

Assessing Movement

By Danica Yates

Every horse has a discipline that they are most naturally fit for. The natural aptitude depends on a horse's mind and temperament, as well as on a horse's body and movement. For dressage, the horses who are most naturally fit for the discipline and the most successful, are the ones who are big movers. Many horses are relatively short strided with flat gaits. Big gaits in horses are characterized by suspension, the amount of airtime in each stride. They take bigger, loftier steps that cover a significant amount of ground. The horses most natural for dressage will possess great adjustability in their stride. It is important for a dressage horse to have a strong hind end to be able to 'sit' as well as to open up and cover ground.

When looking at a horse's potential for dressage, it is important to remember all three gaits. In many disciplines, the quality of the walk is of little significance. In dressage it is arguably less important than the trot and canter but it is still emphasized as an important basic gait. A good walk is a distinct four beat gait. The most common problem with the walk for horses is that it gets lateral. A lateral walk loses the four beat rhythm as a horse lifts both legs on one side in closer sequence. Often, tension will create a lateral walk, but with some horses it comes naturally and cannot be readily fixed. A good walk should be relaxed and ground covering. You can look to see if the horse 'tracks up' or 'over steps' which mean that after the horse's front foot leaves the ground, his back foot steps in or past the track that the front foot left. This is desirable because it shows that the horse is coming under and taking big steps.

The trot receives perhaps the most attention in the dressage world. This is actually the gait that riders can do the most to improve. Given a decent raw product, training can really 'produce' the trot of a dressage horse. None the less, a good raw product is important. What to look for in a trot is suspension and reach. Again, the airtime is valuable as long as it is accompanied by the ability to cover ground- in this case termed 'reach.' If a trot is too up and down, it is termed 'passagey,' too close to passage and not 'ground covering' enough. By far the more common problem in the majority of horses, is a trot that is not springy enough. The more efficient way to move an endurance horse or the stylish way for a hunter to move is long steps swinging low to the ground. For dressage, this would be considered flat. Lift in the legs is valuable to enable the horses to do the gymnastic, lofty tricks we ask them to perform. Also important in the trot is the horse's ability to take the lofty movement forward. Horses of many breeds exhibit knee action that is more of the up and down quality. An ideal horse for dressage lifts his knees but rather than tucking the foot under, he reaches the foot and leg out all the way from the shoulder or hip.



This horse would not be an ideal mover for dressage. While he does track up and has reach, he has a very flat trot. His feet stay close to the ground, with his knee straight and shoulder restricted.



This horse however has much more 'expressive' movement with good suspension and reach. The hind leg over steps and the shoulder has great freedom.

The canter should exhibit great suspension in each step and possess adjustability. Similar to the jumpers, dressage horses ideally possess a natural aptitude for opening up their canter and driving from their hind end, as well as shortening the stride and sitting on their haunches. The canter should be very 'uphill' with the horse light on their front end and active in the hind. We look to see that the hind end comes under; it should not trail out the back in the trot and canter but step under with good articulation or bending of the hock joint.

When assessing movement, it can be easy to get caught up in the action of the front and forget the most important part of a dressage horse, the motor. The extended trot gets a lot of attention because of the action in the front legs, but a more sophisticated analyst will look right to the hind end to see how well the horse is pushing and coming under and round in the extension. To get the most impulsion, pushing power, the hind end must be engaged and stepping under. If the foot trails too far behind the horse it is wasting energy that could be driving forward. In the lengthened trot, look to see if the hind legs match the front in activity in a relaxed ground covering gait and applaud the ones that do.

To ride dressage, you do not need a horse that is a spectacular mover. Doing dressage correctly can actually improve all the gaits of any horse. The benefit of having a horse who is naturally apt for the sport, is that he and the rider will be able to progress further and perhaps have an easier and more enjoyable time working together. In dressage competition unfortunately, correct training is quite often outweighed by spectacular movement. This should not be the case and a good judge will recognize

correct training over flashy but poorly ridden horses. Because dressage is a performance-based discipline, breed does not matter. There is no breed that possesses only good movers and conversely within any breed, potentially good movers for dressage can be found. In the end, try to pick a horse that will be most successful in what you are asking him to do and enjoy the horse you pick.

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