

You Be the Judge

Unique schooling-show seminar provides further education for USDF “L” graduates

By Susan Lang

The USDF “L” Education Program provides excellent education for all dressage enthusiasts who want to learn to recognize correct training and riding. But even those who graduate from the “L” program—and are thus qualified to judge unrecognized dressage competitions—soon find that there can be real differences between practice-judging

“S” judge and “L” program faculty member Debbie Riehl-Rodriguez, of Golden, CO, for a day-long seminar aimed at both riders—many of whom had never competed in a recognized show—and “L” graduates. The USDF University-approved session consisted of a full day of judging instruction followed by several hours of judging videotaped dressage tests.



EXPERT PERSPECTIVE: “S” judge Debbie Riehl-Rodriguez (right) gives judging pointers to USDF “L” graduates Marie Maloney and Robin Hessel during the seminar

at an “L” session or at a recognized show, and judging a schooling show.

Providing an innovative bridge between the two was a 2014 program sponsored by a USDF group-member organization, or GMO. The Great Plains Chapter of the Oklahoma Dressage Society brought in USEF

Although the seminar format is not currently approved within “L” program guidelines (because program rules prohibit a faculty member from conducting an educational session at a show he or she is also judging), Riehl-Rodriguez and other “L” faculty members thought that a report on the Oklahoma semi-

nar, entitled “You Be the Judge,” could serve as inspiration for other GMOs seeking to provide innovative educational opportunities to members, and also could offer several useful insights to riders seeking to improve their own training and show scores.

Refining Your Judge’s Eye

The participating “L” graduates gathered around Riehl-Rodriguez in an oversized judge’s box at Valley View Dressage in Stillwater, OK, to watch and listen as she judged tests aloud. Newer “L” graduates, she said, tend to look for the obvious—crookedness, poor geometry, a spook, and the like—and although the judge must address these issues, commenting on them does not necessarily provide the rider with feedback about the horse’s training as assessed against the purpose of the test, the directive ideas, and the collective marks. (For a comprehensive look at these and other key concepts that are taught in the “L” program, see the “Lessons from the ‘L’ Program” series in the July/August 2014-February 2015 issues of *USDF Connection*.)

When she judges, Riehl-Rodriguez explained, she tries to determine the underlying causes of such “obvious” problems as they relate to the basics of dressage as presented in the collective marks and in the pyramid of training (see illustration opposite). She strives to write comments that will help the rider understand what is needed to progress in her training and therefore to earn higher scores, she said.

About an hour into the judging session, Riehl-Rodriguez continued to give scores and comments aloud but then asked the “L” graduates to formulate scores for the collective marks and to write their further remarks for each test. Having had the benefit of listening to the “S” judge’s commentary, the “L” graduates found that they were able to formulate the collective marks and comments more easily. They also were able to review each test sheet in order to compare their

evaluations with Riehl-Rodriguez's. Extra time scheduled between rides enabled the group to discuss and compare their judging.

Handling Real-Life Issues

Particularly in a schooling-show environment, a judge needs to be able to handle the issues that arise, often from young or inexperienced horses or riders. The "L" graduates in attendance benefited from seeing how Riehl-Rodriguez dealt with such issues as:

Riding off course. When Riehl-Rodriguez saw a rider deliberately put in an extra figure, she allowed the competitor to continue if it was apparent that it was a schooling move and that the rider was in control of the horse and the geometry. If the rider appeared to have forgotten the test pattern, the judge stopped the test and redirected the rider. Either of these occurrences resulted in an "error of course."

Horse won't approach C. It is common in a schooling-show environment to see a horse that is afraid of the judge's booth. In one case during the schooling show, Riehl-Rodriguez allowed a "lead horse" to ride ahead of the frightened horse to give him confidence.

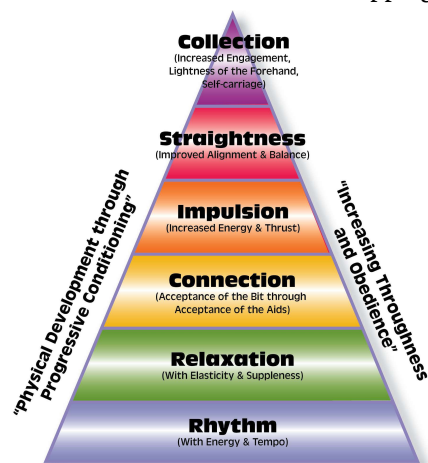
Wrong canter lead. Sometimes a horse picks up the incorrect lead and the rider seemingly is unaware. When this happened, Riehl-Rodriguez said nothing and allowed the rider to continue. Her rationale: Stopping

the rider and asking her to fix the lead still might not result in the correct lead; and it's always possible that the rider knew she was on the wrong lead but opted not to correct it.

Horse not prepared for the level. Occasionally one sees a horse that clearly is not physically ready for the level at which it is being shown, Riehl-Rodriguez said. When this happens, she underlines and circles the pertinent "purpose of the level" terms on the test sheet, to help get the mes-

sage across that the rider is not meeting the requirements of the level.

Rider displays poor equitation. When Riehl-Rodriguez sees a horse whose performance is suffering because of the rider's basic position problems, she scores the "rider" collective mark accordingly and writes comments encouraging the rider to work on developing an independent seat and hands so that the horse can move freely and show his natural abilities to their best effect. ➔



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Why Did My Horse Get That Score?

A common question in dressage is why one horse gets a score of 5 for a particular movement while another gets a 6 or a 7 for seemingly the same execution of a movement. In her educational program, USEF “S” judge and “L” program faculty member Debbie Riehl-Rodriguez tackled this question in detail. Here’s what she had to say.

“Imagine seeing three horses perform leg-yields that receive scores of five, six, and seven. The first step in understanding the variance in the score is to know the USEF rule-book definitions of the marks. A score of five means that the movement was ‘marginal.’ A score of six is ‘satisfactory,’ and seven means ‘fairly good.’”

“The second step is to read the directive ideas for the movement, which are found on the test sheet. In the case of the leg-yield, the directive ideas are ‘quality and consistent tempo of trot, alignment of horse, balance and flow in leg-yield.’”

The judge evaluates the performance against the directive ideas and assigns the numeric score that best describes it:

“A score of five (marginal) for the leg-yield would indicate that the rider made it through the movement but

that there were problems, such as resistance, lack of connection, rhythm problems, or lack of crossing of the legs.

“A six (satisfactory) indicates that the movement was closer to being correct, but there were still issues, such as haunches trailing, varied angle, shortened strides, loss of impulsion, unsteady connection, or inaccurate geometry or other minor problems.

“A score of seven (fairly good) indicates that the horse performed the movement with correct connection, alignment, and flow and that the rider rode accurately from letter to letter.

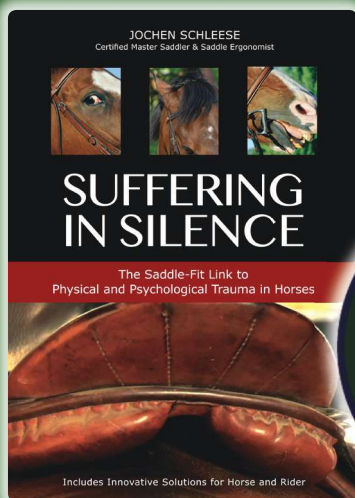
“A score of eight means ‘good,’” Riehl-Rodriguez said, “indicating that the movement was correct and that the judge also saw a higher degree of quality of gait.”

As most dressage competitors know, judges may now use half-points, as well. A score of 6.5 indicates that the movement was slightly better than a 6 but not quite up to a 7. According to Riehl-Rodriguez, the awarding of the half-point sends a message to the rider that, if she utilizes the judge’s comments to resolve one or more of the issues identified, her score may be higher the next time down center line. Conversely, a score without a half-point may indicate that further issues would have caused the score to drop.

As further instruction for the “L” graduates, Riehl-Rodriguez explained how much each issue affected the score, how and where in the test errors were charged, and how to write further remarks that help to make it clear what aspect of the training she feels needs work—for instance, whether she thinks the issues in the test and the low scores were primarily the fault of the rider, not the horse.

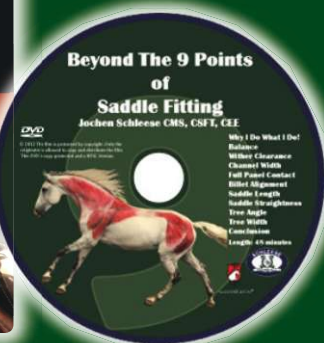
According to Riehl-Rodriguez, some comments need to be worded especially carefully. As an example, she discussed the issue of a horse’s not accepting the contact because the rider’s hands were restrictive and did not give the horse a “place to be.” Telling such a rider “horse does not accept the contact” might result in the rider’s thinking the horse is the problem and resorting to forceful methods to “make” him give to the rein. Instead, Riehl-Rodriguez said, in such cases she stresses that improved riding skills will facilitate the horse’s ability and willingness to stretch into the hand.

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Let's Go to the Video

After the show came a DVD session, during which the "L" graduates studied footage Riehl-Rodriguez had brought with her. As they reviewed Training, First, and Second Level rides, they watched five or six horses do the same movement or the same portion of a test, with Riehl-Rodriguez asking them to score each horse and provide a rationale for each mark. (For more, see "Why Did My Horse Get That Score?" on the previous page.)

The seminar participants also focused on gaits: Was the gait pure? Was it lateral? Were there scope and reach? Was there freedom?

Finally, Riehl-Rodriguez had each "L" score entire videotaped rides aloud, giving collective marks and further remarks just as if they were watching the ride "live."

The innovative schooling-show/seminar format proved valuable for both the "L" graduates in attendance and the competitors. It was some rid-

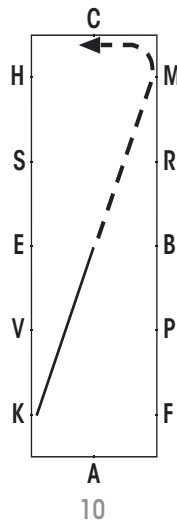
ers' first time showing in front of an "S" judge, and they benefited from Riehl-Rodriguez's seasoned eye. The "L" graduates in turn learned from the opportunity to judge a wide variety of horses and riders, and they honed their skills in using the full range of scores and in formulating collective marks and comments that help to point the way toward better dressage training and riding. ▲

Susan Lang, Wichita, KS, is the president of the Kansas Dressage and Eventing Association, a graduate of the USDF "L" Education Program, and a USEF "r" dressage technical delegate. She competes her 18-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding at Fourth Level.

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