

Trainer Talk with Kathy King Johnson

Show to Train; Don't Train to Show

Showing in dressage can be a tremendous learning experience as well as a lot of fun. On the other hand, it can be nerve wracking, exhausting and frustrating.

How you view showing has a lot to do with the satisfaction you get from it. If you look at an individual show as a major goal and gear all your training efforts to that show, counting down points for awards, and trying to obtain impossible scores, then you will meet constant frustration. If, on the other hand, you look at each show as a short term objective in your overall training goals, then you can optimize your showing experience, progress in your training program, and hopefully raise your scores.

The learning curve and the skill set necessary to show are nearly as hard as learning to ride. Filling out the entries for the USDF shows requires many memberships and massive paperwork: Coggins tests, registration papers, horse numbers, owner numbers, trainer's numbers and so on. One

student said that it is so hard to enter a dressage show that the DQs should be running Homeland Security.

Learning to groom and braid for shows is another monumental task. Learning to trailer horses to shows takes yet another skill set. Once you arrive at the show, you need to know more than how to ride your horse. You need to know how to warm up in a busy environment, how to read a test, how to ride accurately in the dressage ring, how to please a judge, how to analyze and apply the results of your score sheet, how to get to the ring on time in one piece, and how to survive bit checks and officious TDs. And just when you think you've learned enough, you have to learn how to deal with railbirds and off-hand comments from spectators.

Because it takes so long to learn to show well, it helps to view each show as a learning experience meant to augment training. The overall goal of showing, the end result, is to

ride better and have a better trained horse. Showing should be a means to an end, not an end in itself. If showing becomes an end in itself, riders can become fixated on tasks that do not necessarily promote their overall goal, to ride better. If they have to get a 65% at such and such level, qualify for regionals, win high point championships, win all breed awards, ride the JR/YR tests, or go for Horse of the Year, then sometimes riders feel so much pressure they take shortcuts to win.

These shortcuts can be detrimental to betterment of the rider and to the overall training of the horse. For instance, riders may feel so much pressure to qualify for an award that they drill the horse endlessly, push the horse past the level it is ready for, or use quick fix gadgets, bigger spurs, and harsher bits to "train." The rider doesn't learn to ride better; the horse can break down from being physically pushed to do more than he should.

Objectives in showing are good. It is a worthy objective to reach a 65% at each level. Qualifying for Regionals, winning Horse of the Year and so on are all worthy objectives. However, objectives are not goals. The difference between goals and objectives is noteworthy for dressage competitors. Objectives are narrow, specific behaviors that can be verified or validated. A 60% score at second level is a great objective, easy to validate. But if the objectives becomes goals then riders can lose track of the bigger picture. Why do we want that 60% score? To show that we are riding better and that our horses are becoming better trained.

If showing is viewed as a means to an end, if we show to train rather than train to show, then riders take a lot of the pressure off of themselves and their horses. If you make short term showing objectives that lead to long term training goals, it will help allay nerves associated with performance anxiety. Each show, each test, each score takes on less importance in the overall scheme of things. Riders can prioritize more easily what shows and tests fit with their training goals. They are not as apt to push the horses past their limits knowing they have time to train. They are not rushed by some artificially dictated "year-end" award. Horses have no clue when the year ends. *Thanks Kathy! — Ed.*



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Dressage

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