

Why are spurs mandatory in FEI competition?

You would think that since a primary goal of our sport as expressed in the rulebook is “that the horse should appear to do of his own accord what is required of him,” and if the pinnacle of dressage training is supposed to be displayed in the FEI levels and especially at the Grand Prix, that that the reliance on artificial aids and appliances—force multipliers as it were—would be frowned upon rather than required.

If you thought that, you’d be wrong.

But, why? The answer is one simple word—TRADITION. Classical dressage finds its roots in the royal courts of the 16th and 17th centuries, but the brand of competitive dressage which most riders practice today can be traced more directly to the style and methods of cavalry riding of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At that time, double bridles and spurs were required so that a mounted officer would have enough control one-handed to be able to use his pistol or his saber with the other.

Not all that many riders are waving swords these days, but many of these customs continue for no other reason than “that’s the way we do it in dressage.” Only recently has the USEF permitted the use of the snaffle bridle in FEI tests which it sanctions, but so far the FEI has not gone along with that change for international competition. And spurs are mandatory under both sets of rules. Fail to strap them on before you come down the centerline, and you and your horse will be invited to take an early shower.

One suspects that the FEI will eventually bow to logic, but don’t be surprised if another half generation of “the powers that be” will have to go to their graves (undoubtedly wearing their swords and spurs) before that happens.