

## **Tempus Edax Rerum**

### **(When you're having a good time)**

(posted 10-19-10)

Where do dressage tests come from? How and why do they "come out" as they do? The answer is complicated—more complicated than it used to be. Some of us remember the Bad Old Days when the (then) AHSA and the USDF were more or less at war. The AHSA (now USEF) Dressage Committee was centralized and, detractors said, paternalistic. Twenty-five or 30 years ago, outsiders claimed that every decision was made by four people around a coffee table in Greenwich, Connecticut. Meanwhile, AHSA adherents felt that they were the "keepers of the dressage flame" against the uncouth hordes from the hinterlands whose limited perspectives missed the bigger picture which only they were privy to.

In years since, American dressage has witnessed a great rapprochement—an elaborate intertwining of structures and functions with committee members who are deeply involved in both organizations. While the creation of tests is the function of a subcommittee within USEF, that group receives formal input from competitors, trainers, and judges through USDF Councils.

You can guess that anything a committee is in charge of will emerge as a series of compromises, no matter how strong its leader might be. The give-and-take among its members will tend to dampen out the most extreme suggestions, but put a bunch of strong-willed individuals in a room each with their own training likes, dislikes, and hang-ups and the outcomes are often the result of (pardon the expression) some horsetrading among the participants. It may not be possible to make everyone happy but if violence can be avoided, that's usually been viewed as a plus.

Keep in mind that the tests do different things for different people. For those with Regional or National competitive aspirations, they establish the framework to evaluate whose horses and whose training are the best. For those with international goals, they must deliver horses to the FEI levels knowledgeable and strong without harming them. And for many amateur and lower level riders, they must be the guide for progressive, logical training methods. A survey once revealed that judges' comments on tests are the most used source of training advice for many of these riders!

You can always find riders who abhor one test or another. I know people who refused ever to ride certain ones because they were certain their horses would be ruined. I've never felt that strongly about an entire test, but here are some thoughts on movements past and present, some that you may not even remember:

These qualify as Great Ideas:

1. The stretch down in trot—long a training staple, it made its way into American tests in the early 1990s and caused riders to deal with teaching their horses not just to flex but to draw over their topline into the hands.
2. The ceding of the hand to the horse while in the canter on the circle—also new to American tests in the early '90s to make riders examine the concept of self-carriage.
3. Work on the centerline towards the judge—giving the judge a better view of lateral movements like shoulder-in while making riders substitute a thoughtful, supporting outside leg for the now-absent arena fence.
4. Short diagonals of medium trot developed out of shoulder-in along the rail—the shoulder-in to produce engagement, the short distance of medium trot emphasizing quality not quantity.
5. Shoulder-in to renvers—helping riders discover what their horse feels like in lateral balance when he's not falling over his outside shoulder in the shoulder-in.
6. The medium-collect-medium trot exercise in Fourth Level Test 1—a version of the accordion exercise, it reminds riders to keep their horses in an attentive, adjustable, uphill balance while lengthening and discourages the ballistic lengthenings practiced by so many lower level novice riders. I wonder why this concept first appears so late—why not in Second Level before bad habits get ingrained?
7. Three exercises to help riders learn that canter pirouettes aren't cousins to roll-backs: Very collected canter and quarter canter pirouettes are less than 20 years old in US tests. The working pirouette on a five-meter (now 3 meter) diameter half circle is even newer. They all emphasize the horse's ability to "sit" and to carry himself before real pirouettes are attempted.
8. The five loop serpentine in Intermediaire-1—no longer in the current test. By asking for some loops of true and some loops of counter-canter, it made riders keep their horses honestly on the aids and not programmed to do the flying changes simply at a spot in the ring.
9. Flying change at X during the medium canter in Intermediaire and Grand Prix—it encouraged forward riding and expression in the changes—dressage riders can get so anal!

Here are a few more movements and figures that at least rate as Pretty Good Ideas:

1. The quarterline-to-quarterline shallow serpentine in Training Level. Although riders initially complained about difficulties in placing this figure, they did understand the

change of bend concept it was designed to demonstrate. (See the "loop" discussion below).

2. Shoulder-in to 10-meter circle to haunches-in—reinforcing the logic of acquiring the bend and putting the horse in the outside rein during shoulder-in, then retaining the bend and carrying the last stride of the circle forward and sideways in travers.
3. Shoulder-in for half the long side, changing to half pass from E or B to the centerline—the shoulder-in establishing the bend, balance, and connection to the outside rein needed for the half pass.
4. Ten-meter circle in the canter to simple change—the circle encouraging engagement and collection prior to the canter-walk transition.
5. The “swing” which only appeared in FEI tests but required a halt, rein-back of 4 steps flowing directly into four steps forward and again directly into four steps back and then a prompt move-off. When done fluidly and without resistance, it was a wonderful demonstration of suppleness.

Along the way, dressage has witnessed some abortive Bad Ideas:

1. Requiring the entrance in sitting trot in Training Test 1—a demand which, happily, was rescinded. Proponents (mostly Germans) felt that riders had to be force-fed the sitting trot or they'd never bother to learn to do it. The result was a lot of uncomfortable riders and miserable green horses. The current rising/sitting option hasn't degraded riders' desires to learn to sit!
2. The rarely correctly-ridden loop in Training Level Test Four—this ill-conceived movement is performed badly so often that scribes should be issued a rubber stamp that reads "Incorrect figure—bending should be continuous with changes of bend evident at the quarterlines."
3. The canter depart going into the trailer on the green horse in Training Level. That quarterline-to-quarterline serpentine mentioned earlier was nice enough to ride, but in the test it was followed immediately by a canter depart approaching C as the horse faced nearly into the judge's booth. This wouldn't present a particular difficulty to an upper level horse, but from the perspective of a wary youngster, it was sometimes overwhelming.
4. The counter change in leg yielding when it was the only leg yielding exercise performed in all of First Level. It was actually two movements, first yielding to the left from F to X, then back to the right from X to M. Horses which were truly proficient at Second Level or beyond had no trouble with this. Many riders who had rarely yielded could often get the first one right but couldn't get organized quickly enough to re-position

their horse and get back to the track by M. Back in the '80s, this deficiency was pointed to by critics of leg yielding to demand that it be removed from American tests.

5. Leg yielding nose-to-the-wall. Goofy me in my youth actually proposed including this exercise as a nice way to introduce lateral work to the to the show ring. It was rightly pointed out that while it was a great exercise for an indoor arena with a solid wall, it could cause all sorts of carnage in an outdoor ring constructed of plastic chains. Imagine the ring crew working overtime reassembling the *manege* ride after ride as each horse successively got entangled and pulled the whole thing down!

6. Shoulder-in at First Level—this was a mid-'80s experiment. It promoted all orders of overbent necks and riders hanging on the inside rein. This aside, one older judge who had trained in Europe told me: "Shoulder-in is a collected movement. It *cannot* be performed correctly in a Working Trot as your test asks for it. Therefore, whenever anyone rides a shoulder-in in First Level, I *automatically* give it a 4!"

7. Shoulder-in in the walk—a Second Level Test One movement from the mid-1970s. Not many horses back then at that level were sufficient gathered, through, or motivated to perform this movement successfully.

8. The release of one or both reins during the medium canter on the long side of the arena. Uberstreichen in the early '90s was an exercise we were ready for, but since it was a new idea for so many riders, it would have been much more reasonable to introduce it in collection on a circle as the current tests ask. Even now, we see an awful lot of people faking it. Then we saw nothing at all or some version of falling apart or running away.

9. The canter stretch on the circle—also better in theory than in practice. If you were Stephen Peters, it was eminently doable. If you were a typical Second Level adult amateur, it was a prescription to invite your horse to break apart and fall on the forehand.

10. Medium trot on a 20-meter circle. This made several appearances, once in the '70s and again in the mid-'90s. Horses with a scopey trot were at a conspicuous advantage. Most normal horses were out of luck.

11. Flying changes on a three loop serpentine. Because so many horses tipped from one shoulder to the other when making the change, this figure was replaced with changes at the centerline on two short diagonals—result straighter horses, straighter changes.

12. "Ordinary trot"—the term the AHSA used before the more universal "Working Trot" was adopted. Uneducated riders saw the old term, figured "Well, my horse is certainly *ordinary* if nothing else" and wondered why the judge wasn't as impressed as they were.

12. The chalk-marked centerline. It was a nice idea to have the line well delineated—until your horse decided to treat it like a three foot fence and leap wildly over it every time he passed C or A.

13. The jump at the end of the test. A hold-over from cavalry times, riders were required to exit the arena and then negotiate a single three foot fence set beside the ring usually near B or E. Senior judge Peter Lert remembers that many judges simply scored it on a Pass-Fail basis—a ten or a zero depending on whether the horse got over it obediently regardless of form. This requirement disappeared sometime in the '60s although neither Peter nor Max Gahwyler can remember exactly when. I never witnessed the jump being performed, but the first actual test sheets that I ever saw (back in 1966) did refer to this requirement.

Then there were many ideas that now seem quaint or novel that time has passed by.

Through most of the '70s, each level only offered two different tests, as opposed to the three available at every level now. Personally, I wish there were still four for my students to choose from.

In the lower levels whenever a trot lengthening was called for, it came immediately on the heels of the canter work—canter, downward transition, a moment for a half halt (had anyone known how to make one), and then the lengthening—presumably because the canter revved the horse up enough to interest him in taking longer (or faster or anything other than the usual) strides. I remember in 1979 when a Second Level Test Three was introduced, and the first movement after the entrance and halt was a medium trot on the diagonal. “What are they thinking? How could this be possible?” we all gasped naively.

The old, old Fourth Level Test Two had canter half-pirouettes, but you came through the short end in counter-canter and out on the diagonal made the pirouette towards the rail so that no flying change was necessary coming back to the track.

In the '80s at Third Level, we had an eight meter circle at X followed by renvers on the centerline towards C. The haunches stayed on the centerline; the forehand was displaced to the side as the horse moved into the direction he was bent.

In the mid-'70s, a First Level Test Two experiment which was abandoned after two years included turns on the forehand. They were to be performed from the halt on the rail at H and M with the quarters swinging to the inside. This, of course, jammed the horse's front end against the rail and often resulted in backward steps off the aids. More recently, Sweden had turn on the forehand in their tests but it was done at ring center, after a halt, but with the horse in motion and being encouraged to step forward in the movement.

Some of you may also recall the “I” tests and later the Fifth Level tests. The former were meant to bridge the spread of difficulty riders encountered trying to move up through the FEI levels. The first “I” test was of a difficulty between Prix St. George and Intermediaire 1. The second “I” test was designed to fit between Intermediaire 1 and 2. Because they were AHSA and not FEI tests, riders could use a snaffle, carry a whip, and have the tests called. The Fifth Level tests—translated versions of German S level tests—fulfilled the same function until the American rules changed to permit FEI tests at events not sanctioned by the FEI to be ridden under some of the rules which heretofore had applied only to Training through Fourth levels. That development made Fifth Level obsolete.

*As you read these reminiscences, if you call recall any additional movements or requirements that would be of interest, be sure to let me know, and I'll gladly include them.*