

The Dressage Judge's Alphabet

Thank you Jan Geary for these excellent notes

A collection of words and phrases to help ring the changes when looking for new ways of expressing what happens in a Dressage Test

Because we do not always comment on well performed movements, this collection reflects on what NEEDS to happen when movements are in need of some polish, rather than just describing the problem.

A for Aids 'On the aids' means the horse is monitoring the rider's aids successfully, lifts higher or longer but never runs.

Judges Comment: 'Aids misunderstood, strides should lengthen not accelerate'.

Refers to the fundamental process of communication between horse and rider. Acceptance or effect of the driving aids should give the stepping under not speeding up of the horse. Faced with a running, often mechanically and stiffly striding horse when elastic and supple lengthening is required the above comment could be made.

The misunderstanding of the aids between horse and rider can be relevant in many situations

A for Active

Judges Comment: 'Needs more active strides'

When nothing much is happening, in fact it is very ordinary the comment can use words such as "more thrust/ power/ drive to achieve expression".

B for Balance

Judges Comment: 'Unbalanced.....' (plus further explanation if time)

Used in relation to shifting of the weight affecting the rhythm. The weight can be pushed forward or to one side.

A balanced horse can keep identical strides through straight and bent paths and make distinct transitions.

B for Bridle and Bit

Judges Comment: 'Resistance affecting round frame'

Above, behind, against, too deep, resisting - to be on the bit involves the TOTAL horse skeletally with elastic joints. It involves a shorter base

capable of moving deeper under the weight with the hinds. Too short in the neck and trailing hocks often shows up the problem a horse has with accepting the bit.

B for Back (suppleness of)

Judges Comment: 'Needs to swing and relax thru' the back'

A horse that does not relax his muscles to carry the rider appears stiff (corpse like!) and cannot produce a swinging vibrating back necessary for supple and elastic movements. A rider can cause this problem.

B for Bend - 1 longitudinal and 2 lateral

Judges Comment 1: 'Improve roundness'

Longitudinal bend or flexing results in well engaged joints and contributes to greater impulsion on a more collected shorter base.

Judges Comment 2: 'Improve bend to right or left'

Lateral bend is when the horse is bent along the entire spinal column towards one side. Very suppling. Needed in lateral movements.

B for Blurred

Judges comment: 'Blurred transition, too hesitant'

Clear, crisp transitions from one movement to another ie Canter strike off (no extra steps shuffling into canter) or collected walk into Passage (no trot steps before the passage) and many others

C for Contact and Connection

Judges comment: 'Uneven contact' or 'Needs connection'

This refers to the horse avoiding the communication of energy between himself and the rider - an aids issue.

C for Cadence

Judges comment: 'Develop a more elastic rhythm'

A horse with cadence has brilliance artistically. Occasionally we are privileged to witness a truly elastic rhythm.

Stephan Clarke at his 2004 Seminar said 'Cadence is pronounced rhythm'

C for Collection

Judges comment: 'Improve collection'

Collection is a major issue - a shorter frame yet taller more active horse. A stretched topline with a shorter mass which makes it easier for the haunches to support and lift upwards. Gives a liberated forehand and freer shoulder.

Horses that can collect can extend successfully, and horses that are not uphill lack collection.

C for Carry

Judges comment: 'Hinds need to carry more'

Related to the power in the hindquarters, another way to explain the need for a more uphill frame and lack of engagement, especially if wide behind and trailing which is a lack of developed strength.

C for Changes (flying)

Judges Comment: 'Stepping short to left/right' 'Strides not even'
'Not through or engaged'

Changes may not be divided equally to either side of the centre line and strides can often be short to one side or the other. Lack of engagement will be seen in the need to be uphill and through with the hinds. Expression refers to the quality, often due to lack of ground cover and jump and can often be used in the Collectives rather than the detail during the Test.

C for Counter Canter

Judges Comment: 'Lost balance' or 'improve balance' or 'Deviating hinds'

The hinds often do not follow the forehand and the quality of the canter lacks lightness and elasticity. In counter canter horses often seen to be stiff and lacking suppleness.

C for Crooked

Judges Comment: 'Crooked, lack of forward thrust'

Can apply to rein back, halts, flying changes and riding down the Centreline and long sides.....

D for Diagonal

Judges Comment: 'Rein back not in diagonal pairs'

A lateral rein back appears quite frequently.

D for Dynamic

Judges Comment: 'Trot needs to be more dynamic'

Just another power word so that the overused Impulsion can be left in the Collectives.

E for Excellent, which does not mean perfect.

How many 10's have you given in your judging career - make sure you give a 10 before you retire - there are some potentially international horses competing locally now.

E for Elasticity

Judges Comment: 'Needs to offer a more elastic frame'

The horse must be able to contract and stretch its muscles in a round and supple way, allowing him to extend and collect without altering the rhythm.

E for Expression

Judges Comment: 'Willing horse, try for more supple and elastic strides'

Refers to the need to see an athletic stride in trot and canter. Expression is often used in Collectives better to use more specific comments during the Test.

E for Engagement

Judges comment: 'Needs to improve engagement'

No Test is complete without it, a horse will not be up, will not have flexed joints, will not be operating from the engine.

Without engagement and collection there is no Dressage Test only a riding of the Course. Trailing hocks and wide behind are great giveaways! It also indicates the lack of strength.

E for Extension

Judges Comment: 'Work to improve thrust/power/energy/drive/ground cover.....'

Use in Walk, Trot and Canter - so much more interesting than 'more ext' or 'more impulsion'.

E for Even

Judges Comment: 'Loops uneven size' "Half circles uneven"

Even in this context refers to half circles or serpentines that are not equally of correct size. Also used to indicate irregularity.

F for Faded

Judges comment: 'Faded before F or K'

Refers to an Extended or Medium Canter that is not ridden to the marker. Equally applies to trot.

F for Fluent

Judges Comment: 'Strides not fluent'

Often there is an unlevel stride through loss of balance especially in medium and extended paces. Does not always mean an insufficient mark.

F for Freedom

Judges Comment : 'Strides (or rhythm) restricted/cramped - needs freedom thru' shoulder'

Linked to freedom of the joints needed for an elastic, powerful stride. "The Happy Athlete" needs freedom to perform.

F for Frame

Judges Comment: 'Frame lacks roundness'

The roundness of the frame goes with the acceptance of the bridle and engagement of the quarters. Without roundness the horse flattens its outline and cannot collect to a shorter base.

G for Ground Cover

Judges Comment: 'Increase ground cover'

No medium or extended pace is complete without it, walk, trot, canter.

H can be Hollowness /Hurried strides and High croup

Judges Comment: 'Improve fluent/balanced strides in a round frame'

alternatively "Needs to engage hinds with round frame'.

I for Impulsion

A word from the Collectives (the final analysis), better to try for words that convey power, drive, thrust, spring, activity, through the Test.

J for Jump

Judges comment: 'Canter rhythm needs more powerful jump'

A canter with jump has spring rather than flattened speed. It will show clear suspension.

K for Kindness and a Happy Athlete

L for Lightness

Judge's Comment: 'Improve self carriage for lightness'

Related to the liveliness of the pace and acceptance of the bit - the opposite is a laboured, heaviness with weight over the forehead.

L for Lift

Often related to piaffe and passage when the stride is too grounded, also needed in canter strike off when the horse must sit and engage the hinds.

L for Lengthening

Judges Comment: "Needs ground cover and power"

Acceleration is not lengthening, in walk, trot and canter extension and medium paces should show increased ground cover and drive from the hindquarters.

M for Movements with more of everything!

There is also improve, work on, try for, go for and need - 'more' can be very overused, variation is possible.

N for Neck

Judges Comment 'Frame very short thru' neck'

Can refer to acceptance of the bit, also to engagement and the uphill travel of the horse in the Test. Rarely see a swinging back with a short, tight neck.

O for Open

Judges Comment: 'Frame too open, needs roundness'

Often refers to the acceptance of the bridle and lack of collection and engagement - seen in horses working slightly above the bit.

P for Power

Judges Comment: 'Walk/trot/canter need power and ground cover'

Without power there is no elastic change of stride or frame, and without power there is no medium or extended pace.

P for Pivoting

Judges comment: 'Loss of rhythm, pivoting or grounded or stuck'

Refers to Pirouettes in walk - quality of the walk lost.

Q for Quality

Judges Comment: 'Improve quality of.....'

Without quality there can be no high mark, often the missing requirement. Walk can be tending to be lateral, trot can lack fluency and canter needs to maintain the jump. Purity of pace is essential.

R for Rhythm

Judges Comment: 'Losing rhythm'

Can refer to a walk tending to be lateral, can refer to an unlevel stride, offers an alternative to irregular or uneven which may be too harsh.

R for Roundness

Judges Comment: 'Tension affecting roundness and elasticity'

Roundness delivers supple elastic strides and a convex top line. The opposite is short, stiff strides and tight frame.

R for Resistance

Judges Comment: 'Defiance affecting harmony'

Partnership and understanding between horse and rider a problem - the harmony and resistance question.

R for Reach

Judges Comment: 'Needs to improve reach and energy'

In extended paces it is better to comment on the reach than the overtrack. The reason, everyone has a different definition of the overtrack requirement, and conformation is involved.

S for Supple

Judges Comment: 'Work to increase suppleness'

A supple horse engages all its joints and muscles - the opposite is a rigid horse, tight and tense in the back with stiff strides.

S for Suspension

Judges comment: 'Needs suspension, spring and elasticity'

Refers to the airborne quality in trot and canter - most extreme case shown in passage. Needs strength and power to sustain suspension.

S for Swaying

A term to describe a lack of power or muscle strength in passage when straightness cannot be sustained as the horse ends up shifting its weight from side to side.

S for Surging

Judge's Comment: 'Strides not fluent'

S for Shuffling

Shuffling, often in rein back - refers to no clear steps, usually lots of half steps.

T for Transitions

The higher you go the more they are emphasised with a separate mark. In Judging everyone needs to pay special attention to the transitions as they set up or complete the movement - every movement has 3 parts, beginning, middle and an end. To achieve a really high mark all 3 have to be well performed. No 8's, 9's or 10's without good transitions!

T for Travelling

Judges Comment: 'Travelling' or 'Must travel with more thrust from hinds'

This word applies to the 1 metre allowed in the Piaffe in the Intermediate 2, which is often exceeded.

It also describes the way in which the horse proceeds, which can lack power from the hindquarters (engine).

T for Throughness

Judges Comment: 'Must be more through'

Refers to trailing hinds that are not pushing under the body resulting in short, stiff hind leg action.

T for Tempo

Judge's Comment: 'Needs livelier tempo'

Alternative to the overused 'more impulsion' - referring to the expression of the stride.

U for Uphill

'Horses must be born to go uphill' - referring to the fact that internationally unless horses work from behind, high marks and success will elude the rider.

V for Vertical

Judge's Comment: 'Must seek the bit'

Vertical, as in behind the vertical. Implications of lack of an uphill carriage are involved - acceptance of the bridle, carrying weight, engagement, collection, high poll.....

V also for vigorous, vitality and vibrant - all energy words that can make for more interesting comments than Impulsion.

W for Walk

Can be the one pace where a brilliant horse fails. A true walk keeps the 4 beat rhythm and is one that can, in extended, show reach and stretch with a powerful rhythm clear overtrack;

In medium - offer a clear difference from collected/extended

In collected - be more animated and active on a shorter base

X for the centre of the arena, X marks the spot for the Halt.
Do we see true balance on 4 feet with engaged hinds? Do we see a smooth departure?

X for Xenophon the Greek General who has the title of the Father of Classical Dressage.

Y for Yield

Judge's Comment: 'Must yield to aids'

A supple horse yields both mentally and physically. Yield is the opposite of resisting and is to give in, surrenders to the aids, becomes pliant. A good alternative to the often used 'Resisting'.

Z for Zigzag

Judge's Comment: 'Improve the balance and bend'

The counter change is one of the most difficult movements. Often the horse has not the developed strength to achieve a high mark. Rhythm is often lost due to the balance, and the bend is often to the horse's more supple side only.

Z for Zero - In Freestyles there can be a missing movement but in a regular Test there must be something that can achieve a mark! Work to be rider friendly.

Jan Geary June 2005