



UNITED STATES EQUESTRIAN FEDERATION
THE NATIONAL GOVERNING BODY FOR EQUESTRIAN SPORT

GUIDELINES FOR JUDGING WESTERN DRESSAGE

Western Dressage is defined as training and developing the Western rider and horse to improve themselves as individuals and as partners through the use and discipline of dressage. By using classical Dressage principles the Western Dressage rider improves cadence, balance and carriage of the horse. The Western Dressage horse becomes more supple and flexible as it moves up the levels of Western Dressage working more off its hindquarters allowing for increasing lightness of the forehand and encouraging a natural head carriage.

There are a few points of difference between Western Dressage and regular Dressage, most arising from the use of Western tack. The description of the gaits is virtually identical but the Western Dressage horse must maintain “ridability” for the rider in a Western saddle. The rider’s position will also be somewhat different from that of a regular Dressage rider because of the Western saddle. The use of hands will appear somewhat different because of the Western bit; the Western Dressage horse should be “working on and accepting the bit”.

The following comments are intended to assist the Dressage judge:

GAITS:

Walk: A gait of “four-time”. The horse, while remaining on the bit walks energetically but calmly with even and determined steps. Upon extension, the horse covers as much ground as possible without losing regularity of steps; in collection, the horse moves resolutely forward with shorter yet regular strides showing self carriage. No mixing of gaits.

Jog/Trot: A slow-steady, two-beat trot with engagement and impulsion from the rear with a lesser need to cover more ground than at the Trot. No mixing of gaits. Mixing of gaits refers to patterns of foot movements/footfalls that are not true to the Walk, Jog/Trot or Lope. While the need for extreme suspension and thrust is not required, the movement should be elastic with lift. The horse should be energetic and supple and always move without hesitation **demonstrating relaxation of back, engagement of the hindquarters** while remaining on the bit. As horse develops, and upon extension, will lengthen his steps. Upon collection, hocks are well engaged with energetic impulsion enabling the shoulders to move with lighter ease. Because the reins on a curb bit are held alike and in one hand, guiding the horse must be through the seat of the rider and the subtle use of his leg(s); the horse’s body must follow the path of the movement.

Lope: A gait of “three-time”. The lope is light, cadenced with regular strides while remaining on the bit. Upon extension, the horse goes with free, light, balanced, moderately extended and balanced strides. With collection, the stride is shorter and there is more engagement of the hindquarters with more lightness of the forehand. No mixing of gaits.

BASIC POSITION:

The stirrup should be just short enough to allow heels to be lower than toes. Body should appear comfortable, relaxed, and flexible. Feet should be placed in the stirrups with the weight on the ball of the foot. Consideration, however, should be given to the width of the stirrups, which vary on



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Western saddles. If stirrups are wide, the foot may have the appearance of being home when, in reality, the weight is being properly carried on the ball of the foot.

All movements should be obtained without apparent effort of the rider. He should be well balanced with his loins and hips supple, thighs and legs steady and well stretched downward. The upper part of the body should be easy, free, and erect. The seat, as well as the hands and legs, is of great importance in Western Dressage. The rider who understands how to contract and relax his loin muscles at the right moment is able to influence his horse correctly.

USE OF HANDS

One Hand - In repose, arms are in a straight line with body, and the one holding the reins is bent at the elbow. Only one hand is to be used for reining and hands shall not be changed. Hand to be around reins. When ends of split reins fall on near side, one finger between the reins is permitted. When using romal or when ends of split reins are held in hand not used for reining, no finger is allowed between the reins. Rider may hold romal or end of split reins to keep from swinging and to adjust the position of reins, provided there are at least 16 inches of rein between the hands. If a romal is used, hands are to be above the horn and as near to it as possible. Bracing against horn or coiled riata will be penalized.

Two Hands - Hands should be low and close together without touching each other or the horse, and with the thumb as the highest point. The elbows and arms should be close to the body, forming a reasonably straight line from the rider's elbow to the horse's mouth enabling the rider to follow the movements of the horse smoothly and freely and to apply his aids imperceptibly. This is the only position that makes it possible for the rider to school his horse progressively and correctly.

"ON THE BIT" AND HEAD CARRIAGE

Western Dressage horses are not shown with a hanging loop rein; the rider has a "light" contact with the horse's mouth. The horse must show acceptance of the bit with a quiet mouth and a willingness to maintain light but steady contact with no resistance. The seat and legs ride the horse forward into a "receiving" hand. The horse must take the contact on the hand, not the rider taking the contact on the horse. The use of hands on reins will actually vary from horse to horse depending on their level of "finish" but "constant bumping of the bit" and "a gaping mouth" are considered major faults. The emphasis is on a quiet mouth with head carriage that reflects the degree of collection and appropriate balance for the individual horse.

"Good hands" are a rarity in any discipline but are very, very highly valued in Western Dressage. The concept of a "gentle correction" followed by an immediate very slight release of rein pressure is hard to learn but when coupled with a slight half halt the result is a lovely, soft carriage of the head and neck and a happy acceptance of the Western bit.

The head carriage of the Western Dressage Horse is the result of the horse carrying his entire body in balance. Overall head and neck carriage should be in relationship to the individual's natural conformation, showing the proper flexion of the poll and lightness of mouth achieved through proper training techniques which allow the horse to move in total balance and harmony.



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Judges should severely penalize any horse that carries its head below the withers or behind the vertical. Pulling, jiggling, gapping, teeth grinding, and any other behavior that indicates an attitude that is not happy should be severely penalized.

A proper head carriage of the Western Dressage horse should give evidence of flexion at the poll with the front of the face being slightly ahead of or on a vertical plane to the ground. A horse showing at the lower levels of western dressage may carry its head somewhat ahead of the vertical showing a bit more relaxation and giving the overall impression of an individual just beginning in the discipline. The horse should be at or in front of the vertical at all times. Being behind the vertical is to be more penalized than a horse that is ahead of the vertical.

The manner in which the horse carries the bit also deserves attention. Ideally, he should pick the bit up and carry it quietly and comfortably in his mouth throughout all gaits with a minimum of adjustment on his part. Many curb bits have copper rollers, or “crickets,” on the port which are to encourage a horse to use his tongue and keep a flow of saliva going to ensure a responsive mouth. When a horse uses this roller in a normal manner, he should not be penalized for being fussy or nervous in the mouth as he is doing exactly what the bit was designed for. An overly anxious horse will display more obvious symptoms than just rolling the cricket and can easily be distinguished from the horse using the cricket properly.

In summation, the way the horse carries the bit and responds to the hands of the rider is of more importance than the height placement of his head and neck as it relates to his individual conformation. Horses should be faulted for gaping of the mouth, pulling or lugging down on the bit, cocking their heads in either direction, trying to evade or “spit out” the bit, constantly opening and closing the mouth, tossing the head, etc. A bleeding mouth results in elimination.

SADDLERY:

Bits: Snaffle bits meeting the requirements of MO132.3 may be used on any horse in Basic and Training Level tests. The rider must use two hands with a snaffle bit. The use of a curb bit meeting the requirements of MO132.2 may be used on any horse of any age at either level. Riders may use either one or both hands with the curb bit but may not switch back and forth within the same test. Hackamores and cavessons are not permitted in any level in any test.

Saddle: any standard Western Stock Saddle to be used. (Silver equipment will not count over a good working outfit)

Warm-up: Restrictions in warm-up areas are similar to the open Dressage (DR) Division rules other than saddlery. For specific restrictions refer to MO189

ATTIRE: Refer to Morgan Western Pleasure Appointments and Attire --MO132

TESTS:

Calling of tests is permitted regardless of test or level.