

# All About Freestyle: A spectator's guide Part Two

by Debby Buck Dejonge

If you have never seen freestyle, this is the year, and now is the time. Even non-horse lovers sit taller, rock back and forth in their seats, and engage in toe-tapping when the music starts and the wonderful dance of two commences. That "five" minutes is the culmination of untold hours of planning, designing, editing, and practicing. When the pair hits the centerline with the music flowing and the glimmering horse struts, everyone knows something good, if not great, is about to happen. Even the irons on the saddle seem to glisten a little brighter under the lights and the rider sits a titch taller, with the horse ever more buoyant. In this two part series we look at the whys and hows of freestyle.



## The Difference Between A Good & Great Freestyle

Dressage judge Axel Steiner shares his knowledge. "The recipe for a good freestyle is really quite simple. The main ingredient is a proficient rider and horse that work harmoniously together. The rider has to have a plan to use the entire arena in such a way that he/she can emphasize the horse's strength and minimize its weaknesses. The level of difficulty has to be such that the ride looks different from a test, but without causing the horse to struggle with the increased demands. The entire ride has to be bound by music that is supportive of the horse and what is going on at the moment.

A great freestyle demands more quality and excitement. Now a good horse is allowed to display its quality of gaits and training in novel movements which are risky but well-executed. The music is not only supportive of the goings-on but allows the rider to interpret its highs and lows. A good freestyle is fun to watch-a great freestyle is exciting to watch." More simply put, "If you enjoy watching it, it is most likely a good freestyle. If it pains you, it is not."

## Infamous Freestyle Ride

Col. Bud Kitts almost sent his colleague Judge Jack Fritz over the top of his booth when halfway through the middle of his freestyle ride he and his students switched horses and picked right up where they had left off. Col. Kitts is well-versed in the area of freestyles as he loves to ride, compose, and watch them. He would far rather participate than judge them, as he would rather turn his full attention to the ride rather than the score sheet. He feels that if this problem were solved, it would make a heck of a lot of judges happy.

"Dressage is not the most exciting thing for the general public to watch. Especially, for example, a full day of training level tests. We need to do more of the freestyle type riding to invite and actually encourage the American public to partake in dressage and horses. We're not in Europe, where horses and events are a daily event and covered on television.

"When people ask me about the freestyle, this is the one I pick up on: The Fun Freestyle in Michigan." I almost dropped the phone when he said that but was able to reply, "That's me!" Col. Kitts was the judge during the inaugural Fun Freestyle show where there are barely any rules, but everyone

including the judge has fun. The costumes are a riot, but that doesn't mean that the rides aren't great. Jerry Schwartz rode his now infamous "I'm Too Sexy For My Shirt" ride complete with double canter pirouettes and tempis.

## **Freestyles, Traditional & Fun**

Olympic alternate Jerry Schwartz: "The first thing that I think of when it comes to freestyles is how absolutely grueling and time-consuming they are to put together for the choreographer, the rider, and the horse. The second thing I think of is what a blast they are to ride not only for the rider but the horse, too. The music and the crowd seem to heighten the ride even on a horse that can be on the hot side. You want to be careful what type of music you choose for that reason and many others. The horse's personality really comes through in freestyle and that is your opportunity to showcase your horse's strong suits. I have enjoyed performing various freestyle demonstration rides, not just because they are fun but also because the audience really enjoys it. As a bonus, during one such performance, a polo player was running alongside me which gave me my first taste of the one tempis a few years ago on my Grand Prix horse, Finesse."

National Dressage Champion Lisa Payne takes the freestyle up a notch by perfecting her Prix St. Georges Pas De Deux, which she performs with her student, Johnny Robb, on two purebred Arabians which Lisa trained. Not only do they entice the audience with their flair for the dance of four, judges also recognize them with winning Pas De Deux Championship scores ranging from the high 60s to the 70s. Besides the rated competitions, the pair also performs at a number of equine spectator events to help promote Arabians and dressage.

Lisa is a strong supporter of freestyles for herself and her students. Johnny said, "We are really excited that USDF has declared this the "year of the freestyle" and we will continue to support their efforts while having a lot of fun!"

Additional advice from Lisa: Freestyles are pretty easy to put together. They just take a little forethought. Keep in mind both their strong and weak points. Also, keep in mind the movements, regulations, and choreography.

Next, video tape it, watch it, listen to the music, go to studio, and edit the final touches.

When I watch a freestyle, this is what I look for--the relationship of music complementing the horse and the choreography should make sense with the music (not only from a musical standpoint but also the appearance and movement of the horse). If you have a giant horse, you don't have piccolo music--heavier sounds and instruments should go with a like kind horse. The beats per minute should match each gait. For me, I want it to make my toes tap. A ride that makes me want to get up and dance around is what it's all about. It's nice for the audience when the music is recognizable so that they can feel it. However, if the music is good and appropriately chosen for the horse, it is enjoyable whether you recognize it or not.

## **Final Freestyle Notes From The Author**

The freestyle audience is the luckiest audience of all in the area of entertainment and learning. The wise auditor will notice many differences in the warm-up of the freestyle contestant versus a traditional dressage test. You will probably note many riders working on pieces of the ride, their focus being on relaxation and quiet communication. If the stands are swelling with spectators, the music is blaring, and the formerly quiet horse show grounds resemble a circus, they may need extra help even getting near the arena. This "hot" horse may try to rush the tempo, among other things. The sage freestyle rider knows this and will work comfortably through it to provide the beautiful dance we so crave to see. Next time you see a beautiful or fun freestyle, please tell the rider you appreciate their efforts and continue to invite more friends to encourage our year of the freestyle.