

DRESSAGE FOR THE GAITED HORSE

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Over twenty years ago the United States Dressage Federation (USDF) sent out a slogan on T-shirts and bumper stickers stating: "Dressage – ask me what it is!"

Though centuries old by that time, the dressage world tended to think of the sport as "their own". Horsemen of other disciplines often did not recognize dressage training as having any connection to their horse sports of choice.

Over time, trotting riders began to absorb and understand dressage, increasingly adding it's principals to their own style. Many folds began to realize what dressage trainers had been saying all along: "dressage is for everyone."

It was exciting to watch to sport grow so rapidly that the USDF had to expand their program of classes and levels to accommodate the numbers of new devotees. However, as more people began to understand what dressage was, equal numbers of well-meaning equestrians also became convinced they knew what dressage was NOT. It was most certainly, "in their opinion," NOT for smooth gaited horses.

It seemed logical after all, that sports asking only for walk, trot and canter was not sport for a horse with alternate gaits. Though some riders and trainers always knew better, many are still mistaken. Somewhere in America you can bet a trainer just told his or her gaited client to forget about dressage. This may well be due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of gaited horses in general. The attributes of Rocky Mountain Horse are a natural for those interested in dressage.

"So, what exactly is dressage? And who is it for?" Dressage is a French word that simply means to 'dress' or to 'train.' Since training is the foundation of any successful ride, dressage is for everyone. Every horse and pony, every rider or driver can benefit by following the basic principles of dressage.

Classical dressage, in its purest sense, addresses the individual needs of horse and rider as they form a union allowing each to enhance the other's strengths and make up for the other's weaknesses. Since the earliest know writings on horsemanship, riders have been told to ask rather than demand, to reward rather than punish and to be aware of their own shortcomings and abilities as well as those of their mount. Whether a backyard pleasure mount, therapeutic partner, or Olympic hopeful, all equines of any breed can enjoy the art of dressage and apply it to their daily lives; whatever that may be.

The training foundation of dressage is the ability to recognize the need and understand the use of the aids. Ascertaining why a horse won't bend, hurries, is dull or inconsistent, rebels, gaits unevenly or carries his or her head wrong is a must. These undesired behaviors could have one or more root causes; pain (caused by equipment, injury, incorrect work, imbalance in feet or teeth), confusion, or fear being some of the possible causes.

Understanding the physical, emotional and mental make up of the horse aids to explain, challenge and hopefully guide one on the path of curing inadequacies. Once physical issues are dealt with and mental and emotional issues understood, aids are applied in consistent and comprehensive fashion until the horse softens, trusts, relaxes, and then excels. The final touch of a good foundation is to add

significance to movements and thought process so both can be drawn upon in every day rides whether that be trail riding, schooling or showing.

Dressage tests in a show simply ask for a series of movements and exercises used to train a horse and rider. The horse and rider then receive comments from a judge as to strengths, weaknesses and progress. All horses can do the movements required up to a middle level of training. The more athletic horses may carry on into the highest levels. Not only does each individual have their own abilities but certain breeds are known for a sort of group forte.

For example, some non-gaited horses excel in collection. to the extent of being some of the best at Airs Above the Ground. Others possess outstanding coordination and perseverance. Some extend their gaits beautifully. Others appear to float.

Where does this leave our Gaited companions? Ask a Rocky Mountain Horse owner which breed by nature can make an amazingly straight line that many non-gaited require months to accomplish. "Calm, straight and forward" is a standard dressage-schooling slogan. Rockies tend to come out of the womb that way.

A few gaited horses and non-gaited horses find it hard to perform a turn on the haunches. Some of their riders actually chuckle at this request. Have you ever seen a performance where the horse dances with a person? For the RMH's their natural pivots and hind end balance almost mocks the time it takes a trotting horse to learn a pirouette.

How about seeing how your dressage horse over tracks? It's an international guideline to assess engagement of the hindquarters. It's so very exciting to watch a young protégé overstep by 6 to 8 inches. For the Rocky Mountain Horse this is a natural gait.

For anyone who thinks dressage requires a horse taller than 16 hands they only need to remember a Grand Prix horse named Seldom Seen who consistently brought tears to the eyes of the crowds, even during his retirement exhibition. He was 14.3

For the Palomino, Buckskin, or other colors, dressage knows no color boundaries.

Dealing specifically with the Rocky Mountain Horse, we know that form and consistency in executing a four beat gait at 3 speeds is paramount.

Our horses should be calm, yet alert, responsive to their handler's cues and a joy to be around.

By working with the RMH to develop lateral flexion along with decompression through their entire spine from tail to poll, you will increase the overall well-being of the horse. Each individual will be allowed to find his best gaits. The hind end will swing forward from the hip in a smooth action. The shoulder, chest and wither will be carried up and free.

For those going into the show ring correct, progressive dressage training will allow your horse to carry himself around the ring with confidence and poise.

If the horse's stamina has been developed to a good level he will be able to perform in an accurate manor. His correct gaits will be able to be performed on the straightaway or around the curves of the arena.

When a horse carries himself in balance and self carriage, which will be created through well intentioned, guided dressage training, the picture presented will be one of “Hey, look at me!”

Through gentle, uncomplicated training, we make our mounts and ourselves the best we can be as individuals and as partners-becoming one with the horse. If in doubt as to whether you and your partner are the best you can be, consider Dressage. If the team of horse and horseman is sure, they will carry themselves to their goal, regardless of the breed!

In the words of the great horseman and statesman, Xenophon: “Anything forced and misunderstood can never be beautiful. – 370 BC
