

WEG Review: Technical Construction of a Grand Prix Freestyle

By Danica Yates

The Grand Prix musical freestyle is the capstone for dressage performance. It is a chance for riders who have mastered the movements to creatively express their relationship with their horse and their capacity for movement. A good freestyle showcases the horse's technical strengths, embodies the spirit of the horse through musical expression and pushes the limit of gymnastic abilities of the horse.

Freestyle is broken down into two sets of marks, technical and artistic. For the technical marks, there is a list of compulsory movements scored from one through ten. This list is composed of the same movements as in other tests in the level. However, there is no required order in which the movements must be shown, opening the door for artistic construction and execution of the test. The artistic portion of the judging is broken down into five sets of marks. 1. Rhythm, energy and elasticity (coefficient of two) 2. Harmony between horse and rider (coefficient of two) 3. Choreography (coefficient of three) 4. Degree of difficulty (coefficient of one) 5. Music and Interpretation of the music (coefficient of four). Each element is scored in full or half marks and multiplied by the coefficient. The final dressage score is the sum of the technical and artistic marks.

Scores for the artistic marks, primarily the choreography and the degree of difficulty, are closely correlated to the technical scores. The design of the freestyle should demonstrate the best of the horse and rider's technical ability. According to USDF, "A composition that is creative will be scored higher than one that looks like a reworked dressage test set to music." And, "The freestyle choreography should utilize the entire arena, not just the rails and diagonals." Riders at the Grand Prix level can increase the difficulty of their freestyles by exceeding minimum requirements, such as adding extra tempi changes and repetition of difficult movements, executing movements on curved lines, showing steeper angle and change of direction in half pass, difficult combinations of movements, difficult transitions, and performing movements with the reins in one hand.

In looking at the top five competitors in the World Equestrian Games Freestyle Competition, each incorporated different elements into their choreography that increased the technical difficulty of their freestyle performance. Juan Manuel Munoz Diaz riding Fuego XII placed 5th in the Games with a score of 81.45%. He executed some very difficult collected patterns, highlighting the horse's strength for this work. He rode double canter pirouettes. All of the top five riders executed double canter pirouettes except for Laura Bechtolsheimer who placed second and performed 1 and ½ pirouettes in each

direction. Diaz and Fuego showed their two time changes on a curved line. Also very impressive was Fuego's canter extension to piaffe transition.

Diaz performed the one tempies on center line with a brilliant crowd pleasing demonstration of using one hand. According to the FEI, "A well-calculated risk is demonstrated when the Degree of Difficulty corresponds to the potential and the level of training of rider and horse. A challenging, technically correct performance is a significant testimony of a high standard of riding ability and the training of the horse." Juan Manuel Munoz Diaz took a huge risk in dropping his hand off the rein as he skipped down centerline in the most challenging execution of flying changes. Not only did it speak volumes to the horse's training and ability, being willing to take that risk showed trust and huge confidence in his relationship with the horse.



Diaz and Fuego prepare for their one handed one tempis.

Imke Schellekens-Bartels and Hunter Douglas Sunrise placed forth with an 82.10%. Some impressive technical execution in her freestyle included half pass canter zigzags and a nearly full piaffe pirouette. While the FEI states that "Piaffe pirouettes and passage half passes are not considered as a higher degree of difficulty," "they are to be rated positively in the choreography." Like the double pirouette, the passage half pass and the piaffe pirouette are becoming standard to see at the highest level of international Grand Prix Freestyle. Schellekens-Bartels also exceed the minimum requirement and performed 19 one time tempi changes.

Steffen Peters and Ravel took the bronze medal with a score of 84.90% Peters' freestyle was loaded with technical challenges. Quite impressive was the execution of the two tempies as well as the one tempies on curing lines, including 18 one time changes. He showed very steep canter half passes with change of directions, trot half pass changing direction into passage half pass, turns in the piaffe. One very difficult sequences was the canter pirouette straight to the piaffe, to the walk. The continual challenges presented in Peters' choreography speak to his extensive experience riding at that level of competition and confidence to be able to pull it off under pressure.

Laura Bechtolsheimer and Mistral Hojirs took the silver medal with an 85.35%. Bechtolsheimer showed turns in the piaffe, change of directions in the canter half pass. She did execute only eleven one time changes. Edward Gal and Moorlands Totilas won the freestyle with an astounding score of 91.80% Much of Gal's choreography consisted of straight diagonal lines and rounded short ends. He did include one difficult transition from extended canter to pirouette.

Ultimately, freestyle is an opportunity for horse and rider to 'give it their all,' and dance for the audience. The artistic judging should reflect the artistic side of dressage, the emotion that the audience can feel, the connection and passion between horse and rider. Looking again at the marks specific to dressage freestyle judging: harmony between horse and rider, unique choreography, degree of difficulty and music and interpretation of the music, we see that these freestyle scores should be based on artistic expression. Many of the top riders in the world indeed show their connection with the horse, willingness to take risks and passion for dance expressed through music.

<http://www.fei.org/sites/default/files/file/DISCIPLINES/DRESSAGE/Rules/Directives%20for%20Degree%20of%20Difficulty%2020092.pdf>

<http://www.usdf.org/docs/competitions/handbook/Chapter8.A-Freestyle.pdf>

<http://www.topdressage.tv/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=1922>

Danica Yates is a sporthorse trainer in the Portland, Oregon area. FEI and European experience, four years private training with Olympian Debbie McDonald. Training, lessons and board are available. Call (503)278-1112 or visit www.danicayates.com for more information.