



# Showing Dressage

## And Building On the Levels

By Christine Rivlin

**T**his article describes the requirements to show at the lower levels if the rider and horse team expect to be reasonably well prepared and expect reasonably "good" results in terms of scores. You'll notice that each level builds on the previous levels requirements. Starting with good basics and the requirements for each level will help ensure that you are ready for each level.

### Show Requirements

These are my training requirements for horses to show at the lower levels:

The first and most important training basic requirement is to ALWAYS maintain the correctness, and purity of gaits. I emphasize to my students that without maintaining correctness, purity, and to some extent quality of gaits, a movement is not worth riding. I use many exercises, patterns, suppling work, changes within and between the gaits, bending and lateral

work to try and gymnasticize each horse so that they can develop the best possible gaits and be the most "the same" both left and right.

### Training Level

Next for training level, the requirements are that the horse understand the connection and goes evenly, quietly and acceptingly to the bit. The horse must also, to a minimum degree, understand the riders aids to go forward from the leg, and accept the leg for a minimal amount of bending work, such as 20m circles, shallow serpentines, and the idea of corners.

### First Level

For first level, all of the requirements as stated above must be met, and additionally the horse must now be more "on the bit" and understand how to start to lengthen his/her frame for the trot and canter lengthenings vs. running faster. i.e., pushing power or thrust.

### Second Level

For second level, the horse again must have the requirements stated in the above two levels, plus start to carry more weight on the hindquarters beginning to develop the start of collection and the medium paces. At this point, the horse should be reliably on the bit and with a solid communication of the riders hand. Seat and leg aids must be understood to be clear about the differences in driving forward or sideways, like a shoulder in or for a medium trot. The horse should also understand the seat aids, again the difference between holding vs. driving seat in a more collected canter vs. a medium canter.

### Rider Requirements

As far as the rider requirements for the lower levels: they should understand the process of the entries, the forms, etc. which can be a challenge unto itself.



## The Scores



My interpretation of doing reasonable well and receiving "good" test scores from dressage shows are reflected as follows:

- Any scores in the 70's especially the higher up the levels you show are VERY good to excellent.
- Anything in the 60's is good. If you are showing training and first levels I think the lower 60's are alright for your first showings but you may need some work.
- Anything at any level in the 50's or below would mean by my standards that there are some basic holes in the training, the horse might have unexpectedly misbehaved, or there are some issues with quality of gaits.



They should at all the lower levels, but more expectations as one goes more towards second level, understand and show that the rider has an independent seat, hand and leg. Meaning they understand about the leg aids which drive the horse, or to bend the horse. They understand the seat used to hold, drive, or help bend the horse, and the reins to become a bridge from the leg and seat to the horse's mouth. It is very important that the rider learns to use these aids as independently as possible, to be able to go and flow with the horse as best as possible, thus not to interrupt the horse's way of going and quality of gaits. If this becomes a challenge for the rider, then I suggest seeking a competent instructor to help with independence of aids thru lunge lessons. Lunge lessons are a great advantage and importance.

Although at an actual show, there can be a reader for the test at lower levels, I emphasize to my students to have their tests memorized. Of course, it is also important that the rider be familiar with the dressage court, letters, patterns, figures. There is also available online or from USEF a complete rule book explaining the exact specific requirement of horse and rider to participate in a recognized dressage competition. I advise everyone to read the actual definitions of each of the lower levels according to the USEF rule book.

It is important for each rider to realize that: dressage is building blocks. You must have a solid basic foundation and understanding of what ideally you are trying to achieve, which is harmony between horse and rider. Most riders are, at least, familiar with the training pyramid or training scale. The rider must have a solid base in order to reach the pinnacle of

the pyramid. While, through correct training we go up the pyramid, we are constantly sliding back down the scale to refresh and improve the basics if we want the end result to be a horse that is perfectly muscled and a mentally relaxed athlete!

Many riders get in a hurry to do dressage movements, such as the flying changes, the canter pirouettes, the half passes, etc. But these are just tricks if we do not create a horse that is loose, supple, accepting and understanding of the aids; and we will never achieve the desired harmony and beauty we strive for. My best suggestions are to find a knowledgeable, competent instructor that can help you along this path. USDF is a valuable resource to provide amateurs with an instructor base of certified instructors, all whom have participated and passed to varying levels a standardized set of tests set forth by well recognized and respected industry professionals. There are also many books, videos, clinics that can provide valuable tools and resources as well.

*Christine Rivlin is a USDF certified instructor through fourth level, a USDF instructor certification faculty member, a USDF "L" judging program graduate, a USDF Bronze, Silver and Gold Medalist. Her foundation dressage background includes training for over 8 years with Lilo Fore, several years with Gerhard Politz and Major Anders Lingren. More recently Christine has studied under Steffen Peters, Leslie Webb and Roger Seegert. She also clinics with Guenter Seidel, Christine Stuckelberger, Conrad Schumacher, Lars Petersen and Lisa Wilcox. All photos provided by Christine Rivlin.*



Continued from page 9

Positioning rather than squeezing your leg. Conscious riding where you think clearly to your horse what you are asking, and you can clearly interpret their response. Second level is where true dressage begins.

### THE TRAINING

At training and first level, part of what you have trained your horse, if you have done your job correctly, is to teach your horse to seek the contact with the bit. To stretch to it and trust that he can put weight into the bridle without leaning on his shoulders and you will interact with him there. This is best illustrated by the development of a correct "stretchy-chewy" circle. In this cycle, the horse lifts forward from your leg, up over his back through your seat, and into the elastic contact of your reins. This cycle of energy creates a "rainbow" effect where balance is shared between your leg, seat and rein.

As you transition your horse to carrying more weight on his hind legs, you are taking the energy sent through the front of his body and shifting it behind the saddle. Half halts are the modality, where you activate your horse from your leg, catch the energy on your seat and balance your horse there. What slips

past your seat goes to your hand, where the energy must be "caught" and sent back to the leg and seat of the rider with a quick closing and release of the rider's fist- and, if the horse is really out of balance, the rider's arm as well. Your hands at this stage act more as sensors; think of them as the dish on an equal arm balance. Any dense, non elastic weight should stimulate another impulse from your seat and leg to drive the hind leg further under the horse's center of balance. You want weight on the hind leg side, and, as with an equal arm balance, this will lower the hind-quarter and raise the shoulder. If the horse's momentum carries him past your seat and tips him into the shoulders/neck, you feel the increased weight in your hand. You as a rider must have the independence in your hands to gauge what is "wrong weight"- the heavy, dense kind; versus contact. (This is absolutely one of the hardest aspects to master in dressage and even the masters continue to refine this throughout their riding career.) Remember, every heavy, dense ounce (or pound!) in your hand are the pounds your horse is not carrying himself.

To develop this level of independence in your hand, the rider must develop core strength that allows the rider's pelvis and

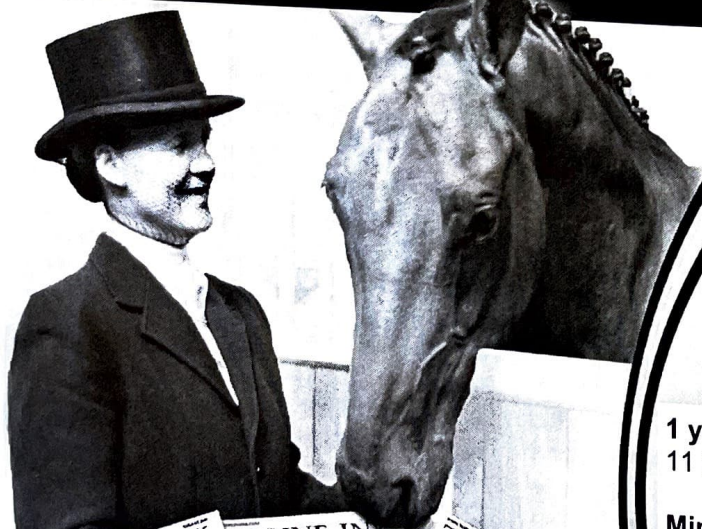
torso to follow and allow the increased height of the horse's stride without grabbing or blocking the horse's back muscles.

As the back muscles lift and engage, the horse can bring his hind leg even more comfortably under his body. This gives the rider the feeling of being lifted; you can actually feel the horses' back muscles expanding across the ribs, giving the feeling that your horse is getting wider and taller. As the horse carries himself more, they become still lighter in the weight that the hand feels; hence, described as taking the weight from the hand to the seat.

It always helps to have a mental picture of where you are headed. In piaffe, the horse trots animatedly on the spot, with his poll the high point and his shoulders elevated well above the croup. Find a video of Kyra Kyrklund riding piaffe- and know that is where all this hard work is taking you!

*Sarah Martin is a USDF Certified Instructor through 4th Level. She is a USDF Bronze, Silver and Gold Medalist and a "L" Judge graduate with 'distinction'. Sarah Martin teaches clinics nationally. She resides and trains in Blanca, Colorado. Her barn website is [www.blancadressage.com](http://www.blancadressage.com)*

ARTICLES   HORSES FOR SALE   MARKETING   YOUNG RIDERS   SHOW & CLINIC SCHEDULES



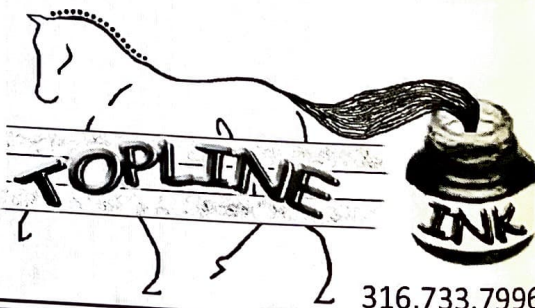
## Monthly Printed Publication for Discerning Dressage & English Sport Horse Riders

Topline Ink Equestrian Journal focuses on informative articles on equestrian theory, training, exercises, rider & horse tips, show information, & more!

1 year Subscription  
11 issues for \$30.00

Mini-Trial Subscription  
3 issues for \$12.00

P.O. Box 997  
Andover, KS 67002



316.733.7996

# EQUESTRIAN JOURNAL

## SUBSCRIBE TODAY!

Easy Online Ordering - [www.toplineink.com](http://www.toplineink.com)

Select articles and other information featured online!

[WWW.TOPLINEINK.COM](http://WWW.TOPLINEINK.COM)

Ad Design © EquineOriginals.com