

What do you like or dislike about the new tests?

Invariably, every four years some trainers look at the new dressage tests as they come out and swear they make no sense, they'll ruin the horses, and that they'll never let their student ride some of the specific tests—ever. Then some time passes. We all get used to the new requirements, and the furor dies down.

Expect the same thing this time even though this edition seems to amount to a relatively conservative reworking of the 2007 tests. Significant changes:

There are only three tests at each level instead of four from Training through Second level. I'm not privy to the reasoning. I'm guessing it was pressure from show managements to simplify their scheduling tasks. For amateur riders who, unable to zip up through levels, are stuck in Training or First level for some years, this reduces how many different tests they can play with by 25 percent.

The Collectives have changed but not in their overall value. The rider score [see my recent blog post *The Weighting Is the Hardest Part!*] is no longer one number with a coefficient of three but three separate scores, each worth a maximum of ten. More precise feedback from the judge at no extra cost!

Every Training Level test now has the stretching circle—hard for the green horse but it will separate the more correct from the pretenders.

Other than that, some patterns remain unchanged; some are different. The one I wish they'd fixed was the oft-ridden-incorrectly loop in the last Training level test. People did it better back when the test called for a serpentine half the width of the arena. If they insist on keeping the "loop," they should have made the directions more explicit [Again see my QOTM Archives: *How Are We Supposed to Ride that Stupid Loop in Training Test 4!*] or included a diagram on the back of the test sheet.

The only tear drops left in First Level 1 will be ones you yourself shed now that the long-present "half circle-back to the track" figures have been removed from that test. They're replaced by the "S" turn from E to X to B which you know from the old First 3. In all of First Level rising/sitting becomes the rider's option. You can read what I think about that in the last QOTM. You also have a canter lengthening in Test 1 with a gradual transition back to working canter using the corner.

First 2 offers a new leg yielding pattern going away from the judge. Its degree of difficulty is that of the old First 4—no more long, easy line introducing leg yielding like the now-retired D to R from the 2007 First Level 2. First 3—the Qualifying test—now has an even more challenging leg yielding pattern: K to X leg yield to the right, followed at X by a left 10 meter circle then a right 10 meter circle then a leg yielding to the left from X back to the track at H. This may seem hard in the beginning, but once you get the hang of it, you'll probably like it. It's certainly easier than the F-X-M counterchange in leg yielding from about 20 years ago.

There's only one test—First 3—with a change of lead through the trot. That's too bad because one test later you'll have to be ready to make actual canter-walk-canter simple changes. There are also no halts in any of First Level other than the ones at the beginning and end of each test.

Second Level doesn't offer too many shocks. The first test is slightly simplified. Test 2 is made harder by the addition of turns on the haunches and a greater distance between the first simple change and the 10 meter canter circle that's supposed to set it up. Test 3 has a new counter canter pattern: after the 10 meter circle and simple change, you proceed on the long side to V, make a 20 meter half circle holding the outside lead, and proceed back across the P-H short diagonal to return to the true lead.

No surprises in the new Third 1. Third 2 throws you a curve: FOUR flying changes instead of just two. The additional ones are near the centerline on the short diagonals like the old 4-1 (from which they've been inexplicably removed!) "Barbra's Brother" [See the explanation in **DRESSAGE Unscrambled!**] only visits this single test and the release is both reins. Third 3's canter half passes are no longer from the centerline to the track but are now from the corner to X with the flying change between I and G.

The progression of the lateral work in the trot through the Third and Fourth Levels is nice and makes sense. Fourth Level 1 retains the diagonal with the Medium-Collect-Medium trot exercise. I always wish this appeared far earlier—in 2nd level for instance. Then the horses could make a briefer but more balanced Medium without inexperienced riders letting them cruise through the bit onto the forehand. Why let them develop “ballistic” Mediums in the first place and then suddenly in Fourth level try to cure them of it? This test later asks for extended and collected walk on a 20 meter circle and counter canter (after the half passes) for 30 meters along the track and around the corner to the middle of the short side with the flying change at C. The very collected canter over the centerline on a 20 meter circle has been moved to the end of the test.

Fourth 2 has working canter pirouettes—still a good idea—now 3 meters in diameter instead of 5 as was in the old test. There are sequential flying changes, but the first time you don’t have to count the strides. The test calls for a diagonal with one change near the first quarter line, one near X, and another near the second quarter line. I have mixed feelings about this. Only in *one* USEF test do you have to be able to count them. That’s in 4th 3 and you only have one line of three changes every fourth stride. No 3 tempis at all. I would have liked to see a preparatory exercise in 4-1 requiring a single flying change on the quarter line as you pass S, maintaining the counter canter down that line till you pass V and then a single flying change back to the true lead.

Fourth 3 does have two other niceties: still only a working half pirouette required but a separate score for the very collected canter which precedes it to emphasize the need for the right kind of preparation. AND a *halt, rein-back, proceed directly to collected canter* which flashes back to an old PSG movement which was retired in 2000.

Change always brings a certain angst, but these new tests shouldn’t try, fry, or crucify you or your horse too much. Remember, anything that you liked from the old tests that’s no longer on the new menu is still worth schooling and keeping in your repertoire. Don’t just “train the tests” but use the new patterns and a variety of older ones as tools in your daily work. *Not on one strand are all life's jewels strung!* [William Morris, 1834-1896]