score sheet and a rewritten artistic side.

Unlike in a dressage test, in which the judge awards a single set of marks, freestyle competitors receive two sets of scores: one set for technical execution and the other for artistic impression. A careful look at the freestyle score sheet will tell you a lot of what you need to know before you begin to choreograph your freestyle. Let's examine the score sheet in detail.

## The Technical Side

The technical-execution side of the freestyle score sheet lists the following:

- Requirements for the level
- Movements both "allowed" and "clearly forbidden"
- Judging tips.

If the score sheet contains a split box under the heading of "Preliminary Notes" for a movement, then that movement must be shown on both reins (left and right).

Technical marks may now be awarded in half-point (0.5) increments, while artistic marks may be awarded in tenths of a point (0.1). The USDF Freestyle Committee's aim in instituting these scoring increments was to facilitate a more clear and balanced relationship between the artistic and the technical sides of the score sheet.

At all USDF freestyle levels, there is a score for both the beginning and the final halt.

Judges award collective marks for gaits (quality), impulsion (energy, elasticity, and engagement), and submission (basic issues of submission and technical aspects of the rider).

There are two separate scores for the walk, with each score being appropriate to the level. At First and Second Levels, freestyle competitors must show 20 meters of continuous medium and free walk; at Third Level, 20 meters of medium and extended walk; and at Fourth Level, 20 meters of collected and extended walk.

A few more technical notes: At First Level, there is a specified minimum size for circles: not smaller than eight meters in trot or ten meters in canter. At Second Level, there is a score for counter-canter. At Third Level, the score for counter-canter has been removed. At Fourth Level, scores for flying changes at every fourth stride (four-tempi changes) and for the canter "working" half-pirouette of approximately three meters have replaced the former requirements of three-tempi changes and a canter half-pirouette.

## The Artistic Side

The artistic side of the 2011 freestyle test sheets (see illustration on the opposite page) has changed dramatically. To help competitors and judges to better understand these changes, Terry Ciotti Gallo and the USDF Freestyle and Judges Committees created a handout called "Understanding Artistic Impression." I'll sum up the important points here.

**Harmony.** The first artistic mark on the freestyle score sheet, with a coefficient of 3, is for "harmony between horse and rider." The quality of harmony (the "relationship" score), formerly included only in freestyle tests, is now part of the rider score in the collective marks in all Training through Fourth Level tests.

When a freestyle test is harmonious, the movements and patterns look easy. However, a team can demonstrate harmony in a freestyle and yet have little relationship to the music. It is important to point out how

## ARTISTIC IMPRESSION

NOTE: Non-compulsory movements must be rewarded or penalized under "Choreography" and/or "Degree of Difficulty" (Artistic). Judges marks for Artistic Impression may be given in one tenth (.1) increments.

NO.

	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, cohesiveness	10		3		
5. Interpretation music expresses gaits, use of phrasing and dynamics	10		3		
<b>Further Remarks:</b>	TOTAL ARTISTIC IMPRESSION				<p>Overtime penalty will incur a deduction of 1 point from Total Artistic Impression.</p> <p><b>In Case of a Tie:</b> The higher total for Artistic Impression will break the tie.</p>
	DEDUCTIONS (Overtime Penalty)				
	FINAL ARTISTIC IMPRESSION (150 total possible)				
	FINAL TECHNICAL EXECUTION (150 total possible)				
	FINAL SCORE (300 total possible)				
	PERCENTAGE (Final Score divided by 300)				

JUDGING ART: *In formulating marks for artistic impression, freestyle judges evaluate harmony between horse and rider, choreography, degree of difficulty, music, and interpretation*

challenging it is for a team to match the music in both tempo and phrasing (see "Music" and "Interpretation" below) and still maintain harmony. This kind of a test is a joy to judge and should be greatly rewarded. It is also what makes the harmony score near and dear to my heart. When I judge, I always comment positively when I see a real "team" in the show ring.

**Choreography.** The next artistic mark, with a coefficient of 4, is for choreography, or the construction of the patterns in the freestyle test.

Is the pattern balanced in its use

of the arena, both from side to side and from end to end? Does the rider utilize the entire arena? Is the pattern creative and visually interesting, or are the movements too "test-like" or repetitious? Is there sufficient balance between work on the left and the right reins? Most important, are the patterns and rider's intentions clear to the judge, or do they leave the judge wondering what it is the rider is trying to perform? Clarity in choreography allows the judge to relax and appreciate the artistic aspects of the performance more fully. ➔

### Digital Edition Bonus Content



Read the new "Understanding Artistic Impression" guidelines, created by the USDF Freestyle and Judges Committees.

# TIME TO NOMINATE CANDIDATES

April 15, 2012

is the deadline for nominations for: Participating Member (PM) Delegates in All Regions

June 1, 2012

is the deadline for nominations for

- USDF President
- USDF Treasurer
- Regional Director for Regions 2, 4, 6, and 8

*Nominations for USDF President, USDF Treasurer, and Regional Director 2, 4, 6, and 8 will also be accepted from the floor of the Board of Governors meeting at the 2012 annual convention in New Orleans.*

E-mail all nominations to [nominations@usdf.org](mailto:nominations@usdf.org).

The choreography score includes the concept of design cohesiveness. The judge wants to see a clear, logical, and flowing pattern. It also includes the concept of creativity; however, at some levels the number of required elements is making it more difficult to create truly unique patterns, and so judges should take this into account when awarding the choreography score. Still, riders can show creativity in their freestyles by doing transitions that are not included in the standard

tests or by incorporating unusual lines of travel, such as along the quarter lines of the arena. If such combinations are particularly challenging, they may also help boost the score for degree of difficulty (see below).

**Degree of difficulty.** This score, with a coefficient of 2, assesses the rider's mastery of well-calculated (and permitted at the level) choreographic risks, such as a steep angle in half-pass or tempi changes performed on a curved line or circle. Executed suc-

cessfully, a pattern with a higher degree of difficulty can potentially out-score a less-difficult freestyle.

Done poorly, however, a pattern that exceeds the horse's limits will be marked down. Examples would be a too-steep leg-yield or half-pass for the horse's current capability.

**Music.** This score, with a coefficient of 3, assesses the freestyle score's suitability, seamlessness, and cohesiveness. The music score is not subjective, for judges are instructed to ignore their own personal tastes in music—but music recorded with poor sound quality, with abrupt or surprising transitions, or with dead air time is hard to ignore.


It is also difficult for judges to ignore music that detracts from the horse's movement—that makes him appear to be “chasing” the music to keep up, for instance—or that clashes with his appearance or personality, such as “heavy” music for a light type of horse or vice versa. If the music is suitable for the horse, with—most important—correct tempos for the gaits, he will truly look as though he is dancing.

“Seamlessness,” a component of the music score, refers to the music editing. Were the cuts clean and smooth, without jarring transitions, moments of dead air time, or obvious fade-ins or -outs?

“Cohesiveness,” the other component, refers to the music in its entirety. There should be a recognizable theme to the freestyle or a consistency in the genre and orchestration of the musical selections.


**Interpretation.** This score, with a coefficient of 3, refers to how well the music expresses the horse's gaits through use of phrasing and dynamics.

Interpretation has to do with the relationship between music and movement. Although the USEF rule book does not address this criterion specifically, the best way to show the correlation is to match the beat of the music with the horse's footfalls. At a minimum, the “feel” of the music should suggest the gaits and the



## MAKE-TO-MEASURE SADDLES

Made for *you and your horse* with the care & craftsmanship you deserve.



Made in U.S.A.

*Deep seat*


*Shoulder*

*Freedom*

*Close Contact*

### JRD's Legendary “Trapezius Relief”

JRD Master Saddlemaker Mehrdad Baghai



# 800-289-8225

[www.jrd-tack.com](http://www.jrd-tack.com)

movements. For instance, one would expect a crescendo, in which the music becomes louder or builds to a climax, to be accompanied by a similarly amplified movement, such as an extension or a lengthening.

The concept of interpretation also reflects the rider's ability to adapt to

any problems that may arise during the test—such as footing issues, loss of concentration of the horse, or rhythm disturbances—thus enabling the freestyle to continue as smoothly as possible. Last, the final halt should be clear, and the music should end at the halt. If the rider is forced to remain halted

while waiting for the music to end or if she is clearly behind the ending, the impact of the performance suffers.

## The Marriage of Artistic and Technical

A freestyle's technical and artistic scores are related, of course: It is difficult for a technically poor ride to be artistically pleasing. However, there is an incorrect belief, even among some licensed judges, that a freestyle's artistic score cannot exceed the technical average by more than a certain percentage.

If a freestyle test is not successful technically, then both harmony and degree of difficulty are affected. If major disturbances plague a ride, then the judge will have trouble perceiving the patterns, which could affect the choreography score. Likewise, if a rider cannot stay "with" the music, then the score for interpretation may be lowered. Think of how multiple falls affect a figure-skating routine.

One score that generally is untouched by technical problems is the mark for music, unless the issues are so pervasive that they overshadow the impact of the music.

The amount of work that goes into a good freestyle should be appreciated by both judges and spectators. Freestyle remains arguably the most popular aspect of our sport, as demonstrated by the attendance at the Grand Prix Freestyle at the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games in Lexington, KY, with its massive sellout crowd. A good live performance is so exciting that even those unfamiliar with dressage can relate to it if it looks as if the horse is truly dancing to the music. ▲

*Janet "Dolly" Hannon chairs the USDF Freestyle Committee. She is a USEF "S" dressage judge; a USDF-certified instructor; and a USDF bronze, silver, and gold medalist. She teaches and trains at Legacy Valley Farm in Arvada, CO.*

### Digital Edition Bonus Content



Watch Steffen Peters' winning Grand Prix Freestyle on Ravel at the 2012 World Dressage Masters Palm Beach (FL) CDI4\* in January.

*Dressage trainer and judge Dolly Hannon says of the performance: "I was struck by the well-designed and very interesting choreography, the use of the arena, and how much more difficult it was technically than many that we saw. He is able to demonstrate superior harmony with his horse and rides so quietly. It is inspirational. The artistic strengths were evident and the interpretation was particularly outstanding, so the entire performance was fluid and was its own unique composition. Truly an excellent example of what the judges want to see artistically (and technically!)."*

# Clean Lungs?

Protect your horses from Harmful Ammonia and Odors.



**#1 Stall Deodorizer  
for over 28 Years!**



Available nationwide at farm supply stores and  **TRACTOR SUPPLY CO.**

**800-367-1534 • www.sweetpdz.com**