



“L” Is for Learning

REAL-TIME JUDGING: An “L” candidate and her scribe confer as a demonstration rider begins her test

Audit the USDF “L” program. *Conclusion*

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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March was roaring like the proverbial lion the final auditors-welcome weekend of the Delaware Valley Combined Training Association-sponsored USDF “L” Education Program. Candidates, auditors, organizers, horses, and riders braved torrential downpours and wild winds that toppled the (thankfully unoccupied) port-a-potty at Laurel Hill Farm in Unionville, PA, during the Saturday-afternoon demonstration rides.

It was a wooly start to DVCTA’s Session C, which focuses on the collective marks, equitation, rider biomechanics, basics, and freestyle. But “L” program faculty member Trenna Atkins, a US Equestrian Federation-licensed “S” judge from Coupeville, WA, who led the session, remained unflappable and cheerful in the face of Mother Nature’s wrath the weekend of March 8-9—undoubtedly she’s seen worse weather in her years of judging.

The Collective Marks

At the University of Pennsylvania’s New Bolton Center in Kennett Square, Atkins discussed the process of arriving at the scores for the collective marks. There are four: gaits, impulsion, submission, and rider (for position, seat, and effect of the aids).

Gaits. The gait score reflects the judge’s assessment of the horse’s three natural gaits as well as his use of his hind legs and back, Atkins said—in other words, the horse’s natural athletic ability. A score of 5 (marginal) or below indicates that the judge sees some irregularity or worse in the basic gaits. To earn a score of 6 (satisfactory), the gaits are pure and regular but “give the impression of being flat—close to the ground,” Atkins said. Above a score of 6, the higher the score, the better the gaits and the horse’s overall athleticism.

Some apparent movement issues, such as momentary stiffness or irregularity when the rider takes up the contact,



SUNSHINE: Session-C leader Trenna Atkins defied the gloomy weather with her warmth and humor. In the background is demo rider Ally Jenny and her nine-year-old Holsteiner-cross mare, Leap of Faith.



NEW PARTNERSHIP: Aspiring Jr/YR Melanie Montagano rode First Level Test 4 aboard her new horse, Godiva, an eight-year-old Oldenburg-cross mare

“are submission issues, not gait issues,” Atkins said.

Impulsion. Judges use the following methodology in evaluating impulsion: the horse’s desire to carry himself forward; the degree of throughness shown in transitions; the elasticity of the topline; and the balance from the hind legs, needed for engagement. Atkins reminded the audience that impulsion is neither speed nor hock action and that impulsion is required in collected movements as well as in other paces.

“Some horses with long legs can place their hind legs underneath themselves easily but never actually use their abdominal or hindquarter muscles,” Atkins observed. This type of horse “may spend his life with that little dip behind the saddle.”

Submission. More than simply obedience, submission is ridability, willingness, fluent execution of movements, and correctness of movements, Atkins said. A submissive horse responds easily to the rider’s aids. Bend and acceptance of the bridle are factors in the submission score, as is the appearance of harmony between horse and rider.

Submission also includes a psychological factor, Atkins explained: “Does the horse understand what is being asked of him?” The FEI’s concept of the “happy athlete” relates to submission as well, she said.

Rider’s position and seat; effect of the aids. “I think the emphasis here is on correctness and effectiveness of the aids, not just on position and seat,” Atkins said. To earn a high rider score, a competitor must produce “a well-executed test with nearly invisible aids and an appearance of elegance.” The rider should appear balanced and effective. Judges give a rider score of 5 or lower when the rider consistently disturbs the horse, is rough with the aids, gives conflicting aids, or sits very crooked, she said.

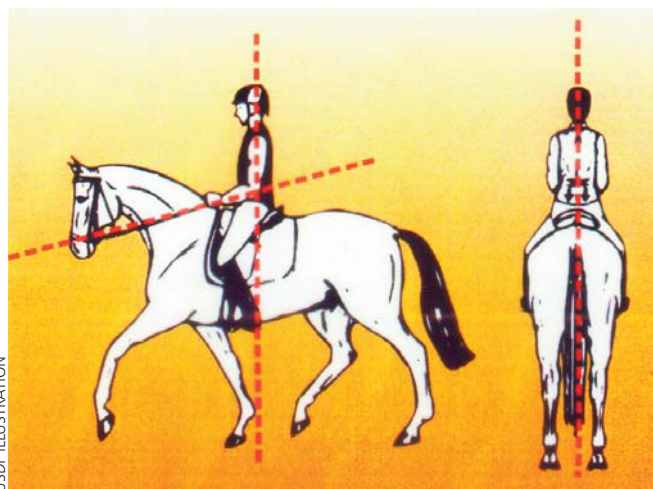
“Punish actively incorrect riding more severely than

clueless riding,” Atkins said. She advised the “L” candidates to be both tactful and constructive in their comments, and she cautioned them about mentioning a turnout issue (e.g., a sloppy braid job or ill-fitting boots) if the rider score is low.

“Comments about turnout tend to be misunderstood,” said Atkins, and may lead a rider to believe that the turnout issue (and not the riding itself) was the reason for the low score.

Rider Biomechanics

An understanding of basic rider biomechanics can help the judge in formulating the “rider” collective mark, Atkins said, because the judge will have knowledge of how the aids affect the horse. Using a combination of graphics and DVD footage, she showed the session-C audience how riders’ body angles flex and extend with the movements of the horse, and how the rider’s “core”—the muscles of the low abs and upper legs—works to keep the seat secure.



USDF ILLUSTRATION

IN BALANCE: Side and rear views of correct rider alignment



DOUBLE DUTY: DVCTA “L” program co-organizer Anne Moss was also a demo rider, doing First Level Test 3 with her seven-year-old Hanoverian mare, Goodness Grace

Although the “L” program doesn’t spend lots of time on rider biomechanics, Atkins threw out a few fascinating tidbits, including clips from a British DVD, *Balanced Beginnings*, part of an “Animated Riding” series containing highly rendered computer graphics depicting the rider’s seat and movement in various gaits, all in an astonishingly lifelike manner. (A Google search showed it available only via UK online channels, including amazon.co.uk and the British Horse Society.)

Judging Freestyles

Session C of the “L” program includes an introduction to judging freestyles, which are a part of dressage competition beginning at First Level. As one might expect, the additional considerations add to the judge’s work load. The judge must not only evaluate the horse’s technical prowess but also must assess the freestyle’s artistic merits and ensure that the ride occurs within the time allowed and follows all

of the other freestyle rules, including showing all of the required movements but not those deemed above the level and therefore forbidden.

The marks on the artistic-impression side of the freestyle score sheet required some explanation to the “L” candidates. The first mark, for “rhythm, energy, and elasticity,” corresponds to the collective marks for gaits and impulsion, Atkins said. The “harmony between horse and rider” score comprises the concepts in the collective marks for submission and the rider. These two marks each have a coefficient of 2.

Next, with a coefficient of 3, is the score for “choreography, use of the arena, and inventiveness.” A well-planned freestyle is balanced equally between moves done to the right and those done to the left. Horse and rider traverse the entire arena and execute easy-to-follow choreography that manages to be both visually interesting and unlike a test pattern.

The mark for “degree of difficulty,” which has a coefficient of 1, incorporates technical considerations as well as artistic ones, Atkins said. A competitor receives a score of 6.0 if his or her choreography is on the same level as the corresponding dressage tests, she explained. The marks for difficulty and choreography go up if the rider performs allowed movements in challenging ways. The object is to show the judge that the horse is so skilled that he can do the movement in a more difficult fashion. Obviously, this strategy is most successful when the movement in question is easy for the horse. Make the choreography beyond the horse’s scope and the marks will go down accordingly.

The final artistic mark, with a coefficient of 4, is “choice and interpretation of music.” This concept is not about choice of music alone; it also includes the competitor’s interpretation of the music, which involves the pair’s technical ability to execute that interpretation.

The Second Level Challenge

Sunday’s practice judging focused on the Second Level tests. Atkins impressed both the candidates and the auditors with her lightning-fast ability to evaluate a movement and formulate a score and a comment in “real time,” always keeping up with the pace of the test. It is undoubtedly a skill that comes with much practice, and Atkins encouraged the candidates to develop confidence in their ability to assess the rides correctly and to give meaningful and useful scores and comments. She told the candidates that, contrary to what one might think, lower-level tests can be the most challenging to judge. At the lower levels, “the rider usually needs more help from the judge, and the judge needs to be correct

in identifying the elements of the scale of training that need the most work.”

Take-Home Learnings

This is where I, as an auditor, get off. I'm not going for my "L" at this time, and so I won't be attending DVCTA's final 2008 "L" program sessions. I conclude this series on sessions A, B, and C

"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 Sessions A, B, and C.

"L" program sessions are taught by an approved 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.

with a newfound note of respect for the study and skill that go into becoming a dressage judge. I came away with a clearer picture of what the judge looks for, and why. I gained insights into the relationship between trainer and judge, and how everything really is supposed to be about the basics. Thanks to DVCTA and to "L" program organizers Darcy Miller-Brown and Anne Moss for letting me be a fly on the wall. ▲

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