WHAT DOES THE MARK AND COMMENT MEAN? – A GUIDELINE

So, you had a lovely day out filming you on line test or hopefully going to a local venue to compete and meet your friends.

**So how do you feel?**

Elated because everything you have been working on in your training had improved in a test situation.

Confused as what the judge saw you didn’t feel?

Disappointed as your sheet “looks” negative?

**So lets go back to basics!** What do the marks mean?

You may have noticed that there are marks 10 to 0 and that your sheet has directives for each movement.

Judges are trained to use marks wisely in line with FEI guidelines as seen in the FEI Handbook. The scoring criteria covers 200 pages and around 70,000 words!

The directives are based on accuracy and the scales of training, refer to previous articles.

So how do I make sure I maximise my marks? What training am I demonstrating and is it in line with the Scales of Training as required?

10 – EXCELLENT

All the requirements of the training scale are performed to their utmost. Excellent precision, accurate marker to marker

9.0 – VERY GOOD

All the requirements of the training scale are fulfilled. The movements are performed with very good precision, exactly on the right lines from marker to marker.

8.0 – GOOD

All the requirements of the training scale are regarded as good. Movements are performed accurately following the correct lines of training.

7.0 – FAIRLY GOOD

All the requirements of the training scale are regarded as fairly good. Movements are performed fairly accurately following the correct lines of training.

6.0 – SATISFACTORY

Either the movements are performed with accuracy and precision but with some weakness in the training scale, or the movements are lacking accuracy and precision, but still demonstrate good qualities in the training scale.

5.0 – SUFFICIENT Either the movements are performed fairly accurately, but with some clear weakness in the training scale, or there are some fairly serious mistakes, or movements are inaccurate, but still demonstrate satisfactory qualities in the training scale.

4.0 – INSUFFICIENT

Either the movements are performed fairly accurately, but with some serious weaknesses within the training scale, with some obvious errors within the movement, or movements may be very inaccurate, but still demonstrate sufficient qualities in the training scale.

3.0 – FAIRLY BAD

Inaccurately performed movements with serious problems within the training scale

2.0 – BAD

Inaccurately performed movements with severe problems within the training scale

1. – VERY BAD

Movements performed are barely recognisable. Showing severe resistance throughout, eg rearing, running backwards etc

1. – NOT PERFORMED

Movements not performed. No fragment of the movement is performed.

Judges love to reward correct training and accuracy demonstrated in the test. Remember they also use half marks and 10.0 is only excellent not perfection!

Learn your test and remember a movement does not FINISH until the next movement BEGINS! Eg M H Medium walk E turn left. The movement for the Medium walk is therefore M to E!

Now let’s look at some of the comments you may receive and the collective marks.

The comments have to be brief and succinct for the writer to keep up!

Dressage is all about progressive and correct training along the Scales of Training. The judges comments or underlined directives should help highlight the weakness in the training and hence where you and your coach can work together to improve performance and success.

The comments and marks should be aligned eg if the judge says good steps it is 8.0 as 8.0 is good. However if they say good steps but could be better balance on circle they may award 7.5 or 7.0 depending on how serious the issue. So the rider knows their training is on correct lines and where to look to improve.

All judges will have their own vocabulary but lets consider some phrases.

On forehand/ balance onto rein. So we are seeing the horse pushing the energy down hill and not with light steps to a soft contact. It is relying on the rider to stay upright! This tells us that the balance is incorrect either because the horse is not working through a supple back or maybe the rider is not in balance and pushing onto the horses shoulders/ front thereby blocking the energy and balance. Think about your position. Is the horse using its hind legs? Is the horse croup high and needs more suppling work?

Incorrect rhythm, needs clearer 4/3/2/beat

The horse is not showing a correct rhythm and footfall for the pace. This can be seen in walk where the horse may show a lateral walk, a serious fault, or it may be due to tension and when allowed to stretch out in his freewalk shows a correct 4 beat. Tension and lack of suppleness can affect rhythm, back to scales of training basics.

Needs clearer transition

For example you are asked to show some medium steps. There should be a clear transition from working or collected pace to medium and a return transition! When shown well better marks will be awarded. M walk to F walk and back to Mwalk. Again we need fluent balanced transitions with no change in rhythm or tempo ( speed of the rhythm).

Lacking preparation

Know your test and remember be accurate and prepare the transitions. You don’t want to both fall in a heap when going from canter to trot on the centre line! Expensive and looses marks.

Clarity of give and retake/needs clear release of contact

Do you understand what the judge is looking for in the give and retake?

The rider pushes one or both hands as directed in the test towards the bit to CLEARLY RELEASE THE CONTACT through showing a LOOP IN THE REIN from the hand to the bit before retaking the contact.The movement of the hand should be continuous and over or 3 strides. As this is a test of self carriage ( ie you aren’t riding the horse holding it up through your rein) the horse should stay in balance, keeping the same rhythm, outline and accept the retake of the rein. If you fail to demonstrate the judge will ring the bell, deduct 2 marks for an error of course, and ask you to repeat the movement!

Lacks bend/ needs more supple bend

Corners and circles show if the horse is being trained to work through a supple back and rib cage. It should bend around your inside leg on a circle, through corners etc and maintain balance. It should not fall onto shoulder or out through shoulder and demonstrates suppleness training. Or lack off!

Needs more through from behind

This will usually be when working through a transition eg trot to canter, trot to walk. Throughness is when the energy is flowing through the horse and not blocked or stiffening anywhere. It demonstrates the scales of training are being applied and will look fluent, balanced and on the aids.

Could have lighter steps

Lightness may refer to footfalls as well as to a light, consistent, elastic contact with the aim of a forward but balanced tendency. Half halts and transitions will help improve this by improving balance and adjusting the weight to the hind quarters not the forehand or rein.

Pushing out behind

This occurs when the hind legs do not come under the horse to push the energy through and with weight on the hind legs for more power. It is seen in medium paces and the energy is directed upwards rather than forwards.

Behind the leg, not in front of leg

This refers to horse that are lazy and not reacting to the leg aid. They do not work forwards into the contact but tend to shrink back coming behind the contact. The horse needs to react forwards to the aids through correct training and to a forwards contact with no backwards pressure.

Willing and obedient

Here we see a horse that is being trained to be confident, attentive and keen to work with his rider with pleasing harmony. Is the horse capable of working at this level if it is not willing? Is it sensitive, stubborn, lazy? Think about your training and how you and your coach can give your horse the confidence to be happy to work in the boards

This is not an exhaustive list but hopefully gives you an idea of how the comments and marks relate to the scale of training. Horses are all different in size and shape and ability but by assessing your performance against this framework your judge should inspire you and reward the well presented work and highlight the weakness in your training to help you retain those marks!

Don’t forget you come down the centre line with 10.0 for every movement or bags of sweets 10 in each. If you throw the judge those sweets they will catch them and you wont have many sweets left at the end!

Ride accurately with clear rhythm, with a supple frame to a consistent contact and you will be rewarded and allowed to keep all those sweets!

REFLECTION TIME

**Go back and study your previous sheets.**

Is there a common theme?

Did more than one judge draw your attention to some training need? What did you do about it? Did you show your coach and revisit the video if you have one?

What was fairly good or better and what did you think you could have prepared or presented better?

By understanding and reviewing our sheets then applying the comments to our training we will improve and progress together in harmony with our horse.

Remember judges are human and don’t always get it right but they train hard to help you and are usually approachable when they have finished their judging for the day. Many are happy to explain a comment if you don’t understand it.