

# Have Mercy on the Judges

*Thoughts from a dressage judge and Olympian*

By Charlotte Bredahl Baker

I have been training dressage riders and horses for most of my life. I have been judging nationally for the past 25 years and internationally for the past three years. As a result, most of the time, I believe that I see both parties' point of view.

For instance, some trainers and show managers complain that judges are too tough on amateur competitors. My response would be that trainers should shoulder more of the responsibility for ensuring that their students compete at an appropriate level.

## The Horse Comes First

Some inexperienced dressage riders who can afford well-trained FEI-level horses think that they should be able to show at that level right away. It is a great advantage if you can buy a trained horse to learn on, but first you have to develop an independent seat and tactful hands, and that takes a while. Even if you buy a trained horse, if you want to become an accomplished rider and do justice to your horse, you should still work your way up through the levels. Personal fitness is also something you owe to your horse.

When I judge, I see competitors at Third, Fourth, and Prix St. Georges levels, riding in a double bridle with the shank of the curb bit pulled straight back and the horse's nose on his chest. The curb can be a torture instrument in the wrong hands. I feel very sorry for those horses, and I don't understand why trainers allow students to ride in a double when they are not ready. As a judge, I am always thrilled to see somebody ride a horse well in a snaffle, especially at the FEI levels (which is permitted in US national-level competitions).

Everybody can have a bad ride, but as a competitor, I will not show a horse unless I can ride a very respectable test at home. Warming up at a recent show, I saw a rider hitting her horse while the animal fought the double bridle, out of control and his head straight up in the air. At the same show, a trainer was screaming at her student to "Hit him, hit him." I was horrified, and so were the new clients I had brought with me. We trainers are supposed to represent our sport, and we need to police our sport.

Riders and owners: Be selective in choosing your trainers. A good trainer has solid ethics and treats horses and clients with respect. But keep in mind that, as an owner, you are ultimately responsible for your horse's welfare.

## Judging: Never-Ending Education

My original goal in entering the judging program was to further my dressage



SCRUTINY: In competition, it's not just the rider who's under the microscope

For this article, I would like to share some thoughts about dressage showing and judging—observations from both "X" and "C," if you will. I hope that I can help you to better understand dressage competition, whether you are a rider, a spectator, a horse owner, an instructor/trainer, or a fellow judge.

## Are Judges Too Tough?

Dressage judges receive quite a bit of criticism, some of which is unfair.

When I judge, I see many riders competing at levels that they are not ready for. I think that it is up to the trainers to set students up for success by having them show at a level at which they can be competitive. I would much rather award a score of 68 percent at Training Level than a 55 percent at Fourth Level. Trainers also need to control their students' expectations so that riders have a realistic idea of their skill levels and don't get disappointed when they compete.

sage education. Today, after many years of judging, I continue to learn and to improve my eye—which makes me not only a better judge but also a better instructor.

I love to judge, even though it can be stressful and challenging. When I judge, my foremost aim is to be trusted by the riders to be fair and never political. My second is for my judge colleagues to trust me to be a team player who will never criticize them behind their backs. All judges make mistakes, and when we do, it is nice to know that our fellow judges won't hang us out to dry.

I don't think that I have ever been totally happy with my own judging at a show. Often I will agonize over at least one rider's score. I don't think riders have any idea how much we all care about doing a good job.

Three years ago, I got my FEI "C" (Candidate) status and started judging CDIs (FEI competitions). It has been an amazing learning process and very eye-opening. At these shows, the Grand Prix level is always judged by a panel of five judges. Any time there is a significant discrepancy among the scores, the judges are required to have a discussion. Most of the time we actually agree on what we are seeing, but sometimes we don't agree on the score.

There are many reasons for score differences. For example, connection issues, such as when a horse is short in the neck and behind the vertical or very long and strung out, are much more noticeable from the long side of the arena than from the short side. Conversely, bend (or lack thereof) is much easier to see from the short side than from the long side.

I find judging freestyles incredibly challenging. There are so many things to consider: the technical correctness of each movement as well as the artistic elements of rhythm, harmony, choreography, degree of difficulty, and musicality. At the end of the test, you have to come up with scores for the five categories and also average out your technical scores, all within ten

seconds—and usually with a runner tapping her fingers impatiently on the desk. This is why riders rarely get any comments about their music. I always feel bad that I can't give the riders feedback on their artistic marks, but there is not enough time. Only the super-experienced judges manage to write comments on Grand Prix freestyles, and that is a shame for the riders.

When each judge's scores are announced at the end of a ride, all of the judges on the panel pay attention and hope we are not out of line. When one judge's marks are out of line, the others will try to console the person and make him or her feel better. Sometimes we agree that the person who was out of line was in fact right. In truth, one of the best things about judging is the camaraderie.

### The Judging Life

Judging has been a labor of love for me, and I have made some sacrifices in order to move up the ladder. It takes a lot of money and time to get through the national system. You have to go to judges' forums, sit with other judges, and do shadow-judging at many shows. All of these requirements are necessary and important, and I am proud that the US has the toughest judge-training program in the world.

Judging is hard work. You have to be willing to spend countless hours in freezing temperatures, wind, dust, hot sun, and sometimes mud. Sometimes it rains into your booth and all your papers get wet. For a minimum of eight hours a day, a judge is expected to be totally focused and not miss a beat, even if bees are buzzing around your face or ants are crawling up your legs. You have to be very dedicated to judging to go through with this. For sure it is not for the money. Dressage judges are paid and treated well in this country as compared to elsewhere, but the pay is still less than half what we can earn teaching a clinic.

There are other challenges associated with being an international judge, as well. An FEI judge cannot



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teach more than two lessons during the preceding year to any rider who will be competing in front of that judge in a CDI, and the lessons cannot take place less than three months before the show. This rule means that FEI judges have to choose between judging CDIs and teaching top riders. I think the three-month rule is reasonable because most of us know our schedules three months in advance. However, the two-lessons-a-year rule makes it pretty impossible to teach anybody at that level. It is a shame that top-level judges are not able to give their knowledge to top riders as a result.

Of course we shouldn't be judging our own students, but three months should be sufficient. As a judge, it is a no-win situation to judge your own students, and I would do my best to avoid that, no matter what the rule was.

In the beginning of each year, an FEI judge also has to declare whether he or she intends to compete or

to judge. If you judge any CDIs on one continent, you are not allowed to compete in any CDIs on the same continent. For some, myself included, the rule requires a difficult choice.

## Common Ground

Judges, competitors, and owners all want the same thing: happy horses, happy riders and owners, and high scores. Most judges are in this for the love of the sport and deserve a

lot of respect for their commitment. The next time you think a judge did a good job, let him or her know. As you probably can guess, judges get a lot of criticism and not many compliments. If you want good judges, treat them well. ▲

## Meet the Expert

**C**harlotte Bredahl Baker is a US Equestrian Federation "S" judge and an FEI "C" judge. With her horse Monsieur, she was a member of the bronze-medal-winning US dressage team at the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona. She has trained numerous horses to the highest levels of the sport. She recently concluded a year as the USDF Adult Clinic Series clinician. A native of Denmark, she lives with her family in Solvang, CA. Her websites are BredahlDressage.com and DressageRetreats.com.



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