

# DRESSAGE JUDGING

## HOW CAN WE MAKE IT BETTER?

By David Pincus, England



▲ David Pincus riding his homebred Grand Prix stallion Sheepcote Wurlizer by Weltmeyer

IN THE PAST 30 YEARS DRESSAGE RIDING HAS DEVELOPED INTO A GLOBAL SPORT. ALTHOUGH NOT AS POPULAR AS SHOW JUMPING OR EVENTING, IT IS GROWING IN POPULARITY. AS THE SPORT GROWS AND OPENS ITSELF, THE JUDGING OF DRESSAGE COMPETITIONS COMES UNDER GREATER SCRUTINY.

Many people find judging inconsistent and unclear, and many believe that unless judging will improve and become more transparent the sport will lose its credibility; some of the reasons for these concerns are very apparent. Very often the discrepancies between the placing of different judges is significant...horses can be placed in the top 3 with 1 judge and lower than 15th with another. In most cases judges who are judging their own nationals place them higher. In the 2008 Olympic Games and FEI Junior/Young Riders Championships there are instances of this happening;

instances when horses display severe disobedience or riders that utilise unethical training methods in public are declared the best in the world. Dressage will be brought into disrepute and require swift rectification which unfortunately, so far has been slow to happen.

The role of the Governing Body of the sport is to devise a system, lay down guidelines in order to create the best possible judging system which takes into account any potential impediments in order to provide a fair competition. The system must take into



▲ Isabell Werth on Satchmo in GP Special

account the strengths and weaknesses of human nature and psychological effects over judging.

A fair system will have the confidences of most participants and will not only be fair but will also *appear* to be fair which is important. The following paragraphs give some suggestions as to the causes and propose some corrective measures. Judges do not sit down in front of the arena with the aim to judge badly, however somehow the current system and procedures will lead them astray.

### THE COLLECTIVE MARKS:

One of the most controversial issues are the collective marks at the bottom of the sheets. Many feel that they are outdated and no longer required. Others believe that they are inconsistent and bias the results. A close analysis of the **collective marks** will help us come to a better understanding of the situation.



Historically, before the sport was a competition in days of the cavalry for instance, the collective marks were the general comments given to summarise the assessment of the horse during his training stages by the rider's superior. Their role was to indicate to the rider where his horse requires improvement and at what stage of the expected level is his training, they were not meant as a vehicle to compare and segregate one rider from another; their role was purely educational.

Today a dressage competition is what it says; a competition. The judge's role should be limited to the appraisal of the performance as they see it, movement by movement. Obviously there is and should be an element of comparison between competitors as the aim is to find a winner. The one which performs the test according to the scales of training and is as close to the ideal as laid down by the FEI will be awarded the highest marks. If the

collective marks reflect the test it would be pointless to award them and if they do not, then there is a problem as they will not be relevant to the test performed. It would be impossible to reach a unanimous interpretation of the collective marks and this is the reason why many results transpire as unclear and at times manipulated.

**Elements in the collective marks:**

The first to appear on the list is the paces; to include all paces in all forms, for example: collected, medium and extended in one mark is very challenging. A horse may be very expressive in his extension but limited in the collected paces or vice versa. There is no uniform agreement as to what paces are the most suitable for dressage. Some have a preference for large expansive paces and some like paces that can collect easily. With modern breeding some horses show paces with amazing knockout factors. The question

is should this have a detrimental effect over the appraisal? Dressage is not a show class but a test of training and riding.

One judge may look at one element while another may look at another element. Judges might evaluate their chosen element correctly but come to a completely different mark much to the confusion of spectators and competitors.

The impulsion mark would have been easy to award but the inclusion of elasticity, suppleness and engagement of the hind legs all under the same heading complicates the issue and has the same limitations as mentioned above.

During the 2008 Olympics the submission mark came under great pressure. For many it was not clear as to how the horse showing the most disobedience in the competition did not receive the lowest mark for submission. Was the rider showing skill at bringing the horse under control or was it poor rider

judgment by pushing the horse too far? There will never be an agreement about this; most of the elements which appear in the collective marks have been taken into consideration when judging. Movement, suppleness, engagement etc. are the basis for evaluating any dressage exercise. To award these marks again is simply duplication.

The rider's marks are the most controversial of all the marks and the one that is mostly debated. Recently on the British Dressage forum there was little agreement as to how to award these marks, it transpires that judges can simply award these marks however they wish without clear guidelines from the Governing Bodies. With modern public scoring facilities, one often sees in international shows that some riders are awarded higher collective marks than others for no apparent reason.

The current use of the collective marks to separate 2 competitors in case of a tie is thoroughly illogical; currently the one with the higher collectives is declared the winner while the rider that performed a better test movement for movement is relegated below.

A good judging system will reduce the subjective element to the minimum, and will leave to be judged only what can easily be agreed upon. Most of the technical elements can be agreed upon according to the scales of training and other directives but the collective marks will always be more subjective as it is impossible to lay exact guidelines on how they should be awarded.

The current judging system suffers from more failings which need addressing:

#### **The rogue judge:**

Following judging practises in competitions we often notice that a judge may have a far more influential outcome than others. This judge may award a combination with a significantly higher mark than the others and equally may award another combination a significantly lower mark than other judges. If this difference between the marks awarded by this judge is large enough, then it can make the scores from the other judges almost irrelevant, he will select the winner.

#### **Excessive subjectivity:**

Dressage judging as already pointed out is very subjective but must be minimised as much as possible. When Olympic medals are on offer it will be nearly impossible for a judge to be totally impartial to national spirits and hopes and not absorb some of the atmosphere surrounding the competition. One often sees riders receiving higher scores from judges of their own nationality.

#### **Procedures & protocol:**

Some of the current dressage procedures contain severe flaws which bring the public to question the whole judging system. The system needs to appear just and correct with



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#### ▼ *Isabell Werth on Satchmo in GP Fresstyle*

no apparent questionable procedures.

Judges can wear many official hats and this can create a conflict of interest. Currently a judge can hold a very high ranking official position in his own national federation or the FEI, determine selections, rules etc., as well as be an international judge. A judge should only be a judge and not hold any other official position; otherwise there is always the possibility of conflict of interest.

The manner in which judges are selected for international competitions is questionable. Currently there is no protocol on how to choose judges for major competitions they are appointed by the FEI committee or invited by an organiser which is often a competitor at the same show. With the current structure of the committee it is self serving. At the 2008 Olympics the riders raised an objection to the compositions of the jury and demanded changes of judges' panel. Should there have been a protocol for selection there would be less grounds for complaints.

#### **The way forward:**

Criticism without offering an alternative has little value. The following are several ideas which may be used as a whole or will stimulate some thoughts as to how to rectify the situation:

- All collective marks should simply be abolished and the results should be determined according to the execution of the technical movements within the test.
- The rogue judge or the patriotic judge can be dealt with by devising a system in which the scores of judges judging own nationals or out of line (highest/lowest scores) will be automatically discarded. The implementation of this idea needs some adjustments and further thinking but it is a base to start from.
- Avoid judges that have 2 roles such as a judge and an official within the organisation in order to limit conflicts of interest.
- Judges for major competition should be subject to a selection protocol and not based

on any personal affiliation between selectors to the selected.

Most of the flaws which are criticised are in areas where there are no clear coherent guidelines whether it's on the technical judging or procedural side. Where no clear parameters are available individuals can stray or the on-lookers can criticise. If and when these points are corrected, dressage judging will regain the respect it deserves.

When I began compiling my notes I was a fairly lonely voice concerning these issues but recent upheavals in the FEI showed that many people have noticed these flaws and hopefully the brave moves taken by the President of the FEI will change the current situation to a better one. The FEI is seeking to implement some important changes which are supported by some and resisted by others. The leading European nations object to the meddling of newcomer nations in their sport. The newcomers point of view must be taken into account as they propel the European dressage industries (breeding, training etc.) to where it is. Dressage is no longer the domain of a few European countries but is becoming open and very global; many countries which are not featured in the world rankings yet, do have an important role in the whole sport and their involvement in itself has a very positive economical benefit for the leading countries. Isabell Werth and Anky van Grunsven would not be worldwide stars without the world interest in dressage. The German and Dutch breeding industries would not be where they are if world markets did not exist. **HT**

*International dressage rider David Pincus B.H.S.I. has been riding since childhood and has had a career in show jumping, eventing and dressage competitions. He now trains horses and riders from Novice to Grand Prix. His students have won many prizes including International 3 Day Events. Past students of his include Claire Oseman, the 1985 European Young Rider 3DE Champion, Vanessa Ashbourne, Reserve Champion in 1986 at the Young Rider European Championships and in the USA, Odded Shimoni, well known trainer and Grand Prix winner, started his career training with David. Linda Foster, a top instructor and FEI competitor from Australia gained Grand Prix experience on his horses. This coming year he is going to start another of his homebred horses at Grand Prix. His 10th home trained Grand Prix horse. The training methods taught by David are those he learned training in Europe. Including the Spanish riding school - Vienna, and in Germany including Warendorf and with Dr Reiner Klimke. David also spent some time in France training with the Cadre Noir in Saumur.*