



Mutual Respect between Riders and Judges

There have been occasions at dressage shows in South Africa where there has been some unprecedented behavior by riders who often not only show blatant disrespect for fellow competitors but also for officials and judges. There has been much abuse of officials and judges and judges have been ‘told’ what to do by riders and their supporters. Many judges have been loudly criticised by competitors and their supporters at the score boards. This kind of behavior is truly selfish, unsportsmanlike and clearly cannot be allowed to continue if our sport is to survive. A number of younger judges have said that they have felt intimidated by riders and will not last the course if this goes on. Some senior judges including national judges have talked openly about resigning. We all have other things we could rather do on weekends. Remember that without judges, we will have no dressage!!

Many riders perhaps have little or no idea of what it takes to become a judge, so I will try to be concise in defining the process for them.

1. It takes a classical background in dressage, a good eye and understanding of the theory and rules of dressage as well as the horse’s physiology before a judge can begin to be trained.
2. Provincial Judges progress from Trainee through Learner then through Provincial D-A over a period of years, having to pass two written exams and many practical exams.
3. It is unusual for a judge to progress through a level in under a year per grade and usually takes between 1 and 3 years for a judge to become established at any level.
4. Once through the Provincial A panel the judge may be proposed for National candidacy. It can take 1 to 5 years to be accepted and promoted to the National B panel. Some judges never progress onto a national panel.
5. Once on the national B panel judges remain until the National selection panel deems them fit for promotion to the National A panel. This can also take a further 2 – 5 years.
6. All in all 12-18 years. (It took me 15years)

As can be seen from the above it takes many years of dedication and determination as well as study and knowledge to become an National judge. In order to be promoted, judges not only have to put in vast amounts of time at shows but also have to attend a requisite number of seminars per year. This all adds up to an enormous number of hours that a judge must happily give up for the sport. There is no financial reward other than a little petrol money at some shows and it follows that the judge must be really dedicated and have a true love of dressage to continue serving in this capacity.

No judge sets out to be deliberately mean to the riders, the judge’s task is that of recording accurately and fairly what the rider and horse have presented to them. Judges should never pre-judge a combination nor compare what they have done in the past. It is difficult for judges

to stay totally objective and to maintain a consistent level of judging throughout their careers and it must be remembered that they are human and like our horses can have certain days that are better than others. When I judge, I am always looking for the positive aspects and the horse that makes me say WOW! Nevertheless, one is obliged to note all of the faults, if the riders are to improve their performances. This is not being negative but rather constructive and with a view to a continual striving toward perfection.

Note that riders are encouraged to discuss their performances and marks with the judges in a constructive manner and that most judges stay on for 15-20minutes after the class in case of riders coming forward. Judges on the whole will happily discuss and give advice for improvement, if the riders come to them. Riders are at liberty to video their performances and go through these with their marks. Senior judges will review these tapes where necessary if competitors feel that they have been hard done by. I find the use of videos very constructive as this enables the rider to truly analyse and criticise their own performance.

Please riders, try to be objective about the way in which you performed the test and your horse's way of going. Look for ways to improve your performance and that of your horse rather than blame your lack of success on others. Put yourself in the position of the judge and ask if you would have done the same? Better still, offer to secretary or become a trainee judge in order to improve your own knowledge and understanding of how it looks from the judge's point of view. Know your rules very well so that there are no surprises when you get to shows. If you are unsure of any technical issue please approach senior judges, who will gladly clarify these issues for you. Have the dignity to always conduct yourselves in a manner becoming a sportsman/woman. Don't make heroes of those riders who continually flaunt the system but rather become one of those riders, who by respecting others, earns that same respect back from the dressage community.

THS National Judge, Sharon Walsh