

## Where the L is that letter?

Not long ago I was disconsolate when I encountered riders who couldn't make accurate arena figures because they didn't know the distances from letter to letter or from the corner to a letter. My heart has been further broken by grown adults—people who should know better and claim to have dressage aspirations—who don't even know where the letters are.

Here's a simple challenge—if not for you, for a random student you might work with or a “dressage friend.” Stand in the arena mounted on your horse. Close your eyes. Point to H. Point to P. Point to I. Or L or D or S. The *only* acceptable score is 100%. If someone is taking a lesson or riding a test and he or she is searching for the letters as they go, then they are in serious trouble!

Most riders know the simple mnemonic “All King Edward's Horses . . .” to place the major letters in their minds. Then there's “R-S-V-P” and S-I-R.” However you do it, learn them! When I was first learning to ride, the primitive arena I rode in was bounded on the M-B-F side by a multiflora rose hedge. A row of stunted plum trees marked the C end, and H-E-K were backed by the hired man's house. If ever there's a doubt, I return to those images.

At one time or another, I have said to a rider, “Make shoulder-in from X to G,” only to find them ending up at H or M. Why? Because they spied the little letter G under the main letter on the polyhedron and assumed that G “must be over there” rather than on the centerline. Unacceptable!

Once I reacted uncharitably when a know-it-all teenage hotshot told me she didn't bother to learn the letters because she could always find them quickly. I had her work for a good long while without irons until the sweat poured off her brow. “Walk when you come to T,” I suggested. She kept circling, looking for the letter. “I can't find it,” she moaned. “Well then, walk at U.”

Since she didn't know enough to reject my whole premise, she had to continue orbiting. Reason enough to become a fully invested citizen of the dressage world and learn which and where the letters are supposed to be!