

## Chapter One

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# What Is Dressage?

### Dressage Defined

When I tell someone, “I’m a dressage rider,” most people, having never heard the word *dressage*, have no idea what I’m talking about. The term *classical riding* typically draws the same response. Often, I try to explain it as *precision riding*, but this definition falls short, too, because dressage is so much more than just a riding discipline. Dressage is really a humane and wholesome philosophy of horsemanship that honors and encompasses every aspect of the horse-human relationship.

Many people think dressage is trick riding because of the fancy, dance-like maneuvers that trained dressage horses can perform. But dressage maneuvers are not tricks. They are polished enhancements of natural movements that all horses can execute when romping with their pasture mates. Watch a herd of horses prancing about at play and you’ll likely see a series of flying changes, pirouettes, maybe even a little passage or extended trot, and sometimes the spectacular leaps referred to as airs above the ground. Later in the book, I’ll explain what these terms mean, but first, let’s talk about what dressage is.

### A TRAINING METHOD

Viewed as the ultimate approach to achieving harmony between horse and rider, the art of classical riding, called dressage, is centuries old, with roots traced as far back as the fourth century BC. The term *dressage*, pronounced with emphasis on the second

## *Deciphering Dressage*

syllable (dres-SASSH), stems from the French word for *training*. By definition, it is a systematic approach to training and athletically conditioning the horse by gradually schooling the animal through a series of gymnastic-like movements at progressive levels. Each level builds on the previous one, conditioning and preparing the horse physically and mentally for the more difficult and challenging maneuvers ahead.

Dressage fosters harmony and communication between horse and rider because results are achieved through careful insight and cooperation rather than coercion or force. Through dressage training, nearly every horse can be improved and molded into a happier, safer, more reliable, and ultimately more marketable mount.

During a dressage test or exhibition (see the figure on the next page), horse and rider execute intricate patterns and transitions from one gait to another that flow like a dance. Sometimes this dance is set to music, which is why people often describe dressage as a beautiful ballet on horseback.

Training begins at the Introductory Level and progresses through to the Olympic ideal, the Grand Prix, the highest level of dressage competition. Of course, not all horses (or riders) are capable of reaching the higher levels of dressage, but any horse can be improved by applying the basic principles to its schooling routine. Likewise, riders who pursue the study of dressage become better riders and trainers because they gain an understanding of the physics and mechanics of riding. Ultimately, dressage aims to make the horse more freely forward moving, straight, supple, balanced, collected, relaxed, and obedient, and the rider more attuned to his mount.

## **A RIDING FOUNDATION**

The foundation of all riding on the flat, dressage principles can apply to and enhance work in any equestrian discipline or breed, including jumping, western and gaited horses. The exercises and patterns help improve the horse's overall balance and athleticism, enabling him to perform better in his current field. Horses that

## *What Is Dressage?*



*A dressage test begins with a salute to the judge.*

have had some dressage training also become more responsive to their riders' aids, making them more pleasurable to ride.

Dressage also trains the rider to sit the horse correctly, using light, effective, balanced, and nonabusive aids or signals that cue the horse to execute a specific gait or movement. When performed at its best, dressage looks effortless and unconstrained to observers as the horse moves fluidly through his paces in response to barely perceptible signals from his rider. So subtle are the aids that the rider appears to sit motionless in the saddle, as if willing the horse to do all the work. Such effective communication without force and tension should be what every rider strives for, regardless of the chosen sport or discipline.

Without question, dressage is the most difficult and demanding of all the equestrian disciplines, yet any rider can participate on any horse or pony, purebred or not, and benefit from work at the lower levels. Even mules can participate at certain shows.

Dressage appeals to many riders who appreciate a challenge but do not relish the risky, daredevil nature of jumping or eventing. It also appeals more to people who start riding as adults because they can pursue it at their own pace and, health permitting,

## *Deciphering Dressage*

continue enjoying riding well into their later years. You do not necessarily have to be young, slim, trim, and athletically inclined to participate in the sport, although it helps! The longer and more frequently you ride, the more physically fit you will become over time, because riding is strenuous aerobic exercise, despite the misconceptions of many unfamiliar with it.

Dressage is also for people who like learning for the sake of learning, because it truly is an in-depth study of the physics and philosophy of riding, encompassing both the art and science of horsemanship. Whether pursued to the higher levels for its own sake or as basic training in preparation for other equestrian activities, dressage offers the best education a horse and rider can receive.

### **A COMPETITIVE SPORT**

In dressage competition, the ongoing education of horse and rider is tested at each level of development. This is why a dressage show is unlike any other horse show. At most horse shows, multiple riders enter the show ring at one time and compete at various paces before the judge. At a dressage show, a single horse-and-rider team enters the arena to perform a given test, depending on their current level of training. A test consists of patterns and transitions performed in a certain order within a rectangular arena marked with letters. The letters assist the rider in knowing when and where to execute a particular movement. Each movement receives a score from 1 to 10. The better the performance, the more points are tallied.

To someone who does not ride, a dressage test can be difficult to understand or evaluate. People who ride understand the complexity of the cues used to tell the horse what to do, but nonriders lack this appreciation. This is why dressage is not a great spectator sport, particularly at the lower levels. Typically, it takes a well-trained eye to distinguish the nuances that separate a so-so ride from a terrific one. Dressage at the higher levels is easier for the layperson to appreciate because the degree of difficulty in upper-level movements, such as the passage and piaffe, is more

## *What Is Dressage?*

evident. Also, by this time in his training the horse has achieved greater collection, grace, and beauty in his paces and is a pleasure to watch. The most brilliant horse-and-rider teams surpass sport and approach the realm of art, which can be enjoyed by all.

### **AN EQUESTRIAN ART**

The study of dressage does not require you to compete at horse shows. In the history of the world's greatest dressage masters, some never competed, but preferred instead to pursue it as an art form. Competition does, however, enable the rider to measure her progress and ability against other riders at the same level.

The harmony of unspoken language between horse and rider and the pursuit of perfection and unity truly elevates dressage from mere sport to equestrian art form. Dressage as an art is preserved in its purest form and performed in its finest tradition by the famous Lipizzaners of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, Austria. Besides standard dressage movements and quadrilles, the Lipizzaner stallions perform stunning leaps, called airs above the ground, which are a part of classical equestrian art. The airs, however, are not featured in today's dressage competitions, as few horses are capable of performing them.

### **A PERSONAL JOURNEY**

For the rider who pursues classical riding as an art, rather than as a mere sport or recreation, dressage becomes a passion, a lifestyle, and often a journey of self-discovery. Success in dressage demands true self-discipline, attention to details, and a sound work ethic. It involves developing a profound awareness of your own body in relation to each move the horse makes. It involves learning how to care for and communicate with another species. It involves analyzing training obstacles, finding creative solutions, and sometimes facing your own fears and limitations. It involves studying and accumulating an array of knowledge in topics such as horse care and nutrition, veterinary medicine, hoof care, equine behavior, pasture maintenance, tack selection, sports psychology, and much more.

## *Deciphering Dressage*



*Holly Veloso rides a test on Grande American, owned and trained by Judy Westenhoefer.*

Most of all, dressage demands patience and perseverance. Any ideal of perfection takes years of training to achieve, and there are no shortcuts, even though some have been tried with less-than-perfect results. Moving through each level is a painstaking progression for both horse and rider, often riddled with setbacks

## *What Is Dressage?*

and frustration. Classical principles have been time tested by riding masters throughout the centuries. Their enduring wisdom dictates that the horse cannot be rushed or forced into attempting any movement that he is not ready to do. To do so only creates tension in the animal and ultimately inhibits the grace and beauty of the movement.

For the rider who perseveres, the payoff is well worth the effort. The privilege and experience of riding an upper-level, classically trained horse elicits a natural high like no other. The horse in motion feels like it is floating forward effortlessly, each hoof barely striking the ground. The rider feels a sensation of great ease and confidence in the saddle, as if all she need do is think the movement and the horse responds accordingly, as shown in the figure on the previous page. The intimate communication and horse-human bond necessary to execute the movements is extraordinarily fulfilling. This is true partnership achieved.

For all of these reasons, dressage is truly challenging to pursue, but just as intensely satisfying and rewarding. In learning to ride well in this sport, we must learn self-discipline and confront our own riding fears and limitations. By learning to train our horses as we ride, we discover the boundaries of our personal patience, our emotional liabilities, and most of all a deep sense of awe at our acquired ability to communicate in an unspoken language with another species.

## **A COMMON-SENSE SCIENCE**

Dressage can mean many things to many people: a training method, a riding discipline, a foundation for other riding activities, a competitive sport, or an equestrian art. The term *classical riding* conjures up images of pomp and pageantry, probably because traditional dressage exhibitions sometimes involve a great deal of ostentation as horse and rider take to their dance floor, the dressage arena, and strut their steps. For some people, this image makes dressage seem unattainable. But the truth is, dressage is simply common-sense riding, as Sylvia

## *Deciphering Dressage*

Loch so eloquently states it in her book, *The Classical Rider: Being at One with Your Horse*.

Once you begin seriously studying dressage principles, it becomes evident how common sense has fashioned the classical techniques. They are solidly founded on the physics and mechanics of the horse's gaits and movements. There is sound reason for why the riding aids are applied a certain way for each movement. When used correctly, they are both effective and humane. This makes dressage as much a science as an art. The rider who fully grasps the concepts and understands not only how but, more important, why the aids are applied a certain way truly becomes a thinking rider who can effectively troubleshoot training obstacles and behavior problems.

This acquired knowledge and discipline is important, because each time you ride a horse, you essentially are training it. Depending on your own riding skills, you may teach your horse either good or bad habits. For example, if you allow the horse to move off on its own while you are mounting, you teach the horse that this is okay. For safety's sake, however, you must not allow the horse to anticipate your next move and act on its own. You must always insist that the horse stand still until you are securely seated in the saddle, and then move off only on your command. This seems like common sense, but it is surprising how many sloppy riders overlook simple issues like this every time they ride. Then they wonder why their horses develop such naughty habits.

A thinking rider is always in control, aware of the slightest deviation from the desired direction of movement, and ready to make small corrections as needed without force. A knowledgeable rider also understands and respects the horse's current conditioning and abilities and does not ask him to do more than he is capable of doing. Such careful and thoughtful handling teaches the horse to trust and rely on his rider. When faced with a frightening situation, a horse handled this way is more likely to look to his rider for safety and obey the commands he is given. This is what good common-sense training is all about: creating an equine companion that is safe and pleasurable to ride.



## **A Brief History of Dressage**

Dressage has existed as a system of training in other parts of the world for centuries, but didn't land on American soil until about thirty years ago. In some European countries, top-level dressage horses are revered as national treasures, and Olympic-class dressage riders are as celebrated as popular football and basketball players are in the United States.

### **ANCIENT ORIGINS**

Historians generally credit a Greek military man named Xenophon, who lived in the fourth century BC, as the founder of classical equitation. He wrote the oldest known surviving horsemanship manual, outlining humane training principles, of which many remain valid today. In his treatise, Xenophon describes how a deep, balanced seat and slight shifts in the rider's weight can be used to signal and collect the horse for precision movements. Precision riding was a necessary skill in Xenophon's time, as war horses trained for battle needed to be easily maneuverable and ultrasensitive to their rider's commands. They had to be able to turn or wheel about swiftly while maintaining balance. Often, the rider's hands were occupied with sword and shield, therefore, the legs, seat, and weight were the primary tools of influence, and well-trained horses were fine-tuned to these aids.

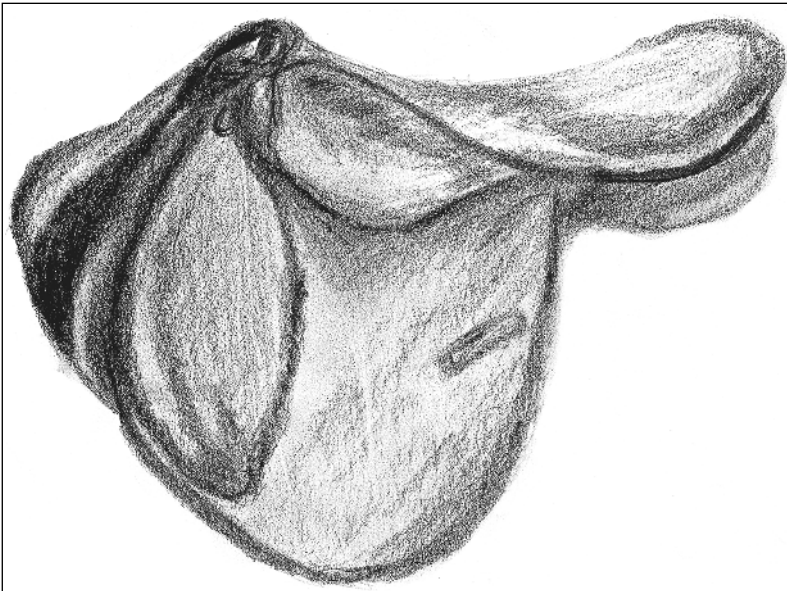
Xenophon's style of sitting a horse, as if standing with legs apart, rather than sitting as if in a chair, would later be refined and become known as the classical seat. If you observe today's top dressage riders, you will note that they ride with a long, nearly straight leg, knee slightly bent, and with a vertical, upright position, as if almost standing in the stirrups.

What's interesting, however, is that in Xenophon's time the stirrup had not been invented. Riders in those days obviously possessed extraordinary balance. Following the lessons of history, today's riders realize the value in riding without stirrups and routinely drop their irons during practice to help develop better balance and body position.

## COMBINED TRAINING

The classical seat differs from the more familiar forward seat or hunt seat position used for jumping (see the following figure). The English jumping saddle is designed with the flaps extending forward to help support the rider's more forward-leaning position. Dressage saddle (shown on the next page) flaps drop straight down to accommodate the rider's straighter leg and a more centered position.

Each style of riding has its place and purpose, yet even the best hunt seat riders employ the virtues of the classical seat during flatwork exercises to collect and supple their horses. Such cross-training benefits both horse and rider and is the basis for eventing, which combines the disciplines of dressage, cross-country, and stadium jumping. Riders who participate in all three sports practice what is commonly referred to as combined training.



*The forward seat saddle used for jumping has flaps extending forward to support the rider's more forward-leaning position.*

## *What Is Dressage?*



*The dressage saddle has longer flaps that drop straight down to accommodate the dressage rider's straighter leg and upright position.*

### **CAVALRY COMPETITION**

For centuries, classical equitation remained the domain of the European aristocracy and the cavalry. It is, perhaps, a sad commentary on humanity that such a beautiful art form arose from the need for responsive war horses. Competitive dressage was even introduced as a military competition in the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden. At that time, the tests for cavalry officers and their horses included jumping and barely resembled the tests we know today in Grand Prix dressage. Civilians were not allowed to participate until the 1950s.

## **AMERICAN DRESSAGE**

In the United States, where western, gaited, and jumping horses have predominated, dressage was practically unheard of until the early 1970s. Before that decade, the average American's exposure to anything even remotely resembling dressage was at the circus. There were, however, a few riders and trainers trying to stir interest in the sport. Most had European connections.

One of the primary movers and shakers was the former Olympian Colonel Bengt Ljungquist, who came from Sweden to settle and teach in Maryland. Ljungquist coached several riders who later became international competitors. In 1974, he became the dressage coach for the U.S. Equestrian Team. After his leadership landed a bronze medal for the U.S. team at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, Canada, American interest in dressage began to escalate. Women riders especially took note because the winning U.S. team was composed of three women: Hilda Gurney aboard Keen, Dorothy Morkis on Monaco, and Edith Master riding Dahlwitz. Today, American membership in the sport remains overwhelmingly dominated by female participants.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) was founded in 1973 to foster dressage growth in this country. Its efforts proved successful, as dressage soon became the fastest growing equestrian sport in the nation. After its 1973 founding, the USDF signed up about 2,800 individual members and 25 dressage clubs, called group-member organizations (GMOs). By 2005, there were about 33,000 individual members and 130 GMOs. Within this thirty-year span, the number of recognized competitions jumped from just 34 to 787.

## **How Dressage Competitions Are Governed**

If dressage competition interests you, you need to know how shows are organized and governed. Your best source of information is the *Rule Book*, which is published annually by the U.S. Equestrian Federation (USEF), the national governing body of

## *What Is Dressage?*

equestrian competition, formerly known as the American Horse Shows Association. The *Rule Book*'s dressage section provides detailed information on the following:

- The governing rules and regulations
- General principles of dressage
- Descriptions and requirements of the gaits and movements
- Descriptions and requirements of the dressage levels
- Requirements of the dressage tests
- The figures and exercises
- Dress and saddlery requirements
- Drawings of bits permitted in competition
- Prize and awards information
- Who the show officials are
- Information about qualifying and championship classes

Contact information for the USEF and related organizations is provided in the back of this book.

## **THE U.S. DRESSAGE FEDERATION**

The USDF promotes dressage interest and education in this country. The USDF works closely with local, regional, and national organizations to accomplish this goal. It is comprised of individual participating members as well as members affiliated through their GMOs (such as dressage clubs) and intercollegiate/interscholastic member organizations.

The USDF also administers a national year-end awards program for every level of competition, based on test scores earned throughout the year. Special categories exist for different breeds, junior/young riders, adult amateur riders, and riders aged 50 and older.

## *Deciphering Dressage*

The USDF lists ten regions on its Web site at [www.usdf.org](http://www.usdf.org). Each region has a GMO List, where you can click to obtain a list of the group member organizations nearest you and their contact information.

**Region 1:** Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, eastern West Virginia, and Washington, D.C.

**Region 2:** Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Ohio, West Virginia, and Wisconsin

**Region 3:** Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee

**Region 4:** Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota

**Region 5:** Arizona, Colorado, eastern Montana, New Mexico, Utah, western Texas, and Wyoming

**Region 6:** Alaska, Idaho, western Montana, Oregon, and Washington

**Region 7:** California, Hawaii, and Nevada

**Region 8:** Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, and Vermont

**Region 9:** Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas

**Region 10:** International

## **TYPES OF DRESSAGE SHOWS**

While large all-breed horse shows may sometimes offer dressage divisions, most dressage shows are limited exclusively to dressage classes. These are further divided into recognized or schooling shows. Both types of shows are typically organized by

## *What Is Dressage?*

a USDF-affiliated dressage club chapter or GMO and afford ample opportunities for volunteers to help out and learn every aspect of how a horse show is managed.

### ***Recognized Shows***

A *recognized show* simply means that the show organizers and exhibitors have paid the required fees to the national governing body, the USEF, and agree to abide by all USEF rules and regulations. Riders of all levels from various areas may compete in recognized, or rated, shows to accumulate awards and points toward state or regional qualifications. Once a horse has earned the required qualifying scores, it is eligible to compete in regional championships. The USDF also awards gold, silver, and bronze medals to those who achieve the required scores.

### ***Schooling Shows***

Schooling shows, or nonrated shows, are where most people start competing at the lower levels to gain experience and learn show protocol. These shows are more casual and loosely organized and are usually less stringent about rule enforcement than recognized shows. In addition, the entry fees are typically lower because schooling shows are not required to hire licensed judges.

As the name implies, schooling shows give novice or beginning dressage riders a chance to learn, experiment, and practice their tests and experience a competitive atmosphere without the pressures of a recognized show. Schooling shows are also ideal venues for introducing a young, green horse to the sights and sounds of the show arena. Often, horse and rider may perform well at home but fall apart under pressure at shows. It is common for horses, especially young, inexperienced ones, to become easily distracted or nervous in unfamiliar territory. Schooling shows provide an opportunity to discover and deal with these situations before moving on to the more competitive atmosphere of recognized shows.

### ***Ride-a-Tests***

Ride-a-tests are even more informal than schooling shows and provide an additional opportunity for horse and rider to practice a test and get a taste of what a real show is like, before actually entering one. Because ride-a-tests are pretend shows—that is, loosely organized local events that are not subject to the usual rules and regulations—organizers generally attempt to adhere to them for the sake of practice. Ride-a-tests typically are organized independently by a riding club or facility for its members and judged by a local trainer or instructor.

### ***Eventing or Combined Training Competitions***

Eventing, or combined training competitions, are sanctioned by both the USEF and the U.S. Eventing Association and governed accordingly. These competitions include tests in dressage, jumping, and cross-country and often take place over several days (see “Combined Training” section earlier in this chapter). Dressage at an eventing competition is judged in basically the same manner as regular dressage shows, although there are some variations in the rules, attire, tack, and protocol. Many eventing judges are also licensed as dressage judges.

## **THE NATIONAL GOVERNING BODY**

The USDF works closely with the equestrian national governing body (NGB) to help develop the dressage tests used in competitions. The tests are revised every four years to accommodate changes and the natural evolution that occurs in competitive sports.

For years, the American Horse Shows Association, which later was renamed USA Equestrian, set the rules and regulations governing recognized shows in the United States. In 2003, however, a new equestrian NGB officially began operations. The new NGB, formally called the U.S. Equestrian Federation, was created by merging USA Equestrian with the U.S. Equestrian Team. Headquartered in Lexington, Kentucky, at the prestigious Kentucky Horse Park, the new NGB sets rules and standards, writes national tests, and governs the conduct of horse shows nationwide.



## THE FEDERATION EQUESTRE INTERNATIONALE

The Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI) is the international governing body for all Olympic equestrian games worldwide and international-caliber dressage events. The *FEI levels* refer to the Prix St. Georges, Intermediate I, Intermediate II, and Grand Prix international levels of competition.

Here's what the FEI levels mean:

- Prix St. Georges follows Fourth Level and represents the medium stage of training.
- Intermediate I represents a more advanced stage of training than Prix St. Georges.
- Intermediate II, also an advanced stage of training, exists primarily to prepare the horse for the Grand Prix level.
- Grand Prix is the highest level of competition.

While the FEI regulates dressage competition worldwide, each country has its own national governing body—the aforementioned USEF being the NGB for the United States. The FEI designs the tests and sets standards for the higher levels of competition, while the USEF and USDF work together in this country to develop tests for the lower levels, closely following FEI directives and recommendations.