

DRESSAGE

From the FEI/USEF
Dressage Judge
Who Brought You
*Dressage for the
Not-So-Perfect Horse*

Q&A

with

Janet Foy

Hundreds of Your Questions
Answered: How to Ride, Train,
Compete—and Love It!

- Understanding How You and Your Horse Learn
- Overcoming Anxiety and Tension
- Gaining Coordination and “Feel”
- Figuring Out Connection and “Throughness”
- Creating Straightness
- “Getting” the Importance of the Outside Rein
- Educating Your Seat for Your Level

AND MORE!



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CHAPTER FIVE

Rhythm (TAKT)

Maintaining the *rhythm* of the paces is the priority of dressage training. Anytime the training creates rhythm problems, the training is incorrect. I remember a long time ago, Finnish Olympian Kyra Kyrklund said in a symposium, “You can improve the trot the most, improve the canter a little bit, and only ruin the walk.” Over the years, I found this to be true.

VOCABULARY

Confusion is often generated by dressage tests, as the rider thinks the word “rhythm” only covers one thing, for example, when the horse is lame, there is no rhythm. Of course, this is not always the case, and to explain, I need to discuss some different words and their meanings.

In the United States, we have a very good judge-training program and were one of the first countries to put a priority on the biomechanics of the horse. The vocabulary taught to American judges is very specific, and oftentimes, judges from other countries are not quite as clear with their words. For example, a foreign judge might just say in the comments, “Horse lost rhythm.” An American judge can use a variety of words instead, which mean very specific things. Here are some of them:

Tempo: This is the *repetition* of the rhythm—that is, faster or slower but still in the correct rhythm for the gait. So a judge might say about a trot: “Tempo varies.” This means the rider is allowing the horse to go faster, then slower: the rhythm is correct, but its speed is different.

Unlevel Strides: Here the horse has the correct rhythm, but one leg is taking a higher step. For example, in the medium trot, the front legs are not elevated to the same height. Or, perhaps in passage, one hind leg is higher than the other. This term describes the legs when they are in the air.

Uneven Strides: Again, the rhythm is correct, but here, there is one hind leg taking a shorter step than the other. This can occur in walk, especially if there is tension in the horse's back. It is also sometimes seen in trot when there is a pattern of "long" then "short" with the hind legs.

Rhythm Problems: Sometimes a horse trips, or the rider creates a temporary rein lameness (by restricting the horse with one rein), or perhaps the horse hits a deep spot at X. All of these things may cause a few steps of incorrect rhythm, but the problem is not consistent. It will be enough to lower your score, however, depending how pervasive it is throughout the test.

If the trot has 100 percent irregular rhythm, the judge will probably blow the whistle and eliminate you for lameness (see below). Often, a rider cannot feel lameness, and the judge, whose responsibility it is to protect the horse, needs to make sure no more harm comes to him by letting the test continue.

Irregular: This comment is used mostly in *trot*, and if the judge sees it consistently in both directions, in all likelihood you will be eliminated. Judges use other terms that will *not* get you eliminated, such as *uneven* and *unlevel* (see above and p. 59). An *irregular* walk is not cause for elimination, but you will not receive a mark higher than a "4" when every step is lateral, which is the most usual problem with the walk. (A *lateral* walk means the horse's legs on the same side of the horse are moving together. Pacing is another term often used for this.) *Uneven* steps at walk can receive a slightly higher score but it's still usually below a "6". Rhythm problems in the walk can lower the gait score in the Collective Marks.

Gait Score

The *Gait Score* in the Collective Marks is a reflection of the rhythm of all the gaits and paces shown and required in the test. This score is also influenced by the freedom and quality of the gaits. A horse with correct rhythm in all three gaits, but with little freedom or elasticity, will have a lower score than a horse with correct rhythm in all three gaits that also shows *reach*, *freedom*, *expression*, and *elasticity*. Think of the "wow" factor when you see a horse that just takes your breath away. Correct training and correct muscling of the horse will improve a horse's natural gaits: the trot improves the most, followed by the canter, but the walk you are pretty much stuck with—remember what Kyra Kyrklund said, "You only ruin the walk. . . ."

• STORY FROM THE ROAD •

I AM HERE!

In all of the years of flying, I have always ended up at the correct airport, until a fateful trip in 2014. I had been contacted by “Anne Marie” via a post on Facebook to do a clinic in Quebec. So she and I agreed on a date a year ahead of time. The whole time we “talked” it was to be in Quebec. I agreed to send books up for signing, and she gave her shipping address to my publisher.

So on a Friday I boarded the plane from West Palm Beach, Florida, to Quebec City. I arrived, got through immigration, and stood waiting outside the door of International Arrivals. I did not see anyone with a sign, and Anne Marie had said she would meet me. Hmmm. After about 20 minutes, when the area had cleared, I turned on my iPad (for some reason I had no phone service), and sent a message to Anne Marie. Here is the imessage “conversation” word for word:

AM: I am here when you come through the glass doors in the arrivals area. I will be on your right. I am wearing a grey coat, blond hair with glasses, around 5 feet 9 inches. See you soon.

JF: Do not see you. I have a purple long down coat on with gold purse and blue carry-on.

AM: I am on the right side of the doors. Where are you standing?

JF: I am by a big column to the right of the doors. Are you in a different terminal?

AM: I am at International Arrivals. Do you see the flower shop? Are you inside or outside?

JF: No flower shop here. I am inside. I will ask if there is another arrival area. I came in from Newark on United. It is a small terminal. I am taking a photo of where I am standing. (*I post photo.*)

AM: I am trying to figure out where you are in the airport.

JF: I am going to the information desk.

AM: I am also at the information desk.

JF: Here is a selfie of me and where I am standing. (*I post another photo.*)

The information desk says this is the only arrival area. I am in Quebec City.

AM: Oh no! You are in Quebec City, not in Montreal?

JF: I am in the wrong airport? Did you not see when I sent the reservation to you?

AM: No, you just sent the arrival time. Is there an Air Canada flight to Montreal? There is a flight every hour. Go to the Air Canada desk, they will fix it. I am trying to arrange something.

JF: Bus goes at 7:00 p.m. It is \$100 CAD, the air is \$471 CAD. I am headed to the bus station. Since I bought the ticket on United, Air Canada won't fix anything. I would have to call United and my phone isn't working.

Continued next page

AM: Go buy the ticket, we will pay.

JF: Okay.

AM: I am talking with an Air Canada supervisor. Give me your booking reference number with United.

JF: Okay, here it is, but it won't do any good. (I send her my reference number.)

AM: Is there a flight leaving soon?

JF: Well the cheapest one leaves at 9:00 p.m. (It is now 5:00 p.m.) I will buy a seat on that one. I will stand by for earlier ones. Will let you know when I board. Gads, so sorry. This has never happened before.

AM: Thumbs up! We will adapt, no worries. Keep me posted. Wanted to bring you out to dinner but we will go straight home.

JF: Okay, I think I will get on the 7:30 p.m. I changed my return ticket on my iPad (cost of \$530) so on Sunday we are good to go.

AM: Okay, we will drink a martini or two! LOL.

I get through security and see a flight boarding for Montreal. I tell the nice ticket agent my sad story, and he lets me on the flight. It is now 5:30 p.m. The flight is only 30 minutes, so not too much time lost.

JF: I am here at baggage, Domestic, by the Tim Horton.

AM: Yes, I am here!

And, finally, we meet!

So the moral of the story is to ask specifically which airport to use. Anne Marie explained to me that everyone in Canada says, "Come to Quebec" and never says which city you are supposed to go to! Here in the United States we say, "Come to Houston," not "Come to Texas"! Anyway, lesson learned for both of us!

Most judges will take the three gaits and average them for the final Gait Score. When the *lengthenings*, *mediums*, and *extensions* show improved freedom, it gives the judge more information and thus an option to move the Gaits Score upward. However, lack of freedom in these movements is not a reason to move the score downward.

Dressage is all about "doing no harm" to the rhythm of the gaits. It is also about improving the *quality and expression of the gaits*. By following the Training Pyramid and correct dressage principles, you will keep on the right track.

~ PROBLEMS ~ and Solutions

Q My Thoroughbred has absolutely the best walk I have ever sat on, and I've only ever seen one I thought looked as good. We waited a very long time to ask for any kind of collected walk, simply because it would have been so easy to mess up when he wasn't strong enough to really hold himself yet! How do I make sure I am able to keep this good walk and the correct rhythm as we train?

A Lucky you for having a good walk on your horse. Too many riders are impatient with the walk and only allow the horse short periods of walk on a long rein between exercises. I have found it very important for the rider to wait until the horse relaxes before picking up the reins again. Otherwise, how will the horse ever learn to do that at the show?

Q My trainer says you can ruin the walk. I think people ignore the walk because it's the walk, but they might also be ignoring what they are doing in the saddle at the walk, like fidgeting with the seat and reins. It's at the beginning of the ride so no one is warmed up yet. Are there good pointers about how to keep the lovely walks we have?

A Riders tend to "push" or "drive" too much with their seats at the walk. They need to remember that walk has no impulsion, which means the gait doesn't have a suspension phase, so the use of the driving seat actually ruins a walk. Instead, use clear alternating leg aids and alternating seat aids. Just allow the horse

to move your seat for you. He will rock you a bit from one seat bone to the other. Then feel how his rib cage moves into your lower leg as the ribs move back and forth. When you feel the ribs move into your leg, that is the time to give a quick squeeze—then you are influencing the correct hind leg.

The second factor that causes rhythm problems in the walk is the suppleness of the horse's topline. Any tension in his topline has an immediate effect on the clarity of the rhythm.

I think it is very important for a rider to spend enough time in the free walk so that the horse can relax and breathe. She needs to do this several times during her ride. And, she must be patient and really allow the horse to relax. Otherwise, he will never learn! The rider should also practice many transitions from free walk to medium walk to free walk so he doesn't learn that every time she picks up the reins she is going to ask for trot. This is why so many horses jig whenever the reins are picked up.

AHA! Moment

I heard it said once, "The horse must be more supple through the topline so he can better use his back." I love this description because my "Aha!" moment was when I learned that tight, quick steps are usually caused by a tight back. Relaxation and suppleness equals bigger strides.

Janet says: As you describe it, the horse's muscles are acting just like wires that conduct electricity! (See more on p. 68.)