

# "L" Is for Learning



UNDER THE MICROSCOPE: Session B presenter Marilyn Heath (standing) takes a question from an "L" candidate. In the ring is the demonstration horse Falco, a Hanoverian gelding by Wummestern, owned and ridden by young rider Emily O'Neill.

## Audit the USDF "L" program.

*Second of three parts.*

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
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**T**he 2007 holiday season flew by, and suddenly it was January 2008 and I was headed back to the University of Pennsylvania's New Bolton Center and to nearby Laurel Hill Farm for session B of the Delaware Valley Combined Training Association-sponsored USDF "L" Education Program.

Session B is the second of the "L" sessions that are open to auditors. In last month's issue, I introduced you to the "L" program and shared highlights from DVCTA's session A, conducted by "L" program faculty members Lois Yukins and Betsy Berrey. This time, Marilyn Heath, who chairs the "L" program, was in charge. As you'll see, she challenged the large pool of "L" candidates (about 20, with more wait-listed) to take their A-session learnings to the next level and to begin formulating scores and comments quickly and ac-

curately. To keep up with the pace of a dressage test (or with Marilyn, for that matter), one must be wide awake and focused. So grab a cup of coffee and let's get started.

### Judging (and Training) Criteria

Session B takes the information on basics and biomechanics from Session A and applies it to the gaits, movements, and levels (Training through Second). The logical place to start is with the criteria and purpose for each, and that's where the session focuses.

Many dressage competitors are unfamiliar with the purpose or directive ideas for their tests and with the definitions of the gaits and movements required. If all you do to prepare for a show is to learn the test patterns, then you're missing some major pieces of the puzzle. You're putting the cart before the horse, so to speak, by focusing on the result (the pattern) without taking the time to understand why the test contains those gaits and movements or what dressage



**VOLUNTEER KUDOS:** *GMOs and their volunteers spend countless hours organizing “L” programs and other educational events. We dragged DVCTA “L” organizers Anne Moss (left) and Darcy Freese away from their duties long enough to snap a photo at Laurel Hill Farm, site of the demo rides.*



**MOVEMENT CRITIQUE:** *“L” candidates watch Second Level demo rider Gail Bowden perform a turn on the haunches aboard her eight-year-old Andalusian mare, Alteza Estada “R”*

fundamentals the test writers aimed to assess through their inclusion.

Here’s where the “L” program can be of tremendous help to the rider, whether competitive or not. The test score sheets (downloadable at [usef.org](http://usef.org); you’ll need to register and log in using your US Equestrian Federation number) list the purpose of the level and the directive ideas for each element that receives a score. For instance, the stated purpose of



**SECOND LEVEL DEMO:** *Medium canter as shown by Oz, a fourteen-year-old Hanoverian-cross gelding owned and ridden by “L” graduate Deb Tsang*

Training Level is “to confirm that the horse’s muscles are supple and loose and that it moves freely forward in a clear and steady rhythm, accepting contact with the bit.” This is the overall level of training and gymnastic development that the judge wants to see in your Training Level horse.

Now look at the directive ideas for each movement. Example: in Training Level Test 4, movement 13 is the “stretching circle.” The directives are: “Quality of stretch over back, forward and downward into a light contact while maintaining balance and quality of trot.” That’s a lot of direction, and it spells out fairly explicitly not only what the judge wants to see (should you be competition-oriented), but also the



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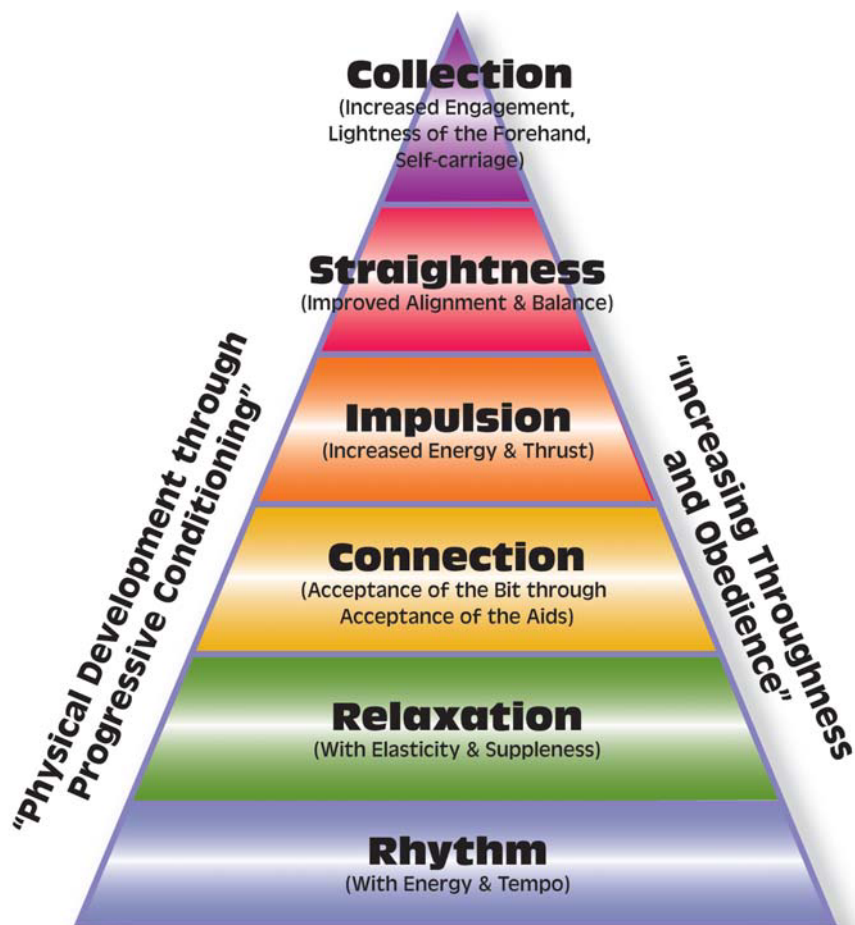


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THE PYRAMID OF TRAINING or training scale

purpose of this exercise vis-a-vis the overall training progression. In other words, even if showing isn't your goal, if your horse is schooling (or reschooling) Training Level and associated basics, you ought to be incorporating the "stretching circle" into your regular work sessions.

Still, although the purpose and the directives are decent training road maps, it would be nice to have some additional guidance as you work with your horse, especially if you lack access to regular instruction. Enter the "L" program. If you audit the program, you'll receive a binder chock-full of helpful handouts that dovetail neatly with all that good info on the test sheets, in the *USDF Directory*, and in the US Equestrian Federation's dressage rules.

Using the "stretching circle" again as an example, the "L" participant binder contains an entire sheet devoted to this movement. The sheet cites the USEF description of the movement and quotes the directive ideas from the score sheet. Then it goes into a series of tips for judging the movement that also happen to be a clear explanation of how you'll know if you're doing the "stretching circle" correctly—and how you'll know if something's amiss. Horse staying in consistent balance, contact, and tempo? Give yourself a gold star: You're probably on the right track. Horse quickening the trot when you give the reins, curling his neck behind the vertical, or failing to do much of anything? All red flags that there are some cracks in your training foundation. Where are



**TEST OF TRAINING:** *The shoulder-in-to-renvers movement at Second Level requires control of the horse's balance and bend. Erika Fleury riding Kiss Me Kate, a twelve-year-old Oldenburg mare owned by Justine Faucher, shows the transition from shoulder-in right to renvers left.*

they? Consult the training scale (see illustration opposite). You'll get even more clues by reading the "suitable vocabulary" phrases on your handout—the verbiage "L" candidates are taught to use in formulating biomechanically accurate, useful comments. The phrases are a cheat sheet of the most commonly observed faults for that gait or movement—another resource you can use to help assess the quality of the training, the gait, and your riding.

## Know What You're After

Dressage judges frequently see horses that appear unprepared for the levels at which they are being shown, Heath said. Well, it's hard to know whether you're prepared if you don't know the criteria. At the barn or on the Internet, riders wonder: Is my horse ready for First Level? How much collection should I demonstrate at Second Level? With its incorporation of the train-

ing scale and the purpose and directives of the levels and the tests, the "L" program is the road to enlightenment. Here are some useful tidbits that I took away from Heath's lectures during session B.

**Balance, not "frame."** Dressage teaches the horse to balance himself longitudinally (from nose to tail) and laterally (from left to right). At Training Level, he should be in a level balance, forehand to hindquarters. As

he progresses in his dressage training, he develops "uphill balance"—the strength and ability to shift additional weight onto his haunches, thereby freeing and elevating his forehand (in other words, collection). First Level does not require collection, and therefore an uphill balance is not required; but judges want to see the First Level horse "working toward uphill balance," Heath said. Only when the horse reaches Second Level—the point in his training at

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## “L” Program Overview

USDF developed the “L” program 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), C (collective marks, equitation, rider biomechanics, basics, and freestyle), and D1 (judging full tests at Training through Second Levels). Part 2, “Candidate Evaluation,” consists of session D2 (more judging) 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 is led by a different faculty member.

For more on the “L” program, visit [usdf.org](http://usdf.org).

which collection is introduced—should he begin displaying a smidgen of uphill balance.

Strictly speaking, dressage horses carry themselves in a balance; Western-pleasure horses go in a “frame,” with a “head set.” Although dressage requires the horse to go on the bit, and a horse going like a giraffe with its nose poked into the air cannot be said to be on the bit, balance is not something imposed on the horse. Balance is developed through correct gymnastic training. A horse can have his head down and his nose in yet be utterly out of balance.

Beginning at Second Level, how much collection is required? Enough that the horse can perform the gaits and movements of the test easily and comfortably, Heath said.

**“Relaxation” explained.** The term “relaxation” has replaced “suppleness” as the second rung of the pyramid of training. As Heath explained, the terminology is translated from German, not all of whose words have exact English counterparts.

In the English-language version of the training scale (see page 48), “re-

laxation” encompasses the concepts of both mental relaxation (i.e., the horse is calm enough that he can focus on you and the work) and physical suppleness or “looseness” (i.e., his muscles are not so tense and stiff that they prevent him from moving freely forward).

## Weighing the Numbers

Judges and competitors alike must understand the meaning assigned to each number on the scale of marks:

10	Excellent
9	Very good
8	Good
7	Fairly good
6	Satisfactory
5	Sufficient
4	Insufficient
3	Fairly bad
2	Bad
1	Very bad
0	Not executed

As a rider, when you review your test sheet, understand that with each score the judge is sending a message

about the perceived quality of your horse's gaits and training, Heath explained. A score of 5 ("sufficient") indicates that the quality was marginal. A 6 or a 7 says that the basics and the criteria for the movement appear to be on the right track. An 8, 9, or 10 rewards extra quality on top of well-fulfilled criteria. Likewise, the lower the score below the marginal (5) level, the more serious or numerous the problems with the basics, the criteria, or both, Heath said.

"When you are giving a score, ask yourself: Why not give a higher number?" Heath said. "If you can't justify it [the lower number], then the number needs to be higher."

Put another way, "If you are giving a score of 7, why are you taking away 30 percent of the score?"

Heath urged the "L" candidates to develop the confidence to use the full scale of marks. Otherwise, she said, one's scores will cluster together in a narrow point spread, and they'll tend to be either too high or too low as a group.

The "L" program teaches would-be judges to give competitors the benefit of the doubt. "Do what is kindest to the rider and the horse," Heath said. This is not to suggest that judges should look the other way when a serious infraction is suspected, but if you're not positive that you heard the rider clucking (a no-no), then don't penalize it. And "don't take off [points] because you can't see something," she advised, pointing out that not all movements are clearly visible from every judging vantage point.

## Prioritize the Issues

In Session A of DVCTA's "L" program, the presenters emphasized that judging is neither teaching nor coaching. The judge's job is to comment on what he or she sees, not to tell the rider what

to do to fix the perceived problems. And every competitor knows that a dressage test is one moment in time—and some moments are better than others. What's more, the judge doesn't know (and wouldn't consider, anyway) your back story: the fact that this is your first show ever, or your first show with this horse, or an improvement on a movement that your horse finds difficult, thereby making that score of 6 instead of the usual 5 something to cheer about. The judge can only evaluate your performance against an established standard of excellence.

Nevertheless, riding a dressage test—and learning judging methodology through the "L" program—are good ways of enhancing your understanding of dressage training and of educating your eye for correctness, flaws, and their probable causes. As Heath explained during Session B, there is not time during the test (or room on the score sheet) for the judge to comment on every little issue. Therefore, it's best to "choose whatever bothers you the most to comment on, prioritize your comments according to the pyramid of training, and comment accordingly," she said.

In other words, the process of judging entails deconstructing each movement and attempting to identify the root issues. Competitors can deconstruct their test sheets in much the same way, and clever riders can use the information to help guide their work at home. Even if showing isn't your thing, you can use the "L" program to learn the same skills, which you then can apply while you ride, when you watch videotaped footage of your riding, or when you watch others ride. You'll gain new insights into the process of developing the dressage horse. ▲

*Next month: Session C.*

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