

The Weighting Is the Hardest Part

(posted 10-1-10)

So as I write this, the new 2011 tests will take effect in two short months. You won't find a lot of radical changes, but one feature that will force the judges to make some firm decisions is the change to the Collective Marks. The overall totals will remain the same: Gaits with a coefficient of 1 (10 points max), Impulsion and Submission each with a coefficient of 2 (each 20 points max), and the Rider score which will still be worth a possible 30 points. But now the Rider score will no longer be a single number multiplied by 3. Judges will award 3 separate scores, each worth a possible 10. They will be Seat and Position, Correct and Effective Use of the Aids, and Harmony between Horse and Rider.

Giving scores is easy. The tricks are consistency—giving the same one over and over whenever the same circumstance arises, and in being sure that the numbers you give convey the right messages to the rider. Under the old system many judges (myself included) weighed the “effectiveness” element fairly heavily. No matter how prettily one sat, if the horse wasn't working properly, the rider would rarely get a high mark in that block. I would argue that the overall mark should still reflect this functional bias. If judges are going to score high for Position and Seat itself, they must compensate (when appropriate) by daring to go *really* low in the second block, the Effectiveness one. Like all the way to 4 or beyond. In other words, if you give an 8 for Position after a bad test, you must go at least down to 4 to average the Rider score out at 6—“Satisfactory.” If it's an unsuccessful test, should the rider deserve any more? I don't think so.

Meanwhile, what about the Harmony score? Yes, it will give judges the opportunity to weigh in on the “viscerally pleasing” versus “vaguely unsettling” taste some rides leave in your mouth—to weed out the rides that “win but win ugly.” But Harmony must not only be tied in to the Submission score, it needs to reflect the Impulsion score as well. Imagine in the course of a test, a very conservatively ridden Medium Canter that only deserves a 5. When the rider takes no risk, it's unreasonable for the rider to earn an 8 for the transition back from it. A good transition back from a quality Medium is much harder to ride and, therefore, much more meaningful and deserving reward. By similar reasoning, in a freestyle you only get a high score in the Degree of Difficulty block if you pull off the hard stuff successfully. A difficult pattern at which your efforts fail gets a low score. Picture, then, an accurate Third Level test being performed in a Training or First Level frame—cheerfully coasting along on the forehand with minimal energy. By a layman's definition the pair may be totally in harmony—a peaceful coexistence. But clearly, that's not a relationship which should draw praise in Third Level.

My point is simply that these changes will require some adjustments in the judges' methodology. Those who are due to go to a Judges Forum in the spring are at an advantage. But inasmuch as forum attendance is only mandated every three years,

some judges won't receive structured insights into scoring these blocks until 2013. In the interim, they will have some homework to do.