

*Do you care more about points or placings?
And what about year-end awards?*

BILL—It might be sacrilege. It's not meant to be sour grapes, but the more I watch and listen over the years, the more specious I think our whole system of awards is. As has been said before by its detractors, dressage competition isn't a sport. It's an opinion. The same criticism, of course, could be applied to figure skating, snowboarding, gymnastics, skateboarding, and Dancing with the Stars (although we all know that's not a sport by anybody's definition).

Recall the pre-Watson computer programmers' dictum: Garbage In→Garbage Out. Before we look at year end aggregates, just ponder the vagaries of an individual class at a show. I truly believe that the vast majority of judges are honest and diligent, but we just have to admit it—every 7 does not necessarily mean the same thing. This is never more clear than with a panel judges as you see presiding at a CDI. Sometimes the total scores among the five judges are fairly close, but when you compare the sheets block by block, you find large discrepancies that are not explainable by the "It looks different from the side than from the front" alibi. If you've got five judges at the same ring, this stuff tends to balance out. But if you've got only one judge, and he's the judge that was giving the 4 when the other judges were all giving 7, the results are skewed.

A judge's primary goal is consistency. You can be a little high or a little low, but be the same every single time you see a given set of qualities before you. That's easier to say than to do. With a ribbon sometimes hinging on just a single point or two, shading up from a 6.5 to a 7 because of a nearly indefinable difference in a movement has huge consequences in the eyes of the rider.

It's Adam Smith. It's Darwin. We all crave winners. But you're allowed to ask yourself, at a given show is your 64.363% actually *better* than somebody's 62.94%? The numbers say so, but just exactly how valid are they? Now, obviously, some rides are decisively better than others and they deserve more recognition. That's why the seldom used Danish System of awards has an appeal to me. In it, if you score over 70%, no matter how many people also do, you each get a blue ribbon. 65-70%: a red ribbon. 60-65%: a yellow one. 55-60%: white. 50-55%: pink. Below 50%: NO RIBBON at all. If you can't be at least "Marginal," you don't deserve one! This won't solve the Westminster-like arguments of "My Vizsla is better than your Kuvasz," but it's probably a lot more realistic than the way we usually do it..

And what about year-end awards? Is numerically parsing averages down to thousandths of a point a meaningful distinction? What of riders who "cherry pick" judges or riders who just happen to end up in the arena of a particularly giddy judge on a given day? Does anyone deny that a horse competing in a show at his home stable has an advantage over one who's had to trailer 12 hours the day before?

You see where I'm going with this. Long ago the AHSA/USDF/USET decided that head to head competition is the only real way to establish champions. Every other way is just a nice excuse to come home with a new wool cooler.

