

# ASK THE EXPERTS

## Precision vs. Quality in Tests

**Q** While riding a dressage test, I often have the feeling that my horse isn't ready to perform the required movement at the required spot. For example, when I'm supposed to ride a walk-canter transition at C, I find that I need more time to execute the transition properly—a few steps past C. What should I do when encountering such problems—go ahead and perform a poor movement or wait until I feel my horse is ready? What is the secret to having the horse “ready” at all times?

Heidi Capo  
Waco, Texas

### SUZANNE DANSBY BOLLMAN

**A** These are excellent questions, because most of us have dealt with lack of preparation for transitions or movements.

Let's assume first that you are in an open show and riding a green or young horse or you as a rider are learning how to ride the test or both. Since a transition has a coefficient of 1, it would not affect your score as much as a mistake with a movement that has a double coefficient, such as a pirouette. In most cases, it is better to do a transition with preparation past the letter than to worry about the placement. This is for two reasons: First, you are training both yourself and your horse, even when you are in the middle of a test. If you do the transition in a hurry or without proper preparation, you are “un-training” your horse. It is better to receive a comment from the judge that says “late but nice transition” and get a 6 than to get a comment like “rushed and above the bit” and get a 4 or 5.

But, if you think you could receive a really low score for lack of execution (if the horse is disobedient or refusing to go to the letter, such as C, because he is

shying from the judge's box or something beyond it), you could choose to circle and receive a -2 for an error. Take your time, coax your horse in a firm but trusting manner (as the rider, you are his leader) in order to work him through his fear. Return to the track well before the letter (to H or M so you have the corner to help you bend and engage him), ride in shoulder-fore so your horse is flexed away from the distraction on the outside of the arena and attempt the transition again. At least you will have (1) schooled your horse and (2) ridden him through the transition. This also demonstrates to the judges that you are willing to take the time and effort to train your horse through a difficult situation without giving up easily or punishing him.

When your horse spooks at home, ride him the same way as in that moment in the show ring—with trust and respect. As the leading partner, use firm affirmation, not punishment. Do not make a big deal out of riding through difficult moments. Keep figuring out ways to ride through them to help develop your horse's confidence in the situation and in you.

The same rule applies for movements. But, for some of the movements with a double coefficient and for which you will receive a double score, you may consider starting them over—but only in extreme cases. For example, you are in the middle of a Prix St. Georges test on the short diagonal, attempting to do a half pirouette and your horse is refusing to go forward on a straight line. Only a meter away from X, you have not been able to collect your horse for the pirouette, and he is not responding to your aids. If your horse normally can do a pirouette for a 7 or 8 and you think he will respond to you more obediently, circle back to the short side so you have the corner and plenty of time before going on the diagonal to re-try the movement,

encouraging your horse in preparation for the pirouette.

An excellent example of this was when I was watching a world-renowned German professional riding Grand Prix in an Olympic qualifying CDI show. He re-started a movement that had a double coefficient, because he would surely have received a 2 or a 3 for it, and he knew he and his horse were capable of doing it much better. He was attempting a counter-change of hand in the canter (3-6-6-6-3) up the centerline. He had reached X at this point. He turned right at X, back to the track on the long side to B, rode down half of the long side again and started completely over, turning down the centerline at A to re-execute the movement and received a 6. With a double coefficient, he received a total of 12, much better than a *total* score of 4 or a 6. This was very clever of him. But, this is not encouraged for everyone, and only under exceptional circumstances. One should be a very experienced rider in order to be able to pull off such an undertaking, especially with a movement of such a high degree of difficulty.

To answer your second question, there is no “secret” to good dressage test riding. The best advice I can give you is to practice riding tests at home, and thoroughly learn them. Have a good ground person and knowledgeable trainer. Videotape your rides. Get to know the arena backward and forward.

No less than two weeks before the show, it is helpful to go out to the arena on foot and “walk” the test. Then, later, you can stand outside the arena and visualize riding a movement or movements and transitions and eventually the entire test. It is helpful to memorize a test in segments, then put it all together when you are ready. Next, do the same on your horse—first in segments, then the entire test a few days before the show. I usually have someone call it to me, or at least

stand at the arena with a copy of the test the first time I ride it at home, to make sure I have memorized it and am riding it correctly. Note what you need to improve, and work on those things before going to the show. It can be surprising what challenges pop up when you ride a test in its entirety.

On a daily basis, work on the basics. Proper preparation at home will increase your chances of success in the show ring.

## Steady Tempo vs. Frequent Transitions

**Q** I'm confused. Riders are often told to ride frequent transitions within the horse's gaits (e.g., working trot/lengthening the strides/back to working trot, etc.) to gymnasticize the horse. A trainer in the area, however, told me to instead pick a steady tempo and rhythm and stick to it. Which of the two approaches is more beneficial in dressage?

Eva Langston  
Buffalo, New York

### MARTIN KUHN

**A** Your confusion is understandable given the apparent contradiction. Some of the confusion comes from terminology derived from poorly translated sources. Germans in particular, often use the word "tempo" to describe the pace of the gait. For example, "*arbeits tempo*" describes a working gait, and "*versammeltes tempo*" describes a collected gait. To its credit, the U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) is doing good work through its manuals, certification programs, rephrasing of the training pyramid, etc., to standardize terminology.

"Rhythm" refers to the correct footfalls and phases (suspension) of the three gaits—the beat. That is: a walk must have a four-beat rhythm, a trot

must have a two-beat rhythm and the canter must have a three-beat rhythm. If there is deviation from the above rhythm, whether in the working, collected or extended gaits, then we have a fundamental breakdown in the first level of the training pyramid. Sadly, such a breakdown is not uncommon. (Pacing in the walk is a common example.)

When talking about tempo, we are referring to the speed in which those footfalls occur—the beats per minute—within the established rhythm. A quicker tempo in the trot results in the horse picking up his legs more swiftly within the established two-beat rhythm. However, if we get a horse too fast, in the trot for example, we call that rushing. This most often leads to a loss of balance which puts the horse onto the forehand and, often, heavy in the hand. We often see this happening in young, green horses when asking them too soon to lengthen the stride in trot. If the tempo of a horse's gait becomes too slow—in the canter, for instance—we see a loss of the proper rhythm, a four-beat canter.

Take note that when performing a good lengthening, medium, or extended trot or canter, the tempo should *appear* to become slower, not faster. This is accomplished by means of greater activity and proper engagement of the hindquarters, which results in a greater degree of suspension. (This is not possible, of course, in the walk, which has no suspension.)

When riding transitions within the gaits, we want the horse to change the length of the stride. Changes to the tempo are an undesirable byproduct of this. That is certainly not the goal.

One of the key qualities of a well-trained horse is the ability to maintain the same steady tempo while performing transitions within the gait. This means that, while the length of steps or strides varies (working, lengthening, collected, etc.), the speed and rhythm should not.

### Suzanne Dansby Bollman

is a USDF (U.S. Dressage Federation) silver and gold medalist who has won many awards regionally, nationally and internationally. With her horses Cooper and Kasper she was long- or short-listed for the U.S. Dressage Team for several years.



### David B. Fishkin, DC, MPH,

specializes in lower back pain. He received his Doctor of Chiropractic from the New York Chiropractic College in 1988 and, in 2008, his master's in Public Health at George Washington University. Based in Rockville, Maryland, his Web site is [centerforlowbackpain.com](http://centerforlowbackpain.com).



### Volker Brommann

is a *Reitlehrer* licensed by the German FN and a USDF medalist. Trained by Walter Christensen, the German native moved to the U.S. in 1981. He maintains a close working relationship with former U.S. coach Klaus Balkenhol. Near Sacramento, California, he trains horses and riders to the FEI levels ([volkerbrommann.com](http://volkerbrommann.com)).



### Martin Kuhn

is a USDF Certified Instructor through Fourth Level. In 2007, he won the USDF Region 4 Championship for the Intermediaire Freestyle. In 2008, his horse, Rubinstar, placed 5th at Horse of the Year at Training Level. He trains and teaches at StarWest in New Berlin, Illinois ([starwestonline.net](http://starwestonline.net)).



Have a question about dressage? E-mail it to [Dressage.Today@EquiNetwork.com](mailto:Dressage.Today@EquiNetwork.com) or send to Dressage Today, 656 Quince Orchard Rd., Suite 600, Gaithersburg, MD 20878—Ask the Experts is compiled by **Reina Abelshauer**.

A helpful way to practice this is to ride with a metronome and set your horse's footfalls to the metronome. In the trot, for example, set the metronome to the correct one-two, one-two beats per minute. As you ride transitions within the gait from working trot to lengthening or collected to medium and vice versa, the speed of the footfalls should remain the same.

If you can accomplish this, you are well on your way to gymnasticising your horse. Don't be discouraged if it doesn't happen immediately, as this is an involved process with most horses. Being able to ride these transitions within the gait without any change in the tempo is a great way to test if your training is on the right path. The transitions are also tools to help accomplish it.

## Square or Rectangular Horse for Dressage?

**Q** I'd like to buy a horse with a suitable conformation for dressage. My question is should I look for a rather short-backed and square horse, or a long-backed and more rectangular one? What's currently considered most suitable for dressage?

Carey Neiman  
Fredericksburg, Virginia

### VOLKER BROMMANN

**A** Horses come in all kinds of different shapes and types. Generally, I believe that rectangular horses are more suitable for dressage than horses that are built like a square box. Short backs also generally make it harder to achieve lateral suppleness in the horse. Because of his longer back, a more rectangular horse is better able to swing in his back, facilitating relaxation and throughness. In general, horses that are shorter coupled are tighter in the back because their back muscles are a

bit shorter. But, that is not *always* the case. This means it's more challenging for the rider to achieve relaxation and longitudinal suppleness in the horse. The length of the back might affect the horse's scope of stride. Imagine a short board and a long board placed over two buckets. When standing in the middle of the short board, jumping up and down, there won't be a lot of swing. When doing the same on a long board, there's much more swing to it. As a rule of thumb, the shorter the distance between the hip and the shoulder, the less swing a horse has naturally. In the half pass or shoulder-in, it's easier to bend a rectangular horse than a short-backed horse.

Tightness in the back can transfer to the mind, creating negative tension and touchiness in the horse, which also makes it more difficult to achieve relaxation and suppleness. Although short-backed horses generally have an easier time collecting than rectangular horses, depending on the structure of the legs and joint placement, both relaxation and suppleness are necessary for the horse to use his muscles correctly and keep his body healthy in the long run, including in high collection.

There are always exceptions to the rule. When assessing a horse for dressage suitability, it's important to look at the overall conformation—the entire picture—not just at the length of his back. Generally, I look for a good connection between the back and the neck/withers, as it allows the horse to support himself under the rider. The neck should blend smoothly and harmoniously into the back via long, sloping withers that reach far into the back as opposed to small, short and unpronounced withers.

Also, the relationship between the horse's back and neck should be good as it directly affects the balance of the entire horse, including how the hindquarters tie into the movement. For example, if

the horse is square but has an extremely long neck, it gives the rider the feel as if the horse is constantly ahead of her, too far out in the front. Conversely, a longish back coupled with an extremely short neck makes it difficult for the horse to stretch his back. Ideally, the horse's forehead, midsection and hindquarters should complement each other in length and size. As a general rule, the shorter the back—the closer the hind legs and front legs are to one another—the choppier the gaits (it has nothing to do with the horse's size).

When looking at a young horse that hasn't been under saddle for long, I make sure he looks well-balanced when moving and standing. His legs should be straight. I also look at the angles of the horse's hip, buttock and stifle joint. For a dressage horse, the angles should not be too open, but rather closed. The same applies for the stifle joints downward to the hocks. Open angles, exhibited by straight-legged horses, make it harder for the horse to collect.

The size of a person also affects whether to choose a horse with a longer or shorter back. A tall rider with extremely long legs will have little room for them on a short-backed horse. A heavier rider who requires a rather large saddle should make sure the saddle does not sit on the horse's loins (which is more likely if the horse has a short back), as it inhibits the horse's ability to relax. On the other hand, a petite rider should not choose a horse that is extremely long in the back—simply because he will be harder for her to ride. As a general rule, horse and rider should fit each other optically. At shows, although dressage judges don't necessarily judge the picture, it might trickle into the evaluation of the pair.

Whenever assessing a horse for the first time, make sure to keep an open mind, even if you spot conformational

flaws. Handle the horse and ride him. Are there enough positives that override the negatives? Does the horse feel good when you ride him? If I look at two horses—one is rectangular and one is square—but the rectangular horse's attitude and temperament is rather challenging, and the short-backed horse turns out to be a great ride, I might opt for the square horse because I can actually ride him. At any rate, I like a horse that is elastic, supple and has the ability to collect with training, and in my experience, a rectangular horse is *usually* well-equipped with those qualities.

## Riding Lessons with a Herniated Disc?

**Q** I have been suffering from back pain due to a herniated disc but would like to continue with my riding lessons. I heard riding might help alleviate the pain. Please give me your thoughts on that.

Monica Lewis

Rochester, New York

### DAVID B. FISHKIN, DC, MPH

**A** The answer to the question of whether or not it is wise to continue riding while having pain that may be associated with a herniated disc depends on several factors. If the pain is recent and intense and is made worse by sitting in general, it may be best to wait until the pain has subsided before resuming riding. If you are experiencing a recent onset of pain, it is a sign that the inflammation is quite active in the area. Further attempts to "ride it out" may lead to a more severe situation. But, if the pain has been going on for a longer period of time (a minimum of four weeks), is not made worse by sitting and generally feels better with activity, then con-

sider getting back into the saddle.

Many riders who have chronic lower-back spine disease actually feel better with riding. This is supported by what we know about stimulating the lower spinal muscles. The very deep, lower spine muscles are subject to weakening because of fatty replacement of muscle. While we do know that this fat is not a weight-related issue, the cause that leads to these changes is unclear. Is it the lack of activity or the incidence of trauma, such as a herniated disc, that initiates the conversion of muscle to fat?

The disc, which sits between each bony segment—called a “vertebra”—is a hydrostatic ball bearing, like a water-filled balloon with a tough outer casing. It provides spacing and shock absorption between the vertebrae. The disc is a pain-sensitive structure, but it is not the only pain-producing structure in the spine. Even if you have an obvious herniated, or “bulging,” disc that can be seen with diagnostic imaging, such as MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), it still may not disclose the real source of the pain. While technology is a wonderful tool, it is not often the determining tool for understanding and solving the problem. Be wary of a doctor who simply looks at these images and concludes the origin of your problem. This knowledge only comes from a thorough history and examination.

Maintaining healthy deep, lower spinal muscles can be quite challenging because these muscles, which are essential for correct dressage performance, are typically difficult to strengthen with standard gym activity. These muscles require specific targeted exercises, sometimes on specialized equipment. It turns out that riding is an excellent way to stimulate these lower muscles. Riding is a very dynamic activity, and dressage specifically is even more demanding and stimulating for these muscles because of

the focused attention to balance.

Another way to stimulate the deep, lower spinal muscles when not in the saddle is to sit on a device called a “stability disc”—a circular, air-filled disc that encourages you to move your pelvis while sitting. It is an excellent way to keep the deep, lower back muscles toned or to strengthen weak ones. The stability disc fits nicely in a chair, works well in a professional setting and is great for travel.

Another factor to consider for riding is your own body structure. No one is perfectly symmetrical. In many areas of life this may not be critical but, in dressage, your body structure and balance could mean the difference between adequate and outstanding performance. Common areas to analyze include the two sides of the pelvis, known as the hemi-pelvis, for balance. Some people have a smaller hemi-pelvis, which could require a build-up of the saddle features. Determining the characteristics of the hemi-pelvis is accomplished by technical X-ray and biomechanical analysis. Limb length discrepancies could also require an adjustment in the saddle.

Lower-back problems rank as the fourth most costly chronic disease after diabetes and heart conditions. Fortunately, lower-back problems do not threaten your life as the other diseases do, and there are effective options to stabilize and improve your condition. For example, in my office we employ a treatment option called “myofascial trigger point dry needling.” It is a method of effectively balancing dysfunctional and locked muscles. Muscles can undergo a process whereby they become locked and cannot unlock by themselves, even with therapeutic forms of treatment, such as massage, ultrasound or electrical muscle stimulation. This technique is not acupuncture. Rather, it is a western-derived approach to treating sick and injured muscles. With so many effective,

standard treatment options, as well as many evolving, innovative and creative ones, surgery should always be the very last resort—not the first.

Finally, listen to your body. If the activity you are doing is increasing your symptoms, then you should stop it temporarily. Thus, your pain level may require suspension of your riding until the situation is stabilized. Even if the doctor says “yes,” if your body says “absolutely no,” listen to it; it is whispering signals to you, and you should respect them.

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## BOOK REVIEW

### **Riding Dynamics, The Process of Learning and its Application to Riding**

*By Kerry Turner with foreword by Patrick Print, Chairman, British Horse Society 248 pages. Available directly from the author: shantiesmum@yahoo.co.uk.*

*Reviewed by Mary Daniels*

**T**his book uniquely combines the twin passions of author Kerry Turner, horses and learning. It is unlike any other horse book in that it is based on Systems Thinking, a technique she learned in the United States with its creator, Peter Senge.

This is a book that will appeal to intellectuals, those riders who need to take in information first on the left side of the brain and let it sink in before they can “right-brain it” (have it become automatic and unthinking).

At first, getting through all the detail at the beginning of this book seemed a bit daunting. But, once into it, the book’s purpose becomes clear: to challenge the rider to improve by constantly self-analyzing the dynamics of riding.

This book gives the reader the tools for self-analysis. The author is well-qualified in her approach, having completed degrees in mathematics and Opera-

tional Research, gaining an international reputation for her business performance management work. She also competed in all three riding disciplines and completed her British Horse Society (BHS) exams and judges training in Great Britain.

She found the influence of the trainers with whom she has worked and the books she read to be only the “trees” and sought to see the “forest,” the greater picture. In order to gain a broader, more balanced spectrum of views on riding and training, she created a questionnaire and sent it to a cross-section of well-known trainers, judges and riders. (The questionnaire is in the back of the book, and the reader is invited to take it.)

By sharing contradictory views from the respondents of the survey, the author shows that each rider must find his or her own way, analyzing what is right for him or her and the horse. She writes, “Take back your power, take responsibility for yourself and your influence.”

This is probably not a book for the neophyte who is still trying to get some conformity in learning the basics. But, for the rider already immersed, the text is chockablock with all kinds of information, including her thoughts on subjects including equipment, finding the right horse, choosing a trainer, back problems, nutrition, fitness, Pilates, massage and osteopathy for the rider—which makes for interesting reference.

The book costs 18 euros (\$25.60 USD) plus shipping. For an extra 2 euros (\$2.85), the author will inscribe a personal message and donate to The Brooke Foundation, an international horse charity. 📖

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