

Go to the Mirror, Boy

I remember that afternoon though it was more than 40 years ago. We were standing in a scruffy, un-mowed Massachusetts field beneath the guy wires of a local TV station's transmitting tower. My formal dressage education had yet to begin, but a few of us Neophytes Plus were prepping a Pony Club B candidate on her dressage skills. The guidelines listed, among the movements she might be asked to execute, a turn on the haunches. With Harry Chamberlin's book literally in hand, we studied the instructions like you would the microwave directions on a Swanson TV Dinner. Kimber, our little protégé, would dutifully carry out whatever our reading of the recipe called for, and then we would all consult.

"You think that was it?"

"I don't know. It didn't really look like anything."

"She followed the checklist."

"Yeah, but it *couldn't* really look like *that!*"

The problem was that none of us had ever actually seen a turn on the haunches be performed. We'd never been to a dressage show. I don't believe we could have found one if we'd wanted to. Video hadn't been invented yet, and the few still photos in the book were not illuminating enough to let us visualize what we were trying to help her produce. Looking back, it was almost comical.

Nowadays, you've got fewer excuses.

A couple of years ago I went to the heartland to judge a one-ring recognized show. (Hint—the fairgrounds lay near a large body of water which, by definition, leaves out most of those "I" states—exempting Illinois, of course.) Classes were to begin at 7 a.m., and I'd seen on the prize list left for me at the hotel that I was to start with Third Level Test 1. Around 6:40, we pulled onto the grounds and I glanced at the horses warming up as we made our way to the show office. As I did, I thought, "Huh, I must have misread the schedule. There are only Training Level horses in there."

As you can guess—or why would I be telling this story—it turned out they *were* the Third Level entries, all in Training Level outlines performing Third Level movements but without the balance and engagement that Third Level requires.

And as they soon discovered, no matter how precisely you position a half pass or how accurately you make a flying change (although no one could do those anyway), it all comes down to the overall picture your horse makes. If he doesn't conform to the standards of the level, you shouldn't be surprised if the score is well below 60 percent. What you're showing isn't "Satisfactory."

With all the DVDs available, the gazillions of YouTube postings, and what you can find on FEI and USEF streaming videos, there isn't a good reason not to know what a correct horse at any level is supposed to look like. And since you can almost always find some guy under the bridge down at the Interstate who can point a camcorder, you also have no real excuse not to know what your own horse looks like.

"I hate to watch myself ride" isn't a good reason to avoid finding out! For a Reality Check, you have to compare the two—what *IS* against what's supposed to be. That's what judges do after all. Why should you be the last one to know?