

The glory of judging

Thoughts from an Olympian and FEI judge, by Charlotte Bredahl Baker

I have been training dressage riders and horses most of my life, as well as competed internationally. I have been judging nationally for the past 25 years and internationally for the past three years. As a result, I believe that I can see both the riders' and judges' point of view on most issues. My goal for this article is for riders, trainers and the general public to be more aware of the big challenges judges face and not be so quick to criticize.

Trainers responsibility

When I am judging National tests I find that many riders are showing at a level they are not ready for. I think it is up to the trainers to set students up for success by having them show at a level at which they can be competitive. I would much rather award a score of 68 percent at Training Level than a 55 percent at Fourth Level. Often, I see competitors at Third, Fourth, and Prix St. Georges levels, riding in a double bridle with the shank of the curb bit pulled straight back and the horse's nose on his chest. I feel very sorry for those horses, and I don't understand why trainers allow students to ride in a double when they are not ready. Everybody can have a bad ride, but don't show a horse unless you can ride a respectable test at home. Personal fitness is also something you owe to your horse. How can you expect your horse to be fit, if you are not?

Never ending education

I love to judge, but it can be stressful and challenging. When I judge, my foremost goal is to be trusted by the riders to be fair and never political. My second goal is for my colleagues to trust me to be a team player who will never criticize them behind their backs. All judges make mistakes, and when we do, it is nice to know that our fellow judges won't hang us out to dry. I don't think that I have ever been totally happy with my own judging at a show. Often I will agonize over at least one rider's score. I don't think riders have any idea how much we all



FEI C- judge Charlotte Bredahl Baker.

care about doing a good job. Three years ago, I got my FEI C- status and started judging CDI's. It has been an amazing learning process and very eye-opening. At these shows, the Grand Prix level is always judged by a panel of five judges. Any time there is a significant discrepancy among the scores, the judges are required to have a discussion. I always learn a lot from those discussions. Most of the time we agree on what we are seeing, but sometimes we don't agree on the score. There are many reasons for score differences. For example, connection issues, such as when a horse is short in the neck and behind the vertical or very long and strung out, are much more

noticeable from the long side of the arena than from the short side. Conversely, bend (or lack thereof) is much easier to see

from the short side than from the long side. Transitions in and out of piaffe are difficult to judge from the front. I find judging Freestyles incredibly challenging. There are so many things to

consider: the technical correctness of each movement as well as the artistic elements of rhythm, harmony, choreography, degree of difficulty, and musicality. At the end of the test, you have to come up with scores for the five categories and also average out your technical scores, all within seconds. Usually you will have a runner (person picking up the test) tapping their fingers on your desk to hurry up, which is very stressful. This is why riders rarely get any comments about their music. I always feel bad that I can't give the riders feedback on their artistic marks, but there is not enough time.

The judging life

Judging is a labor of love. It takes a lot of money and years to get through the national system. You have to go to Judges' Forums, sit with other judges, and do co-judging at many shows, all at your own expense. All of these requirements are necessary and important, and I am proud that the US has one of the toughest judge-training programs in the world. After you go through the National system you start over with the FEI system. It takes longer to become a FEI judge than a brain surgeon. No joke. Judging is hard work. You have to be willing to spend countless hours in freezing temperatures, wind, dust, hot sun, and sometimes mud. For a minimum of eight hours a day, a judge is expected to be totally focused and not miss a beat, even if bees are buzzing around your face or ants are

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crawling up your legs. Every score you give is posted on the internet within minutes and if you make a mistake on one score out of many you get severely criticized. We would only need one judge if they

were all perfect. You have to be very dedicated to judging to go through with this. For sure it is not for the money. Dressage judges are paid and treated well in the US, but the pay is still less

doesn't make sense to me that you need more equipment the more trained the horse is. I think the breeding of the horses has changed so much and our horses for the most part are lighter and

most important part, combined with knowledge and experience. I am sure trainers and riders all want to have good judges with a lot of experience behind them and I think it is very important for all

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than half of what we can earn teaching a clinic. In Europe the pay is much less (next to nothing) and I have been told that the judges are not always treated very well, even at some of the most prestigious events in Germany and Holland. In my opinion that is not okay. I have only judged one event in Europe and that was the 2011 British National Championship. At that show all the judges were treated great and I loved being there. When I looked at the schedule I noticed I was at C for the National Grand Prix Championship with Stephen Clarke on one side of me and Uwe Mechlem on the other. First I thought, ‘Oh dear, another character building experience’, but after I thought about it for a moment, I knew I couldn't be in better company. I had two of the most amazing and most respected judges in the world on either side of me and I knew if I had a problem, they were there to support and guide me, not criticize me. Both of them are true mentors to the up and coming FEI judges.

Role model

In general I was very impressed with the very sympathetic riding I saw in England. I think it is very good for the sport to have such a great role model at the top of the sport in Carl Hester. I became friends with Carl when I was competing in Europe and he is the ultimate horse man who treats his horses with a lot of respect. Besides being an amazing rider and trainer, I love that he believes in turning his horses out every day and not drill them in the arena. While in England I was also very happy to see so many FEI riders showing their horses in a snaffle, which is legal in England and the USA. I hope one day it will be legal under FEI rules. It

more sensitive than in the past, therefore needing less equipment. We see so many mouth problems at the FEI level and I think in many cases they are caused by too much equipment. I have nothing against the double bridle, if the horse is happy in it.

Challenges

There are other challenges associated with being an international judge as well. An FEI judge can't teach more than two lessons during the preceding year to any rider who will be competing in front of that judge in a CDI, and the lessons cannot take place less than three months before the show. This rule means that FEI judges have to choose between judging CDI's and teaching FEI riders. I think the three-month rule is reasonable because most of us know our schedules three months in advance. However, the two-lessons-a-year rule makes it pretty impossible to teach anybody at that level. It is a shame that top-level judges are not able to give their knowledge to top riders as a result. In the beginning of each year, an FEI judge also has to declare whether he or she intends to compete or to judge. If you judge any CDI's on one continent, you are not allowed to compete in any CDI's on the same continent. For some, myself included, the rule requires a difficult choice between riding and judging.

Upcoming FEI judges

We don't see many top riders or trainers go on to become international judges and I think it is because there is not a lot of incentive. Of course being a good rider or trainer doesn't guarantee you will be a good judge. Being a good judge is so much more than just technical knowledge. I think the right kind of character is the

parties to get together and find a solution to this future problem. In general it would be great to see more interaction and positive problem solving between trainers and judges. Judges, riders, trainers and owners all want the same thing: happy horses, happy riders and owners, and high scores. Most judges are in this for the love of the sport and deserve a lot of

respect for their commitment. The next time you think a judge did a good job, let him or her know. As you probably know, judges get a lot of criticism and not many compliments. If you want good judges, treat them well. <<

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Carl Hester, according to Charlotte, is the ultimate horse man who treats his horses with a lot of respect.

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