

# “L” Is for Learning



ARNOLD BRONKHORST

LOOKS DIFFERENT FROM HERE: “L” program gives the judge’s perspective

## Audit the USDF “L” program. *First of three parts.*

BY JENNIFER O. BRYANT

Last year, members of the USDF Judges Committee contributed articles to *USDF Connection* outlining some basics of the USDF “L” Education Program. Sprinkled with glowing testimonials from program participants, the articles were intriguing. I’d served as an “L” program demonstration rider years ago but had never attended a session.

When my GMO, the Delaware Valley Combined Training Association, announced that it would host an “L” program beginning last fall, I jumped at the chance to attend. Organizers Darcy Freese and Anne Moss graciously granted permission for me to cover sessions A, B, and C for *USDF Connection*. On a chilly November Saturday, I showed up at a small classroom at the University of Pennsylvania’s New Bolton Center in Kennett Square, notebook in hand. In this article, I’ll tell you about session A. In the next two issues, I’ll share highlights from sessions B and C.

### “L” Program Overview

USDF developed the “L” program (“L” is for “learner,” as in “learner judge”) as a way to give aspiring judges a solid, established foundation in the basics of evaluating dressage performance in competition. The program, now a prerequisite for those wishing to enter the US Equestrian Federation’s judge-licensing program, has evolved into a strong educational opportunity for non-judge aspirants as well.

The entire “L” program consists of two parts. Part 1, “A Judge’s Perspective,” consists of sessions A (intro to judging and biomechanics), B (judging criteria for gaits and paces, movements, and figures), and C (collective marks, equitation, rider biomechanics, basics, and freestyle). Part 2, “Candidate Evaluation,” consists of sessions D1 and D2 (judging full tests at Training through Second Levels), session E (sitting with USEF “R” or “S” judges at shows), and the final examination.

Auditors are welcome to attend the sessions in part 1.

“L” program sessions are taught by a faculty of USEF

“S” (Senior) judges, who follow an established curriculum. Each session in a program may be led by a different faculty member.

For more on the “L” program, see “L Details” below.

## Session Snapshot

Held over a weekend, DVCTA’s session A consisted of a day and a half of classroom lecture, concluding with a half-day spent observing demonstration horses and riders at Training through Second Levels. The full classroom day was tough on the backside, but presenter Lois Yukins and her special guest, fellow “L” faculty member Betsy Berrey, kept the audience’s attention with information-packed material, challenging questions, photos and graphics, and DVD footage of dressage tests.

DVCTA’s “L” program was noteworthy for a couple of reasons, Yukins said. First, the numbers were huge: 20 candidates (with more wait-listed) when the norm is ten, and around 50 registered auditors. Second, “This is the first big ‘L’ program with the new format,” Yukins said—DVD and PowerPoint presentations instead of videotape and overhead transparencies. The content, too, had been “tweaked” for the session, she said, and will be discussed at this year’s Adequan/USDF Annual Convention.

Candidates came from all over—as far away as New York and North Carolina—for DVCTA’s program. Out-of-towners pay travel, lodging, and meal expenses. It’s a serious commitment, so it’s understandable that they sit up front and are generally the only ones permitted to ask questions of the presenters.

## “L” Details

To enroll in a USDF “L” program as a candidate, you must be a USDF participating member who has earned a minimum number of required scores at or above Second Level. Candidates must scribe for USEF “R” or “S” judges before taking the final examination. Those who pass “with distinction” are eligible to enroll in the USEF’s ‘r’ judge-training program.

For complete details and requirements, download the participant guide (PDF file) at [usdf.org/docs/education/judge-training/lprogram/ParticipantGuide.pdf](http://usdf.org/docs/education/judge-training/lprogram/ParticipantGuide.pdf).

USDF group-member organizations (GMOs) host “L” programs. To find “L” programs in your area, choose the “Calendar” link from the USDF home page ([usdf.org](http://usdf.org)). For information about auditing, contact the program’s organizer.

To help train their eyes, in the program’s classroom sessions, participants view footage of actual test rides at Training through Second Levels. The “L” program faculty is always in need of additional footage, either video or DVD. Riders must sign releases and may request that their faces be obscured. To donate footage, send e-mail to [lprogram@usdf.org](mailto:lprogram@usdf.org).



JENNIFER BRYANT

THE PRESENTERS: Lois Yukins (left) and Betsy Berrey

Auditors’ dressage experience varies more widely. Most candidates at DVCTA’s “L” program were professional dressage riders and trainers, while many auditors were adult amateurs. The presenters review rule-book and glossary definitions but assume that audiences aren’t hearing “turn



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SPONSOR BANNER: DVCTA, the “L” program’s host GMO, displayed its logo and made membership info available to the audience at the New Bolton Center



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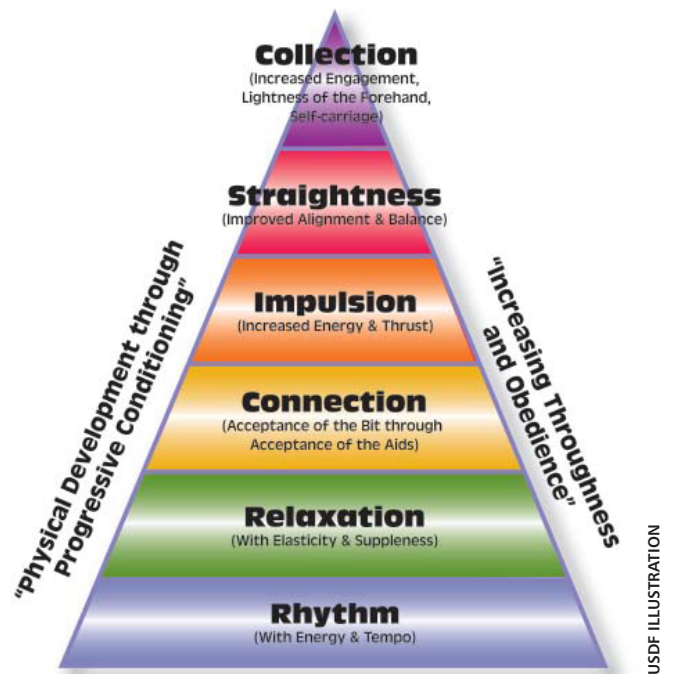
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on the haunches,” “tracking up,” and other terminology for the first time. To make the most of the auditing experience, a little time spent in advance with the USEF Rule Book and the USDF Glossary of Judging Terms would be well worth it.

When the sessions move from the classroom to the arena, candidates and auditors get the chance to marry real-life examples to all that theory. Unlike in most clinics and symposia, the “L” faculty members do not give the demonstration riders instruction, other than directions. The purpose is not to make the demo horses better but to give the candidates something to evaluate. The value for the demo rider comes in hearing the

candidates' scores and comments and, in particular, the faculty member's insights and feedback on those scores and comments.

Yukins emphasized that “They call it judging because you have to make judgments.” The carefully honed



THE TRAINING SCALE or “pyramid of training”



EXAMPLES: A variety of horse breeds and types in the ring helps “L” faculty member Lois Yukins (standing, facing camera) bring biomechanics to life



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CONFORMATION EVALUATION: An “L” candidate comments on the throatlatch of Hot Shot, a fourteen-year-old Welsh-cross gelding ridden by Reagan Walsh

methodology and curriculum help to ensure a solid grounding in arriving at scores and comments, but perspectives and vantage points enter into the judging process, and a minor variation in marks for an element is OK as long as the candidates can back up their choices with a solid rationale, she explained.

## Dressage from the Ground Up

“In dressage, a clean test is basics plus geometry,” Yukins said. Basics are the purity of the walk, the trot, and the canter; and how well the gaits embody the qualities of the training scale, relative to the athletic development expected at the level being shown.

Biomechanics is the study and properties of living beings in motion. The elements of the training scale (see illustration on the facing page), from rhythm through collection, refer to

biomechanical principles, as do the collective marks of gaits, impulsion, and submission. As the foundation of the “L” program, Session A devotes much discussion to biomechanics and how that knowledge informs the dressage judge’s marks and comments.

In formulating a comment, the judge must first address basics and biomechanics, Yukins and Berrey explained. Next, consider how the movement was executed (was the geometry accurate? Was the pattern ridden as specified in the test?). Finally, consider the “modifiers”—factors that color the movement but are not the movement itself. Effectiveness of preparation in corners, breaking gait, signs of resistance, and the like are considered modifiers.

The “L” program expresses this process as an equation:

$$\text{Basics} + \text{Criteria} \pm \text{Modifiers} = \text{Score}$$

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The hierarchy explains why (for instance) a horse that executes a slightly lopsided canter circle in good balance and a clear rhythm could potentially earn a higher mark than a horse whose circle is geometrically accurate but whose canter is four-beat: Gaits trump execution.

The more fundamental the basics/biomechanics problem, the more severely it is punished, said Yukins. Incorrect rhythm, lack of submission, lack

of impulsion or straightness—judges mark these types of faults harshly because they're trying to send a message that, on a basic level, the horse's training appears flawed. Such problems are known as *fundamental* faults. Less severe are *significant* faults—problems such as a lack of self-carriage or an unsteady head position, which indicate training or riding issues but which are not necessarily the result of poor basics. *Minor* faults, such as shying or

stumbling, "are treated lightly unless they are recurrent through the test," said Yukins.

## The Great Gait Debate

In discussions of dressage competition, one issue always arises: whether judges give preferential treatment to those free-moving warmbloods with big, impressive gaits.

Yukins and Berrey deny that judges favor certain breeds. Instead, they said, judges evaluate the gaits and basics against the established standards: the test directives, the collective marks, and the training scale. Because the definitions of these standards include such biomechanical qualities as freedom, reach, and scope (more on vocabulary in a moment), a horse that displays these qualities to a greater degree will—all other things being equal—outscore a horse that possesses these qualities to a lesser degree. And the fact remains that sport horses are bred for such qualities while some other breeds were developed with different goals in mind. Measured against the dressage yardstick, the quality sport horse may come out on top.

Let's you think that you're doomed if you don't ride a superstar mount, note Berrey's comment: "There are many test elements that are not affected by the way a horse moves. Halts, rein backs, turns on the haunches—any horse can get a great score in these types of movements, even if they are not great movers."

## Judging Vocabulary

Coming up with appropriate comments is harder than it might seem. Yukins and Berrey cautioned against using what they call dressage patter—those platitudes that have little grounding in biomechanical reality.

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ALL IN A ROW: Ways of going differ among (from front to back) Hot Shot; Stormy, a fifteen-year-old Haflinger gelding ridden by Maryanne Ost; and Mistletoe, an aged Hanoverian/TB mare ridden by Anne Dome

“Behind the leg,” for instance, is a horseman’s axiom that’s not literally true—the horse is not actually standing behind the rider’s legs.

In order to comment effectively, a judge must know what the terms—from rhythm to collection, unlevel to uneven, steps to strides, balance to bend—really mean. This is where the USDF Glossary of Judging Terms comes in. Yukins and Berrey encouraged the candidates to use the vocabulary to make their comments as specific as possible. Then, the competitor should be able to review the test sheet (glossary in hand if needed) and figure out, fairly precisely, what elements of the training scale the judge thought could use strengthening.

In that vein, candidates were cautioned that the judge is there to judge, not to teach. One candidate in DVCTA’s program, a full-time instructor, found it difficult to formulate “judge-like” comments while viewing DVD clips of dressage tests.

“I keep wanting to tell the riders what to do to fix it!” she exclaimed. Yukins acknowledged the difficulty and said that switching from “trainer’s hat” to “judge’s hat” is a skill that must be acquired.

### Concepts into Action

For the final hours of Session A, candidates, auditors, and faculty traveled to Judy Jefferis’ Laurel Hill Farm, a short drive from the New Bolton Center, for a few hours of observing and critiquing the conformation and biomechanics of fourteen demonstration horses.

Yukins had the candidates evaluate the Training Level horses’ conformation and basic gaits. With the five horses—a Haflinger, a Quarter Horse, a Dutch Warmblood, a Welsh cross, and a Hanoverian/Thoroughbred cross—sharing the arena, it was easy for the audience to spot differences in horses’ ways of going. Some horses’ conformation produces obvious limitations when benchmarked against

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the ideals of dressage. Biomechanically, conformation affects movement, a fact that's apparent when one watches multiple horses doing the same thing at the same time.

## The Judging Life

Yukins and Berrey discussed the judge's responsibilities and expected conduct as well as such issues as working with scribes, handling errors, and dealing with rules violations. There's

a lot to know, and "L" candidates and competitors alike need to read the USEF rules carefully because there are numerous distinctions and fine points. The faculty members also urged the candidates (and this is a good suggestion for competitors as well) to diagram the tests. Doing so "is the only way to learn where movements really begin and end," said Yukins.

The judge's task is formidable, but competitors can take heart in knowing



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*UP THE LADDER: Second Level demo horse Ghost, a seventeen-year-old TB gelding who competed through I-I and is now a school-master for owner/rider (and "R" judge) Elsie Kellerman, shows his higher development up the training scale in this medium trot*

that the "L" program teaches them to give the rider the benefit of the doubt in questionable circumstances. The faculty members and candidates alike showed obvious pleasure in viewing good examples, and the candidates oohed and aahed over outstanding photos and footage like the dressage enthusiasts they are. The "L" program teaches would-be judges that, although they have a responsibility to uphold the standards of the sport, they're on the riders' side.

As Berrey put it, "Every movement is an opportunity to get a '10.'" ▲

*Next month: Session B.*



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